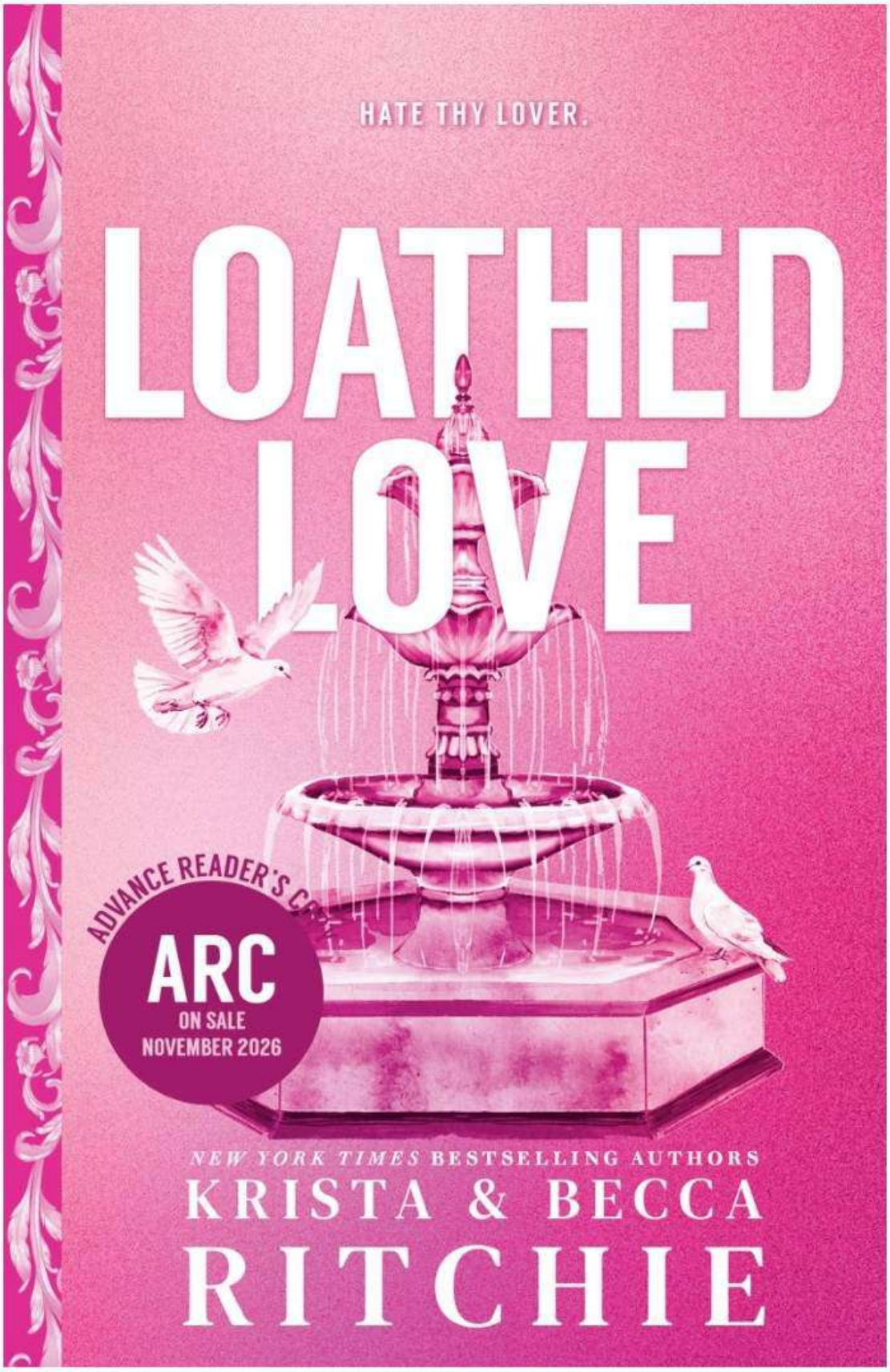

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NOVEMBER 2026
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS
KRISTA & BECCA
RITCHIE

CamScanner

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LOATHED LOVE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS
KRISTA & BECCA
RITCHIE

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CHARACTER LIST

THE COBALTS

Connor Cobalt & Rose Calloway

First Born:
Jane Eleanor (27)

Second Born:
Charlie Keating (25)

Third Born:
Beckett Joyce (25)

Fourth Born:
Eliot Alice (23)

Fifth Born:
Tom Carraway (22)

Sixth Born:
Ben Pirrip (20)

Seventh Born:
Audrey Virginia (18)

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1

AUDREY COBALT

I'm five minutes from missing the biggest opportunity of my collegiate career. Which has absolutely, unequivocally *nothing* to do with boys.

Sadly.

I would've rather my first freshman quandary be about matters of love.

Instead, I'm scuffing the soles of my Mary Janes as I walk too briskly across Manhattan Valley University's campus. I am not a runner or even a power walker.

I *gingerly* stroll. I love taking in the scenery. Smelling the roses. Listening to birds tweeting in the trees. Sometimes, I even snap photos of them to send to my friend who has a talent for identifying bird species.

There is no time to admire MVU's gothic stone architecture, stained-glass windows, gargoyle-topped turrets, or lush green lawns. I can't even properly ogle the cute college guy reading against an old oak tree.

Oh, he's really handsome.

Normally, I'd try to squint and distinguish the title of his paperback. You can learn a lot about a man by what he chooses to read.

Do not trip. I steady my pace. Lift my chin. Strutting gracefully ahead. Reynolds Hall is in sight.

I take a determined breath.

This isn't about falling madly in love. As much as I'd prefer it to be.

I've yet to experience anything remotely as romantic as a Mr. Darcy or a dashing reformed rake from one of my many bodice rippers. (Suffice it to say, my bodice has *never* been ripped.)

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It feels as if grand, epic love is meant solely for pages in books and for everyone but me. And I understand I'm not living in *Much Ado About Nothing*, where Benedick writes Beatrice truly *terrible* yet endearing poems.

But in this modern age, I would still love to be swept off my feet and ravaged head to fucking toe.

Has romance really evaded me?

Has it died?

Withered into a sad, pitiful state like a dried prune?

Are men truly so lazy that they can't even attempt a badly written poem?

Or is it just me—that I've never put myself in positions to find true love and I need to turn back and approach Oak Tree Boy?

That is not going to happen today, my resolve reminds me. *You have a purpose, and it's not finding a boyfriend.*

I brush my red hair off my shoulder. "Farewell, Oak Tree Boy," I say to myself.

"Who?" A salty-sounding feminine voice comes through my earbuds.

I forgot I left my best friend on a call. We do that a lot. Never hang up our phone calls. Sometimes it feels like we're with each other always.

"What could've been my future husband," I tell her and push through double doors. "I'm mourning our five children that never were, the honeymoon to the French Alps where he would've warmed me by the fire, then stripped off all my clothes and—"

"And been the reason you missed the quote, 'biggest opportunity of your collegiate career,' end quote."

My smile expands. I love Kinney Hale. "My future husband would never," I agree. "He'd only help me succeed in all avenues of life." I drop my voice as I step into the cavernous, echoey, empty hall. "And then he'd fuck me relentlessly."

"Such big dreams," she deadpans.

"Oui. We can have it all, Kinney. Feral sex, once-in-a-lifetime love, and..." The classroom is empty? I spin on my heels, the marble squeaking beneath my Mary Janes. No one is here.

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"Aaaaand," she draws out. "Do not tell me you've already kicked your academic goals to the curb for Rotting Bark Boy."

"Absolutely not. I must be lost. Was the room 102?"

"402."

Hurriedly, I search for an elevator, then realize it's an old building. There are none. "The *stairs*," I say in horror at the worn-out marble steps.

Four flights would be nothing if it didn't feel like oxygen was already in limited supply.

"You can do a roundoff back handspring," Kinney says pointedly. "You can climb some stairs."

True, and yet…

"I wish to be carried," I say as I scale the Everest of staircases, trying not to pant. "Preferably in sturdy, strong arms."

"Too bad one of your brothers isn't there."

I scoff. "I meant by my future *husband*." I refuse to stop and rest, even as my quad muscles scream at me. "But I do wish my brothers were here. Ben would give me a piggyback ride unprompted. Which sounds"—I huff, I pant—"rather lovely right now."

Ben is somewhere on campus since he's a junior at MVU, but fortune is clearly evading me in this precarious moment. Because if I had my way, my six-foot-five, hockey player brother would suddenly materialize right in front of my face.

Of course, I can do this without Ben. Without Tom. Without Eliot, Beckett, and Charlie. Without all five of my older brothers.

I'm the youngest of seven. I shouldn't want to be coddled, but it'd be an utter lie to say it's not nice having brothers who'd carry me across puddles and molten lava. Who'd protect me from trivial messes and gruesome death.

Given the right circumstances—like me faking a sprained ankle—even Charlie, my oldest and most disagreeable brother, would carry me up these stairs too.

But this is a new chapter where I don't let them make my life easier at every turn. Because I'm eighteen. Maturity-wise, I might as well be twenty-five already.

However, they see me like I am fifteen going on fourteen.

It's absurd.

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I'm grown.

An adult in college.

And I'm embarking on matters greater than the heart.

Taking a new step, I wince down at my feet. "I think I might have blisters the size of Texas."

"Sounds like you have the wrong size shoe."

She can't see my smile. "Or my Mary Janes aren't meant to be worn by those who run late."

"You're not late to the tryouts yet. Just don't stop moving."

"Like minds," I breathe hard, staring up the last flight of stairs like it's fucking prey. I will devour. Conquer. Succeed.

It's in my blood.

Surely.

Forging onward, I check my phone and reread a text.

MOTHER

There is absolutely nothing you can't do, gremlin. Be courageous and yourself. Do not let a single pompous prick make you feel small at your tryouts. Or give them hell.

My lips rise.

College is my fresh start. I've hung up my pom-poms at Dalton Academy. I'm not a cheerleader anymore, and I'm diving headfirst into academics.

Without my best friend at my side.

My smile disappears. Kinney is a senior at prep school and won't graduate until May. To sneak my call, she left her calculus class—which she hates anyway—to go to the girls' bathroom. I imagine she's alone wedged between the paper towel dispenser and sink.

I despise that word: *alone.*

I despise even more that I left her *alone.* But she urged me to leave Philly earlier than we intended. She still lives there with her parents, who are not-so-coincidentally my aunt and uncle.

Our moms are sisters and best friends. It practically sealed us as *best friends for eternity* since birth. We grew up down the street from each other. We used to be in the same grade. Since middle school, we imagined someday throwing our graduation caps in the air together.

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Then…everything changed.

So we decided that I would graduate five months early and speed run my life into college and New York City.

I'd been dreaming of college since I was ten. The whole notion of being an adult, venturing out into the world and soaring, appealed more than being treated like a child rooted to the confines of age.

And then there was the grief of seeing all my siblings leave our childhood home one by one. I wanted to grow up alongside them. Be an adult *with* them.

That time is finally here.

It's February 2—already a month into my first semester at MVU, and I can admit that quite literally *nothing* has gone as planned.

When I matriculated in January, I didn't take into consideration that it was the second part of the school year. No freshman orientation guided me into the collegiate halls. They mailed me a campus map and a pamphlet that said, "Welcome to Manhattan Valley University," and expected me to figure things out on my own.

Which is fine. I am capable, astute, savvy.

I don't need hand-holding, but I didn't expect so many freshmen to have already settled into friendship groups. Their first-day jitters all but waned while mine put the *fresh* in freshman.

Worst of all (and most importantly)—all the clubs are full.

Backgammon, Model UN, even *Chess* have no openings for new members. The collegiate dreams I made at ten years old always consisted of me being on an academic team, specifically *quiz bowl*.

Just like my mother.

She described her days on Princeton's Quiz Bowl team as some of her most cherished memories. That was where she ran into my father, who rivaled her while playing for Penn's team. Their love story grew in college, and while this is *not* about love, it is about me fulfilling the dreams I set for myself.

There'd been no spots open for quiz bowl. Not until today.

This is the moment my dreams will begin to come true.

I reach the fourth floor and quickly find 402. The old oak door looks heavy, the brass handle tarnished and nicked.

My labored breaths dissipate as determination surges energy into my lungs. "I've made it," I tell Kinney.

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"Go kill all your opponents and forget about Bark Boy."

"Boy forgotten. You, always remembered."

I like to imagine she's smiling—the quintessential Kinney Hale ones. Little and brief smiles, as if they're fissures in her hard goth-girl exterior.

I love when they appear, but I also love everything about her.

After we end the call, I slip my earbuds into my small leather book-bag. I tuck the loose hem of my rose-petal pink sweater into my ivory skirt, then smooth out my hair with my fingers. I am the sole redhead of my family, but the glossy strands are more carrot-orange than auburn.

This isn't a beauty pageant. No one will care if I look like I've been tumble-dried in a laundromat.

I'm just barely on time.

Chin hoisted, shoulders drawn back, I reach out and turn the old knob and barrel into the classroom. But I'm *too* fast.

Three steps in, I collide into a hard chest. Coffee spills on the floor, and my shoes slip underneath the liquid—I'm ashamed to say I lose my balance.

Hands fly to the small of my back, clasping me in a strong hold so my head won't meet the marble floor. Mossy-green eyes skim me in concern.

"You all right?" His deep masculine voice nearly steals my breath.

I have to be dreaming.

A man just caught me.

I just *ran into a man* like a head-on collision. Situations of this romantic caliber do not happen to me. They stay inside the worn pages of my paperbacks or remain on stages in plays.

My cheeks flame.

"I…" Words, gone. Which is lovely considering I'm never lost for them.

His pink lips lift in a smile, his toffee-brown hair so fluffy and windswept. He could be hired as Prince Charming for a little girl's birthday party. Sleeves to his pale-blue button-down are bunched at his muscular forearms. Stylish, preppy, and put-together, he wears pleated navy pants, a brown leather belt, and shined loafers.

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I feel more shortened of breath in his arms than I did climbing the Everest of stairs.

It's his smile, isn't it? The little laugh pulling the corners of his lips—the sparkle of his eyes.

He may be handsome, but I refuse to ogle him for a second longer as he helps me upright. "I'm sorry about your coffee," I say, my hand on his warm, hard chest for a beat. I try to ignore the splatter of latte on my *shoes*.

"Don't be. It's from the faculty break room down the hall. Machine is ancient, and it tastes like cafeteria coffee anyway." He lets go of my arms, then sets his messenger bag on the professor's desk several feet away.

I shake my foot like a dog pissed on me.

"Dior?" he asks.

"Pardon?"

"Your heels—they're Dior." He must see the designer buckle. "Here, let me." He motions me closer with a couple fingers and digs out a napkin from his leather bag.

"You know your shoes?" I approach with arched brows.

"I know clothes, cars, crowned princes from the thirteenth century—the list extends beyond the letter C. And there's an almost certainty that I know more than you." He draws out the chair, as if he didn't just slight me. Arrogance can be attractive. It goes hand in hand with confidence, after all.

I squeeze my gaze at him. "How can you be so sure?"

"For one, I'm a grad student. You look like a freshman."

"Age isn't a measure of intelligence."

His inquisitive eyes sweep me. "Set your foot on the chair." I clutch the desk for balance and put my foot on the seat. He adds, "For another, I'm on the quiz bowl team and you're not."

"It's why I'm here. For the tryouts." I scan the empty classroom. "Where is everyone else?"

"You're almost late." He finishes wiping off my shoes, then takes out his phone. "Five more minutes and Lia and Wilcox would've made it out of the building." He texts with one hand and crumples the dirtied napkin with the other. "If those need to be professionally cleaned, let me know. I can send them to my cobbler."

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I suddenly realize he's wearing a luxury watch.

So he's rich and impossibly handsome?

With both of my feet on the ground, I tell him, "They'll survive. My shoes are as resilient as I am." I check the closed door.

"Lia and Wilcox are on their way back," he says before I ask. "The sophomore we're thinking about adding to the team is just *okay*. We're considered a top-five team in the nation, so we'd prefer someone better. So we'll give you a shot, freshman." He pockets his phone and leans back on the professor's desk. Unblemished, no moles or freckles dot his peach-pale skin. Tendrils of his brown hair sweep his forehead. "I'm Guy Abernathy."

"Audrey Cobalt."

"I know."

I'm not shell-shocked. Being recognized comes with having parents in the public eye. But I play coy. "You know?"

His gaze voyages around my freckled cheeks and orange hair. "Youngest daughter of Rose Calloway and Richard Connor Cobalt."

I curtsey, flaring out the ends of my ivory skirt. "That is me. I am her."

He threads his arms, his ass just casually resting on the desk. "Your parents are geniuses." That catches me off guard. Most people don't offer that as their first assessment of my famous parents. I've heard so many other things about them and my family:

Your father owns Cobalt Inc., a multibillion-dollar corporation.

Your mother is a renowned fashion designer for Calloway Couture.

Your grandfather founded Fizzle, one of the most popular sodas in the world.

Your aunt is a sex addict, and her scandal thrust your entire family into the spotlight.

My parents being smart usually doesn't rank high on their notability, even if it's one of my favorite things about them.

"That's true. They both graduated from Ivies," I say.

"I was more so talking about their time in the academic tournament circuits. They're legends. No one has come close to beating your dad's PPG." *Points per game.*

"I'd love to be the one to beat it." *If only.*

"You think you can?" His gaze bores into me. Challenging.

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"Of course," I lie.

Of course not.

I'm very doubtful I can dethrone my father, but I'm not about to blow my shot at these tryouts by devaluing myself. I add quickly, "Their love of quiz bowl is actually one of the reasons I want to join the team. I'm shocked you have an open spot."

His fingers tighten on the lip of the desk. "Our fourth quit last minute. Family emergency. She's moving back home to Concord." His head swings to the left as footsteps clamber across the hall.

"Sorry, we're back," a girl says—*Lia*, I'm guessing. She untwists a bulky cream scarf and unbuttons her long gray peacoat. Pieces of her black hair unspool from her claw-clip like she ran to the fourth floor.

As soon as she sees me, her brown eyes pop in surprise and her movements slow. "You're really here." I'm about to respond, but her head whips to Guy. "We thought you might've been joking."

"She is a Cobalt. In the flesh." Guy winks at me.

I've never truly admired a wink before, but the way my stomach flutters, he might as well have blown me a kiss. Regardless, I'm realizing if I wasn't a part of an esteemed lineage of quiz bowl champs, I likely wouldn't even be given this chance.

No pressure, Audrey.

It's not as if I haven't felt it before. All my siblings are supremely talented in their chosen passions. Not to mention, Charlie is a literal genius. Maybe even more brilliant than our father, but Charlie would rather scoop out his eyeballs than be forced to participate in a collegiate academic tournament. I've been under shadows so large for so long that it doesn't make me cower in the face of this kind of pressure.

All I want to do is prove to everyone I am worthy.

I am smart.

I'm more than just the youngest Cobalt.

"I'm here for the tryouts," I tell Lia and the tall, lanky guy who hurriedly shuts the door. He lifts aviators to the top of his head and darts around the coffee spill to avoid mucking his polished loafers. He's as well dressed as Guy. His crisp, white button-down contrasts with his deep-brown skin.

He says fast, "Jordan Reyes Wilcox. Everyone calls me Wilcox, and I have about ten minutes before a lunch date—so you better live up to

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the hype."

"She will," Lia vouches. "Her mom is *Rose Calloway.*" I get the sense she convinced Wilcox to return.

"I won't take too much of your time, I promise," I tell him.

Lia drags Wilcox to the four rows of student desks. She's smiling from ear to ear, appearing overly pleased that another option exists and that the option is *me.*

I inhale a reassuring breath, just to murder my nerves.

Guy suddenly sidles beside me, and too many emotions swarm me at once. *Eyes on the prize, Audrey.* And it's not him.

"This is Lia Chung," Guy says, introducing her. "Second-year grad student."

"I'm getting my master's in biomechanics," Lia adds and sits on top of the desk.

I smile. "Impressive."

She plucks out a small tablet from her purse. "I haven't gotten it yet, but I won't reject the compliment."

"I am terrific at giving encouragements. If the team needs a morale boost, I am quite efficient on that front."

"We're looking for aptitude, not a cheerleader." Wilcox leans against the desk beside Lia like he's one second from bolting.

I nearly argue, but Guy tells me, "Wilcox finishes his undergrad in May, but he's already been accepted to Manhattan Valley Law School and spends his lunches networking with attorneys at his parents' firm."

Wilcox motions for Guy to hurry. "The firm: Wilcox & Reyes. My parents are divorcees who work together. Guy is our esteemed captain. I do quiz bowl for fun. What other things does she not need to know? She's not accepted yet. We can give her our bios later, Guy. I have places to be."

Guy slips me a furtive smile. It's a slanted, closed-lipped smile that reaches his mossy-green eyes. It teeters between flirty and friendly, and I just naturally assume friendliness.

"I'm ready whenever you are," I tell him.

Guy leaves my side to sit on the desk between Lia and Wilcox.

I smooth my hair off my shoulders and tilt my chin, standing before their judgment with unbridled confidence.

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Just like my mother taught me.

Lia tucks her tablet to her chest. "Do you have any quiz bowl experience? From high school?"

"Yes." I nod. "I was on the team for a year. I brought my stats if you need them." I slip off my brown leather bookbag, about to unclasp the gold latch.

"No need," Wilcox says quickly.

He means, *No time.*

Guy jumps in, "We just want to ensure you know how it works. Tossups, powers, negs. If you make it, we'll run our own practices and start building your stats at a collegiate level." He folds his arms and grips his biceps in a masculine, quizzical manner. "Why just one year?"

"The team wasn't serious," I say truthfully, adjusting my bookbag on my shoulder. "Another girl and I were the only two doing any independent studying—and I didn't like that we were placing so low. I'd rather not be on a team at all than be on a bad one."

The number of times my brother Eliot asked me how my matches went and I had to confess to placing last was mortifying enough. My brothers and my sister are *spectacular* at what they do. I don't want to be the only Cobalt who comes in last place.

But maybe it's not a great trait. That I didn't stick it out. That I called it quits rather than being a motivating support for the rest of the team. The ship was sinking, and I jumped.

Guy, Lia, and Wilcox don't nod or shake their heads or let any judgment pass through their blank expressions, so I can't be sure of their opinion on the matter.

"What do you know about music?" Lia inquires.

"Music?" I frown.

Guy leans forward a little. "We're not a generalized team, and we don't have subs, so each of us is required to be a specialist in a category while also knowing a little about everything else."

Lia wiggles her fingers. "Science, math, and sports."

Wilcox is eyeing the analog clock above the whiteboard. "Lit and philosophy."

Guy holds my gaze. "And I'm a history specialist with a secondary strength in geo and current events. Our gap right now is music and

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fine arts."

Oh.

No.

Fuck my life. Truly.

I can manage most of the fine arts category, but in music I know only the basics: a handful of popular composers, *maybe* two opera terms, and a bit of music from ballets. Ask me about an instrument, though, and I'd struggle not to gawk and eat air. Charlie plays piano, and Tom is a literal professional musician. They would both ace this right now. How do I manifest my brothers' knowledge?

My pulse speeds for a second. Admitting my lack of expertise will shut the door in my face. No quiz bowl. No achievements under my name. I'll be the youngest and least accomplished Cobalt. When my mother asks how tryouts went—I'll have to admit I didn't make the team.

I failed?

No.

I can't do it.

I can't.

"It's your lucky day," I lie into a bright smile. "I'm proficient in music."

"Seriously?" Lia asks, excitement seizing her eyes. "Because this would be so perfect." Her enthusiasm makes me feel like molten cow manure. This is why I keep lying to a minimum. It doesn't *feel* good.

My brothers would claim I'm the worst liar in the family, but it's likely being a *bad* liar by Cobalt standards still makes me an above-average liar to everyone else. They seem to be buying it so far.

I think.

Wilcox throws out quickly, "Who composed *Clair de lune*?"

Really? I keep my expression void of surprise. "Claude Debussy," I say confidently. Who knew my love for the *Twilight* movies would pay off so spectacularly?

Guy doesn't look overly impressed. I suppose it's a single composer. I could have gotten lucky. To be fair, I think I did.

Before they sling harder questions, I say, "A four-on-the-floor is a drum pattern. A hocket is a musical term derived from the French

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word for 'hiccup.' Verismo was a genre of opera that focuses on ordinary people. I promise I know my stuff. You can ask me anything."

I don't really mean that. Those were random facts I scrounged up from the dry well that is my music knowledge. *Please, please, please only ask me things I know.*

"Name three Russian composers," Lia says, which is such a softball. Truly, my siblings would all be able to knock this one out of the park. I'm not special here.

"Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Shostakovich," I answer quickly.

Wilcox nods hurriedly. "Okay, she's in—"

"Wait," Guy says to him. "Give me five minutes with her." *Yes, please.* I smooth my lips together and hope heat doesn't rise to my cheeks.

Wilcox groans, then rests back against the desk.

Guy focuses on me. "Three German composers."

Wow, this is going well. I tell him, "Bach, Beethoven, Brahms."

Lia smiles. "Should we do a buzzer tryout?"

"No," Wilcox snaps. "Guy said *five* minutes, not thirty."

Guy ignores them to ask me, "Who composed the original score for the ballet *Giselle*?"

I perk up. "Adolphe Adam." My brother Beckett being a principal dancer at the New York Ballet Company is suddenly a godsend—especially since *Giselle* is his absolute favorite ballet, thanks in part to the music.

"Which century?"

"Nineteenth, I believe."

"Are you sure?" he challenges.

I stand firm. "Positive. Specifically, the year 1841."

He smiles wider into a nod. "Correct." Now he's checking the analog clock. "I have office hours with a professor in ten minutes." He plants his hands on the desk and pushes to his feet to tell Wilcox and Lia, "She can be on the team in a probationary context. We'll run through drills next practice."

I made it?

I'm on the team.

"See you, probie." Wilcox races out the door, not offering a second glance.

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Probationary. It's not permanent yet.

That's fair.

"Welcome to the—" Lia cuts herself off as her phone rings. "Sorry. Talk more Thursday! Excited you're here!" She rushes to the door, then answers, "Hey, babe…" Her voice drifts away.

Guy goes to his messenger bag on the professor's desk. "Lia will ignore the whole world for her girlfriend."

I hardly know Lia, but I already love that she's in love. As all people ought to be. "That's awfully sweet."

"Until we're in the middle of a strategy discussion"—he opens his bag—"and she leaves to take a two-hour phone call with Izzy."

I can see how that'd be bothersome. But still. "Love is worth the disturbance, I imagine."

"She's not the one being disturbed." Guy digs a spiral-ring notebook from his bag. He runs a hand through his toffee-brown strands. He has some of the best hair I've ever seen. "We meet up every Thursday at seven p.m." He holds out the notebook and a ballpoint pen. "Write down your email and phone number, so I can contact you about practice."

Practice.

I have teammates.

I'm about to be a part of an academic team.

My heart is beating out of my chest. I can't wait to tell my mother. I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe they didn't ask me harder questions.

Fate.

Destiny.

Some fortuitous spirit has most definitely descended and granted me this wish. Because if I wasn't supposed to be on this team, they would have grilled me with in-depth questions about instruments and orchestras instead of the rudimentary composer questions.

Not that I can keep this ruse up for long.

Thursday.

It's Monday, so I need to be able to ace the drills in three days. I need to become a musical genius—because there is no future where this disarmingly hot grad student finds out I just lied my way onto the team.

CamScanner

Probationary. It's not permanent yet.

That's fair.

"Welcome to the—" Lia cuts herself off as her phone rings. "Sorry. Talk more Thursday! Excited you're here!" She rushes to the door, then answers, "Hey, babe…" Her voice drifts away.

Guy goes to his messenger bag on the professor's desk. "Lia will ignore the whole world for her girlfriend."

I hardly know Lia, but I already love that she's in love. As all people ought to be. "That's awfully sweet."

"Until we're in the middle of a strategy discussion"—he opens his bag—"and she leaves to take a two-hour phone call with Izzy."

I can see how that'd be bothersome. But still. "Love is worth the disturbance, I imagine."

"She's not the one being disturbed." Guy digs a spiral-ring notebook from his bag. He runs a hand through his toffee-brown strands. He has some of the best hair I've ever seen. "We meet up every Thursday at seven p.m." He holds out the notebook and a ballpoint pen. "Write down your email and phone number, so I can contact you about practice."

Practice.

I have teammates.

I'm about to be a part of an academic team.

My heart is beating out of my chest. I can't wait to tell my mother. I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe they didn't ask me harder questions.

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CamScanner

No fucking way.

"Here you go." I pass the notebook and pen back to Guy.

He tucks them underneath his arm. "On se voit bientôt, Audrey." *We'll see each other soon.*

And he speaks French. Because, of course, how more perfect could he possibly be for me?

Butterflies flap fiercely in my stomach, and it takes me a long second to understand why. It's not just the French.

He didn't call me "Cobalt."

He said my name.

Audrey.

CamScanner

2

AUDREY COBALT

Alea iacta est. *The die is cast*. Julius Caesar's words ring in my head as I make my way out of Reynolds Hall and onto the lawn. There is no turning back. No tucking my tail between my legs. The only way ahead is forward, and I must stop any doubts from invading.

My first instinct is to whip out my phone like a pistol and search through my *favorites* in my contacts.

My thumb hovers over Ben's name. He's the youngest of my brothers but still older than me. The sixth-born. He's partly why I'm in New York so soon, but I'm trying to keep my distance.

It's a delicate situation, and I don't want to smother him.

I want to prove to Ben that what happened to me at the frat party, during his sophomore year at MVU, was a fluke. That the messes I create don't need to be solved by my five brothers. That I can climb out of the holes I've dug myself into.

Which is why I shouldn't call any of my siblings. If they fix this problem for me, they won't believe what I already know about myself. I'm resourceful, and they don't always have to be my resource.

Decision made, I pocket my phone in my Prada bookbag, and a cold gust of wind blows my hair at my face. A strand sticks to my lip gloss. Just as I peel it off, I notice a familiar face across the quad.

I must be seeing things.

Surely it can't be him. I take a couple steps closer, squinting harder.

His hair is the color of melted brown sugar. Ruffled and disheveled, the wild strands catch his pretty eyelashes and curl at his neck. A red plaid shirt is tied around his waist, and his dark jeans look worn. Very '90s grunge, except for the white button-down I spot beneath his un-

CamScanner

zipped leather jacket. He's seated on a bench that faces a marble statue of Aristotle.

It's my second favorite bench at MVU because this quad is quieter than the main one by the science buildings.

Two silver piercings swoop around his bottom pink lip. As I walk nearer, I see a splotchy red birthmark against the ivory of his neck—and I know it's him.

My eyes widen in shock and delight.

This is fate. Destiny rescuing me once again. I have no other way to explain how this man happens to be in my path at this very moment.

I hurriedly make my way to the bench.

My black Mary Janes plant right in front of him as he takes a monster-bite from a sandwich. Lettuce spills on his lap, but he ignores the mess as his brows furrow at me. Up close, I notice a barbell piercing in his eyebrow, and an inky-black tattoo peeks out of his unbuttoned collar—but I can't distinguish exactly what it is.

"Hi," I say in a cheerful greeting.

He swallows his bite in a thick gulp. "Who are you?"

My mouth goes slack. My heart stutters. "Seriously?"

"Wait a second..." Faint recognition flits across his steel-gray eyes. He snaps his fingers. "I've got it now."

Good. I nod.

"You're the Queen of England." He smiles sardonically and takes another bite of his sandwich. He's so casual about it that I feel as if insulting people might be one of his daily activities.

But seriously...what...the fuck? "You really don't know who I am?" I've never been offended by someone not recognizing me, but this is different. This is...ridiculous.

He suddenly narrows his eyes as he chews. Genuine confusion pulls the creases of his face.

"Our brothers have been in a rock band together for a year," I snap at him. "They're *dating*. Tom Cobalt and Phoenix St. Pierre. Do those names ring any bells for you—ohmygod, don't take another bite of food." He's shoving the rest of the sandwich into his mouth and collecting his backpack from the bench. He stands to leave. "I'm talking to you."

He points to his mouth as he chews like he can't converse now.

CamScanner

"You still have *ears*," I snap at him, quickening my pace to keep up with his lengthy stride. He slips me a glare, and I ask, "You're seriously going to run away from me?"

He laughs mid-chew, and after he swallows, he says, "Does it look like I'm running?" *No*. He's walking briskly though. I'm almost jogging just to maintain eye contact.

"You are Birdie St. Pierre?" I confirm.

"Oh, *now* you're asking? Normal people lead with that rather than assuming they know who you are."

I let out an annoyed huff. "Our brothers are dating. I'm sorry, I thought you would recognize me."

"I didn't," Birdie says. "But I've heard enough about you."

"Perfect. So we can start over."

"No, see you don't get another first impression. You have to live with the one you just made, *Virginia*."

I glare. He did not just use my middle name like an insult. *Ughhh.* "I have a million things to say to that, but can we pause for a second? My legs are on fire."

He does stop walking, surprisingly.

"What do you want?" Birdie asks pointedly. He faces me with an annoyed pout, and it dawns on me suddenly...he's very, *very* attractive. Like the boys from my favorite teen movies who drink beer behind a dumpster and skateboard to class and throw casual middle fingers. He has an "I'm going to burn the world to the ground" energy that is both scary and enticing. But this criminally attractive guy with '90s style, piercings, and tattoos is unequivocally *not* my type.

He is so far outside my type that he might as well exist on Venus with surface temperatures of over eight hundred degrees Fahrenheit. He would burn to an ugly crisp before even becoming *my type*. And not only that—he's looking at me like I'm roadkill that suddenly appeared on his doorstep, brought to him by a mangy, feral cat.

Any and all attraction suddenly poofs out of my brain like exhaust.

What do you want? His question lingers in the air.

"Why would you think I want something?" My cheeks are on fire from the accusation. Unfortunately, it's an *accurate* accusation.

His brows rise. "Am I wrong?"

CamScanner

I let out a long breath. “You said you know ‘enough’ about me.” I use finger quotes. “What does that even mean?”

“Heads up!!”

I turn toward the shouted warning—a football collides with my forehead. The impact knocks me on the ground, my ass hitting the grass behind me in a painful *thud*.

What…?

I blink in shock, staring up at the sky, clouds and overcast weather muddying the beautiful blues into gloomy gray. There’s no chivalrous hand extended toward me. No gallant man to help me to my feet. I sit up all by myself to see Birdie staring at me with a hand to his mouth like he means to hide his laughter, but his chest bucks with the movement.

“I’m so happy you find this amusing,” I snap angrily.

He wipes his hand across his lips, but he can’t rid himself of his smile. “You took it like a champ,” he tells me, which causes my cheeks to burn. But he adds, “Fucking hilarious.”

All bashful heat converts into a furious scald.

Screw him.

He bends down to casually pick up the football from the grass and tosses it back toward the jocks. They raise a hand in thanks. Everyone is way too blasé after I was just hit with a projectile. Birdie twists back to me and holds out a hand.

“No,” I growl. “You can’t act all chivalrous now.”

He rolls his eyes while I scramble to my feet and brush the grass off my skirt and pink sweater. My stomach drops. Is there a run in my tights? Massive grass stains are on my butt. Just *lovely*. I take a calming breath and rub the knot on my forehead.

Birdie watches me. “What did you want me to do?”

“Catch the football. Protect me from injury.”

He laughs even harder. “Okay.” He nods slowly. “First of all, *not* a superhero. I have human reflexes, Virginia.”

A growl scratches my throat as I glower harder.

He continues, “Second, do I look like a fucking jock?” He waves a hand down his tall, lean body. He has muscles in his biceps, so I don’t know what he’s insinuating other than he looks like he could grace the cover of *Rolling Stone* over *Sports Illustrated*. “I don’t play sports.”

CamScanner

"You threw the football back just fine."

"Throwing something isn't the same as catching." He looks me over. "Earlier, you asked me what knowing 'enough' about you means. My brother called you conniving and *trouble*. That's what I meant."

"Conniving?" I start to smile. "That's sweet, actually."

He shakes his head. "Not a compliment."

"If you knew my family at all, you'd understand it is one." I readjust the strap to my bookbag that's fallen off my shoulder.

He glances at his phone, and I worry that he's checking the time. He might have somewhere to be.

"You're like your brother, right?" I ask hurriedly.

He's baffled. "In what way?"

"You're a drummer for a rock band too? You graduated from Berklee College of Music, same as Phoenix. Although, I'm positive he said *cello* is your specialty and drums are his, but all this is to say that you must know quite a lot about music."

He blinks at me like I'm speaking in riddles. Granted, this is the extent of what I know about Birdie St. Pierre. I've been given the basics from Tom and Phoenix. Had I known I'd need his help, I'd have asked for a full biography.

I continue, "Nothing Personal. That's the name of your band."

Birdie shakes his head. "No. Not anymore."

I frown deeply. "So what are you doing at MVU?"

He lifts and lowers his shoulders. "Just lingering around a college campus in the hopes I run into you."

Confusion buries itself in my chest. Until I realize, "You're being facetious."

He chokes out a rough laugh. "There was a part of you that thought I was being serious?"

"No," I lie quickly. "That's absurd."

"Oh look, we agree." He's about to move.

"Wait!" I shout too loudly because he's still right in front of me. "You really aren't going to tell me why you're here?"

He expels a weighted huff. "Fuck. I'm in grad school, Virginia." His tone is frustrated, annoyed, very much *over* me. "I'm here for my master's in music."

CamScanner

The expression on his face says, *fuck off*. But he might as well have gift wrapped me a present with his words. I'm grinning like an absolute fool.

Birdie grimaces. "Why are you smiling like that?"

"I have a favor to ask—"

"No." He's back to striding away from me—this time his pace is double the speed.

I jog to keep up. "You don't even know what I'm going to ask."

"Don't have to know. Don't care. I'm not in the market to help a spoiled, entitled rich heiress."

His words are cold water splashing against my face. "I'm your brother's boyfriend's sister!"

He stops dead—and I almost run into his chest, but I'm able to halt my momentum an inch away. "Do you even hear how ridiculous that sounds? It means nothing to me."

I glare. "You don't care if Tom and Phoenix think you're mean to me?"

"No."

I wince and hastily tell him, "I just need to be tutored in music. That's it. I will pay you."

His rough laugh sounds drier. "I don't want your money, Virginia." He points to his mouth. "Look at my lips very carefully. When you're alone tonight and when you wake up tomorrow morning, I want you to remember this. *I'm. Not. Interested.*"

He turns around to walk away, and this time, I have far too much pride to run after him again.

CamScanner

3

AUDREY COBALT

Half-truths aren't lies. It's just omitting the full scope of what's happening. Which is what I tell myself after I get off the phone with my mother.

She knows I made the quiz bowl team, but there's no reason to tell her I'm on probation.

Hopefully I won't be for long.

I spend the next three hours at the library before heading to my astronomy lab in the late afternoon. There, I learn to use a Newtonian telescope—which, *interesting*—but jitters and nerves override my love of learning. I'm losing *time* to solve a very real problem. And I can't stop thinking about Birdie.

My best solution happens to be the most infuriating, aggravating person I've ever met. *He rejected you, Audrey*, I remind myself.

He's not even a solution anymore. He's a failed attempt.

Just thinking about him causes an intense scowl. I might start forming real wrinkles on my forehead alongside the golf-ball-sized bump.

As soon as class ends, I'm on the phone calling all the grad students in the music department who are listed as available for tutoring. And… every single one is booked up for the next two weeks.

I don't have two weeks. I don't even have seven days!

Sweat builds when I think about standing in front of Guy Abernathy and being outed as a fraud. Maybe it'd be better not to show up to practice at all? I could quietly forfeit my spot and make an excuse about pursuing other avenues, but quitting twists my stomach. It's worse than being defeated. It's giving up. Even the idea feels like being forced to strip bare in front of an entire auditorium. *Humiliating.*

CamScanner

It's not just my ego I'm trying to protect.

My dignity is at stake. Who does Guy even know? Could he gossip about me? Will I be barred from other academic teams in the future if I ruin my reputation with these three students?

And yes, I should have thought about this sooner. But I had five seconds to either tell the truth or lie, and I chose *lie.* I must sit in the wake of my mistake or fight for a proper solution.

Quitting is a looming and agonizing option. One I try to ignore as I sling my heavy bookbag onto the backseat of the Range Rover.

"Have a good day, Miss Cobalt?" Hans asks from behind the wheel, always dressed in a dapper black suit, his graying caramel-colored hair smoothed with product.

He's been my chauffeur since I moved to New York. Thanks to Beckett. My brother shifted his personal driver to my daily schedule so I'd get around the city safely. Which made me feel quite loved. Most especially coming from Beckett, who trusts very few people, and Hans has been his most trusted driver ever since my brother moved to New York at sixteen for ballet.

"It's been...eventful," I tell him, massaging my aching shoulders. My many textbooks spill out of the unclasped bookbag.

"Air conditioning okay?"

"Oui. It's lovely. Thank you, Hans." I push my books back into the leather bag, just as my phone buzzes on the seat. I forget about the strain in my arms and snatch the phone quickly.

KINNEY

Just got my phone back from detention. Knew you'd make the team. They would've been idiots not to have you.

So ridiculous that she got caught taking my call in the bathroom and was punished. I wish I'd been there to try and convince the principal to let her out with a warning. I'm sure Kinney just accepted her bad fate.

AUDREY

Practice starts Thursday 🩷 Just need to find a music tutor so I can be a music specialist 😅 You know any musical savants?

CamScanner

KINNEY

Yeah, your brother. The genius one or the one in a *literal* rock band.

AUDREY

Sadly, Charlie and Tom are not options. I'm turning a new leaf here in New York. I shall be handling my own self-made problems these days.

KINNEY

Whoa. That is a very new leaf.

I'm sure there are tutors online...though that might be sketchy if they find out who you are.

There are times when being the daughter of famous parents has its perks. Other times...not so much.

I peer up from my phone, then out the window. The north quad is still in sight, and the Range Rover hasn't budged an inch. "Hans?" I call out. "Why haven't we left campus yet?"

"We're waiting on someone, Miss Cobalt."

"Who?"

The answer appears immediately as the door swings open and Charlie climbs in. What in the world is my eldest brother doing on campus?

He spares no words for me. Just simply shuts the door so Hans can drive. Charlie shrugs off a long wool coat and rakes a hand through his tousled golden-brown hair. His aggravated expression is commonplace. It'd be stranger to see him full of glee.

Do not look suspicious. Nothing is out of the ordinary. You didn't just lie to a hot grad student to slither your way onto a quiz bowl team. You are a lion, not a fucking snake.

As the car bumps along the road, I spin too fiercely to my brother and my seatbelt yanks at my shoulder. "Are you spying on me?" I wonder. "I am flattered—"

"I wasn't at MVU to spy on you." He slumps backward and kicks off his loafers.

CamScanner

I smile. "Then for Ben? I've loved seeing you both get along. Gone are the days where you two wished each other dead. *Metaphorically*. You would never kill Ben."

Charlie lets out a sharp, dry laugh. "There is still time. But I'm not here for *Ben*." His tone is irritable, and then he eyes the goose egg on my forehead and the run in my tights. He appears unsympathetic. "Trip over your common sense today?"

"Hardly."

"Keep catching your falls with your face and not your hands and I'll keep believing you have zero survival instincts."

I cross my arms. He's going to wish he didn't jab at me. "If you must know, I fell into a man's arms today. He was *one second* from ripping off all my clothes and taking me against the desk. Rough, *hard*, to the point of—"

"I don't care what's happening in your imagination, *sotte petite sœur*." He calls me his *foolish little sister* with extra bite. He also looks like he wants to fling himself out of the vehicle.

Normally, I'd feel victorious over perturbing him, but a wave of disappointment slams into me. *This* is not what I'm supposed to be doing in New York. It's so easy to fall into my little sister role where I get a rise out of my brothers, especially after they tease me.

But I don't want to be treated like the baby of the family anymore. I don't want to annoy Charlie so much that he doesn't include me in things.

"He is real," I say more seriously. "I didn't fib. The most handsome grad student caught me in his arms today." I sink backward and finger the thin necklace at my throat. I'm warm all over remembering the literal run-in with Guy Abernathy. Only cringing a little, knowing this could end very poorly come Thursday.

"What's his name?" Charlie asks.

I blink out of my thoughts. "You care?"

"Beckett will if you're hanging out with anyone close to our age." He names his fraternal twin.

"But you don't care?"

"*No*."

I squint, trying to detect a level of *care*. Maybe it is true. Maybe Charlie is callous, but it's hard for me to accept his lack of empathy the

CamScanner

way Ben has over the years. "Not even if the grad student pins me to the wall—"

"I'm not talking hypotheticals with you," Charlie cuts in. "And if you ask me *why*, I will remind you that you are the most obnoxious person in this family."

So much for not annoying him.

"That just means I'm the most engaging of the Cobalt Empire." I swat my hair triumphantly off my shoulder. "Even Eliot would call me a winner."

"Because he'd rather cut out his tongue than call our youngest sister a *loser*. Whereas I"—Charlie picks himself out of a slouch—"will tell you exactly what you don't want to hear. The coldhearted fucking truth."

"Mean-spirited," I say to him. "That is what you are, and it's not a pleasant attribute, Charlie. How do you expect to find your one true love if you're exuding Grinch behavior?" It's something I heard Tom say once, and I'm starting to agree.

"What's his name?" Charlie asks again, but more bitterly.

"None of your concern..." I trail off. Does he look peakish? Sweat beads up on his forehead. "Are you ill?" I quickly dig in my bookbag.

He glares. "Ill-tempered."

If he were truly sick, I don't know if he'd tell me. I think my worry annoys him most. He would rather be met with swords than blankets.

I find my Tiffany-blue tin and pop the lid. Freshly baked gingersnaps line white tissue paper. *Fortuitous.* I baked Charlie's favorite cookie last night. "Here. Have as many as you'd like." I pass him the tin.

Charlie rarely rejects a gingersnap.

So I'm glad to see he doesn't now. He chews the cookie. Then he rolls the sleeve of his black cashmere sweater, showing me gauze around the inside of his elbow.

There was a blood drive on campus today.

"You donated blood," I realize. "That's why you were at MVU then?"

He nods in confirmation and swigs water from one of the glass bottles in the console. Rosy color begins to return to his fair skin.

I smile, happy to see he's not going to pass out. "You survived because of me, you realize."

CamScanner

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CamScanner

"Because I was going to keel over and die during this car ride if you didn't feed me." He gives me a look like *be smarter.*

I simply smile brighter. "What would you do without me?"

"Too many enjoyable things to count. If you believe this is an exaggeration, then continue to live in fantasy. It is where your insufferable romance exists." He forces a half smile.

I ignore the sting.

I try not to let Charlie claim this win.

Audrey 1 vs. Charlie 0.

I shove the tin in my bookbag. He doesn't thank me for the cookies. His appreciation is rarely said in words, but I like to believe it lies behind his harsh yellow-green eyes. Somewhere in there, the gingersnap is the best part of his day, and he's grateful I exist.

They all are.

This uplifting belief leads me to Hell's Kitchen.

To my new home.



Charlie is on the phone with Beckett, speaking in hushed French so I can't eavesdrop, while the elevator ascends the luxury high-rise. We both step off at the twenty-first floor, but Charlie disappears into apartment 2166.

I watch the door shut behind him.

The speed at which I moved to New York throttled all five of my brothers. They didn't expect me to graduate prep school early, but being the last one left at the Cobalt Estate, in that big house, was eerie and cold. No matter how much my mother tried to fill the space with noise, I missed my siblings.

Their laughter.

Their banter.

Their fighting and chaos.

I hated every second of walking the halls and hearing the creak of the floors, knowing they weren't footsteps. Knowing Ben wasn't running over to me with a humongous smile and calf-high socks, his pet bird flapping behind him. Just to grab my hand and tell me, "You have to come outside."

CamScanner

"What for?"

The rain.

I hated the mud, but I would dirty my stockings and skirt for Ben. I'd catch droplets on my tongue and protect my hair with a clear umbrella, still able to see the world around me. When we were much younger, he'd make mud angels, and I'd rate each one a spectacular ten out of ten.

We're not so little anymore, but now that we're grown, I don't want moments together to just cease to exist.

Time is finite.

I knew that the moment Ben almost…he almost…well, he's still here now. That's what matters most.

It's why I couldn't be alone any longer. Being the youngest already feels like a curse.

I don't want to be left behind.

And living here with my brothers gives me the chance to show them I'm not little anymore.

I enter the neighboring apartment, 2168 etched into a gold plaque on the door. While Charlie, Beckett, Tom, and Ben all live together, my new roommate is solely Eliot.

He never once made me feel like a consolation prize or burden. He vied to be my roommate like the position was CEO of Cobalt Inc.

I've never loved him more in my lifetime than I do now.

And we have a much better apartment than the too-modern, too-ordinary bachelor pad next door. I push inside, and the décor instantly rouses my spirits.

Heavy burgundy drapery, velvet chaises, damask wallpaper, and so much clutter. I love the lived-in feel of the strewn books on the kitchen counter, the melted blue wax stuck to the coffee table, the remnants of yesterday's late-night fireplace chat—wine glasses sitting emptied, my lip gloss on the rim.

It's like living backstage at the Globe Theatre.

Paper hearts dangle from the ceiling, my addition for the month of February. I flip on the gas fireplace—and then freeze at the several *lit* candlesticks on the mantel. Is Eliot home?

No…I haven't heard a noise.

CamScanner

I know my brothers Eliot and Tom are pyromaniacs, seeing as how they set Prince Snuggleton on fire and threw him in the pool when I was six. Beckett jumped in and saved my teddy bear from drowning in the deep end. All the while Eliot and Tom cackled like the witches from *Macbeth.* I forgave them within the hour.

I don't like holding a grudge.

But I doubt Eliot is foolish enough to leave the apartment with candles burning.

I think?

I hope.

I sigh. I've only been living with Eliot for a month. It's not as if I have him all figured out. The last time we lived together, I was *thirteen.* He was nineteen. A lot has changed since then.

On a typical day, Eliot would be at the theater by now, getting ready for his nightly performance on Broadway. He plays *the* Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in the critically acclaimed stage play, *Amadeus.*

But today is Monday, and Mondays are dark days. No performances. Eliot uses Mondays to do voice work, go to the gym, and get massages. He's home by late afternoon unless he has a date.

I check the time.

6 p.m.

Maybe he's at a cocktail bar with a girl.

I dump my bookbag at the end of a wine-red chaise and stack the chunky texts.

The History of Musical Instruments

Fundamentals of Music

Five Centuries of Keyboard

Choral Orchestration

I checked them out of the library as a last-ditch attempt to study on my own. But I know it's more of a way to placate my feelings than a real solution. Reading these books would take hours and only cover a fraction of what I'd need to know.

It'd be far faster to have someone with this specific set of knowledge tutor me.

Birdie was my best shot.

Curling up on the chaise with a cable-knit blanket, I grab *Fundamentals of Music* and rub the creases of my eyes. I could still call

CamScanner

Tom and ask for help, but that'd mean sacrificing another large slice of pride and looking like the little sister that's unable to clean her own messes…*again*.

I need to figure this out myself.

Uncapping a pink highlighter, I flip to the first page.

The front door opens abruptly. "Sustenance!" Eliot calls out in dramatic entrance. He hoists two white paper bags of takeout, arches his brows, and gives the bags a playful shake.

It's impossible not to smile and laugh.

Eliot sets the takeout on our weathered oak kitchen table, then unwinds a scarf from his neck and slides a hand through his wavy brown hair while unbagging the containers.

At six-four, he's not only skyscraping tall but impeccably dressed. Polished oxfords, crisp navy-blue button-down, tailored slacks, and a stylish black peacoat—he could fit in with the likes of my new quiz bowl teammates, I realize.

And yet Eliot never went to college.

He chose the arts instead.

The media calls him "devilishly handsome" and one of the most eligible bachelors in Manhattan. Kinney says he looks more and more like Superman by the day.

In my eyes, he's just the brother who set me on his shoulders so I could pick the highest crab apples from the thick tree in our backyard. The brother that knocked out Sal Ferrari's front tooth when he heard him spreading rumors about taking my virginity. The brother that put firecrackers on my birthday cake instead of candles and laughed hysterically when my handmade birthday streamers caught on fire.

I hated him for a mere five minutes.

Because he squeezed me in the tightest, most adoring hug and said, "You are by far my most favorite little sister, dearest sister." His blue eyes sparkled with an earnest love.

"You only have one little sister, dearest brother," I noted, always trying to mimic his way of speaking as a child. I loved the fanciful, lavishness of Eliot Alice Cobalt and his dramatic portrayal of Puck. Oh, to hear him monologue *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a marvel of my childhood.

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He'd bend conspiratorially close to whisper, "'Lord, what fools these mortals be,'" and I'd giggle.

I loved every second he noticed my existence. I still love it like one does a raging fire on a brutally cold night. But I never imagined he'd choose to live with me—not over living with Tom. Those two are only eleven months apart in age and bound together like twins.

Granted, his motive might be to ensure I stay out of trouble, but I am deeply honored that he cares about my well-being—and even more that he chooses to spend time with me.

I glance at the lit candlesticks. Only slightly concerned about the type of danger I've signed up for. "Have you been gone for long?"

"Just ran down to the lobby to pick up dinner. I couldn't have been more than a few minutes." All my brothers use a white-glove delivery service for takeout.

Eliot catches me eyeing the candlesticks. "Here…" He shrugs off his peacoat, folding it across the barstool, then journeys into the living room to blow out each flame on the mantel. "No fires. We're all alive and well—" His voice dies instantly at the sight of me.

I don't hide what I'm sure is an ugly bump.

His eyes darken considerably, and he darts over to me with mounting brotherly concern. "What happened to your head?" He tilts my chin upward to examine the goose egg in the light.

"Slow reflexes. I didn't escape the path of a football quickly enough."

"Someone hit you with a football?" He lets go of me like he might go grab a knife. "What's his name?"

"It wasn't intentional." I sigh at my ripped tights. "I'm more upset at the stains in my skirt. I regret wearing white."

"Those can be dry-cleaned."

"My ego cannot."

His lips quirk. "This isn't the sister I know. She wouldn't let grass stains affect her self-esteem. She knows her confidence is impenetrable."

He's right. I didn't let Birdie's laughter chip at my pride, and I certainly won't let a fashion disaster be the cause either. "Tomorrow will be better." I nod resolutely. "Everything will work itself out." I stare at the tiny font of my book.

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Somehow it will.

Eliot takes a seat at the foot of the chaise, my stacked textbooks between us. "You still don't think you should have your bodyguard around?"

"Kosko *is* around," I defend.

Eliot serves me a casual yet protective look. Like he wants to argue, but he also hates warring with me and the rest of our siblings. He fits the fourth-born role well as a peacemaking middle child. His attempts to glue us all together don't always pan out the way he intends.

Each person in my family has a 24/7 bodyguard assigned to them. I've grown up with a constant source of protection like I'm the daughter of nobility or the president. Sometimes, I do pretend that my parents are seventeenth-century aristocrats, but my reality is much more prosaic. My parents are rich and famous and so caught up in the public eye that they fear their children might be used for bribes and ransoms.

But since I've turned eighteen, I've been able to have a little more control over when and where my bodyguard follows me. Vlad Kosko and I have an agreement. He's on campus, if I need him, but he's not going to trail my heels like a shadow.

He can watch me…from afar.

I don't break the slight challenge in Eliot's gaze. After a full minute, he releases a resigned breath.

A smile hooks my lips.

I've been having this discussion with him for weeks. He doesn't like that my bodyguard isn't within breathing distance of me while I'm alone. But I want the *normal* college experience. Or at least, normal enough.

How am I supposed to achieve that with a bodyguard following me around campus?

Plus, I want Charlie to be so painfully wrong—that romance doesn't just live in my head.

How can the opportunity even arise if I have another guy attached to my hip? Kosko isn't an old wrinkly man. He's twenty-seven and a Navy vet.

"Anyway," I add, "I doubt Kosko would have done much. The ball came out of nowhere. I barely had time to blink."

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Eliot nods, accepting this for now. He picks up *The History of Musical Instruments*, a flute, violin, and harp illustrated on the cover. His gaze cinches in confusion.

Before he can ask, I spring to my feet and head to the table. "Where'd you order food from?"

"Maison du Bœuf. Steak frites for you. Salad Niçoise and salmon tartare for me." We don't always eat French cuisine, but Eliot knows I've been on a steak frites kick.

"Did you get their beets and goat cheese?" It's *divine*. I glance back. He hasn't moved off the chaise.

Eliot grins up from the book. "Of course."

I spot the beets, then I grab a container of...ratatouille? "Who are the veggies for?"

His smile falters at the edges. "I also invited Selene. I hope you don't mind. We'll be in my room."

Ah yes, the revolving bedroom door of Eliot Alice Cobalt. Being his roommate has opened my eyes to his exploits. I made a complete fool of myself with Felicity, the first girl he brought over. While he was still getting ready, I chatted her up and tried to wingwoman Eliot. Telling her all his best qualities.

His *loyalty*. His devotion. His commitment.

I gave her my number and told her she could call me anytime for a girl chat or to trade recipes (she was also a lover of baking sweet things). Then the next night hit and Eliot introduced me to *Penelope*. As if Felicity didn't even exist!

But yes, she very much exists.

I know based on the texts she sent me. Cursing me out. Telling me I'd set her hopes too high when all it'd been was sex.

The way Eliot doted on these women with fine dining and romantic strolls in Central Park, I just imagined they were more than one-night stands. He had real *interest* in them. Before he didn't.

I suppose I don't even know what flings are like. I don't want short-lived, meaningless sex for myself. Is it so bad that I also want Eliot to find deep, devoted love? Not these fleeting spells of...passion.

Even if I know Selene might be well-informed that this will likely be her second and last date with my brother, maybe she's perfectly happy with the arrangement. Maybe this is what fuels my brother's soul.

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But I just don't understand it.

I don't see what he sees, but I am his roommate. And I have to *see* these girls come in and out of his life like wisps in the night.

Regardless of my feelings, Eliot doesn't need my judgment when he was the only one who vouched for me to move to New York early. I pop open the lid to my steak frites and pluck out a crisp fry, taking a tiny bite. "Selene is a beautiful name," I tell him after I swallow. "You don't need to hide her in your room if you don't want to. I'll be in mine. I have to study." *All truths.*

Eliot raises the textbook. "What are you studying for? I didn't think you were taking music classes."

I'm in the kitchen, plucking a plate from a cupboard. "Extracurriculars."

He joins me, and I pass him two more plates, one for him and Selene, as he says, "You're in a music club?"

Lying to Eliot will tear me to pieces, so I admit, "You know how I made the quiz bowl team today?"

"Yes?"

"Well..." I scrape my bloodied steak onto the plate. "I made it probationally. And I might've lied about being a music specialist."

His grin morphs into sheer pride. "My devious little sister." He sets the plates down, just to pull me into a tight hug, lifting me up high with his height.

I laugh when my feet come off the floor. When he sets be back down, I say, "Don't tell Mother and Father. There's still a chance I don't come out of this."

"You're a Cobalt." His grin levels to something softer, more serious. "You'll come out on top. We always do."

I want that to be true, so much so that I don't refute him.

I am a Cobalt.

Cobalts also don't flub auditions, and they surely don't squander a golden opportunity. Which is why I can't waste another second.

I need to study, so I wish Eliot well on his date, then take my bookbag and plated steak frites to my bedroom.

It's decorated in a simple yet sophisticated way for my new college life. A white wooden desk against one wall, a matching vanity against the other, a four-poster bed with billowing sheer white drapes on the

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posts. A reading corner is outfitted with towering wooden bookcases and a velvet blush-pink bucket chair.

Everything is new. I wanted to start a new chapter this year and not bring any of my high school things with me.

As soon as I place my plate on the desk, my phone buzzes in my bag. It takes me two seconds to unearth it and two seconds for my face to roast in anger.

UNKNOWN

This is Birdie St. Pierre. (See how introducing yourself first does wonders.) I got your number from my brother.

I drop into my fuzzy desk chair. I can't believe he has the *nerve* to text me after what he said. I add his number into my contacts and reply quickly.

AUDREY

I'm not interested. That's what you told me to remember when I wake up. Well, bud, it's not even midnight.

BIRDIE

Bud?

AUDREY

Yes. Said condescendingly.

BIRDIE

I take it you have another offer to tutor you then.

I glare at my phone, then stand up and start pacing the length of my room. He can't seriously be considering this now. He had been so against it that he was practically running away from me.

AUDREY

I don't trust people who change their opinions so fast.

BIRDIE

Let's just say circumstances changed for me.

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AUDREY

In less than eight hours?

BIRDIE

Yes, Virginia.

I growl. He's so obnoxious. I could literally find *anyone* else. But by tomorrow? I collapse back on my soft pink comforter, his confident, annoying grin embedded in my brain. He should have been the one pelted with a football. I'm not going to just jump at the second chance without more answers. If I'm venturing down this road, I want to at least trust him.

AUDREY

What changed?

BIRDIE

I need the money. How much does this tutoring thing pay?

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4

BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

The renowned composer Joseph Haydn is buried in a marble tomb with *two* skulls.

All because he was a genius.

Shortly after he died, two dumb idiots stole his head to study it. When they were caught, they didn't fess up. They handed over a decoy skull. It took one hundred forty-five years for Haydn to be reunited with his own skull, and the replacement was never removed.

Sometimes I think that might be the pinnacle of greatness. To be *so* legendary, someone would go to the lengths of grave robbing to study your head.

Not that I'd be around to witness anyone shoveling up my dirt.

Not that I'm even in the realm of one-of-the-greats or have any aspirations to hold a baton. Composing has never been one of my main goals. But I've had many.

Too fucking many.

Adding things to my to-do list might as well be a permanent hobby —but I did not wake up this morning thinking I'd become someone's tutor.

Let alone *her* tutor.

I stare at my text.

I need the money. How much does this tutoring thing pay?

It's been a couple minutes, and Audrey hasn't responded.

She could be messing with me. Or maybe she'll ghost me, thinking she's giving me a dose of my own acidic medicine. Sucks for her, but I won't cry over it.

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It didn't hurt my soul to send her this text to begin with.

My pride has been neatly folded, slipped inside a book, and stored on a shelf for many years. I've set it away. Let it collect dust. Because there's no place for vanity or ego in my life. I know I'm talented—and I can prove it. But anyone who tries to make me can go kick rocks.

So if she doesn't want to be tutored anymore, I'll figure this shit out myself.

I always do.

Slipping my phone in my pocket, I return to the scuffed bar. "Can I get a Jack and Fizz?" I ask the new girl bartending.

I frequent this dive in Chelsea enough that I'm betting this is her first week at Gillies. She's a cute girl—about ten ear piercings, her dark hair in two messy buns with pencils stuck through them.

She takes a long look at the snake bite piercings in my bottom lip, and her smile tugs upward. "Nice."

"Likewise." I motion to her ear.

The smile reaches her brown eyes as she grabs the bottle of whiskey. A Tame Impala shirt is ripped at her belly button in a makeshift crop, and tattooed scissors snip an inked heart on her forearm. Her whole alt-rock vibe would be my type…if I had a type.

I really don't. I'm into all kinds of people.

Except one.

I guess I have an *anti*-type.

Stuck-up, vain millionaires and billionaires. Sons and daughters of millionaires and billionaires. I'd rather fuck a fire hydrant than put my dick anywhere near one of those.

"I'm Jessica," the bartender says, sliding my drink toward me. I pick up the glass and instantly see her number scrawled on the cocktail napkin.

Five hours ago, I would've given it more than a second glance. I would've flirted my ass off to get her into bed. But I have a problem tonight that won't be solved with even the world's best fuck. *Unfortunately*.

I slide off the barstool with my drink and the napkin. "Thanks, Jessica." I give her a friendly (not flirty) smile and twist my way through the football crowd watching the Pro Bowl Games. Crumpling the napkin in my fist, I check my phone again.

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No reply.

I'm fine.

It will be fine.

I set my drink down on a Sharpie-vandalized high-top table where my former bandmate's empty Koning Lite is being used as a fidget spinner. Scally flicks the beer bottle while his eyes roam the bar like he's an Apple computer from the '80s trying to boot up.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"When did Gillies turn into a sports bar?" Scally's lips drop.

I swallow a sip of whiskey. "Since they started selling two-dollar shots on Sundays." I eye the beer bottle as he winds it up again. "Are you playing spin the bottle with the entire bar?"

He heaves out a heavy sigh, then stops the bottle. "Nah, man. I'm trying to figure out if this is bad enough that we need to find a *new* bar."

I laugh. "You're supposed to flip a coin for that, dumbass. Not spin a bottle."

"Good point."

He is somehow able to shove a hand in the tightest black jeans imaginable. He unpockets a lighter but still searches for loose change.

As the lead singer of Nothing Personal, his messy brown hair, pretty-boy face, and bedroom eyes have driven girls to scream profanities and fling their bras onstage. I've been personally accosted by a Victoria's Secret 34B when it flew past the mic stand and hooked onto my drumstick.

I'd been so impressed, I almost found the girl to tell her she'd kill it at those carnival bottle-ring-toss games.

That memory does a number on me. I take a deeper swig of alcohol, whiskey burning the back of my throat. There were plenty of *good* times being the drummer for Nothing Personal. Quitting a month ago was the hardest thing I had to do. I'm not even convinced it was the right thing.

Cheers ignite across the bar. I catch a glimpse of the TV. Looks like one of the football players caught the ball in the end zone.

Scally makes a sour face. Vale Scalamonti is the kind of guy who would rather be caught in the back of an ambulance than at a sporting

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event. “Not my scene” might as well be tattooed on his perfectly toned abs.

I don’t think he has anything against the jocks here, but it’s a slippery slope. One minute Gillies is playing all the alt-rock classics and the next they’ve got the trendiest pop hits lined up to cater to the new crowd.

I love all kinds of music, even pop, but we can find that in a hundred different bars across the city.

Gillies is special with their constant cycle of emo, punk, and rock. Hell, they haven’t even bothered to take down Christmas lights and garland dangling from the walls and ceiling. Multi-colored bulbs blink in and out, lengthening the holiday spirit into February.

I love it too much.

I’m not finding a new bar.

“Fuck,” Scally curses, giving up his search. “You have a quarter on you, Bird?”

I snort. I can’t remember the last time I carried cash, let alone coins. “You think it’s 2004?”

“Your brother does.” Scally rattles his empty beer bottle. “Phoenix always has cash on him.”

“Yeah, because he likes to pretend we’re living at the height of Paramore and Panic! At the Disco.”

Scally doesn’t mention the real reason that Phoenix likes tipping in cash. It’s to help servers because credit-card processing fees sometimes eat into the tip. My older brother knows what it’s like to penny-pinch to pay rent, and he just unburied himself from an avalanche of debt.

I sip more Jack and Fizz, ignoring my current financial crisis.

“When’s your brother getting here?” Scally asks.

“Sick of me already, Scal?” I paste on a smile.

“Meh.” He tries to drink from his empty bottle, then huffs and eyes the bar, gauging the crowd. “I need that quarter.”

“Just put a randomizer on your phone, man.”

“It’s not the same, baby St. Pierre.”

I flip him off. I’m not even a little bit offended Scally prefers Phoenix’s presence over mine—they’re closer and better friends, seeing as how they met in fucking *kindergarten.* Back in Quincy, Mass., they stood up to middle school bullies together and stayed close. When

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they split for college—Phoenix to Berklee in Boston, Scally to NYU—they kept in touch.

To Vale Scalamonti, I'm just the kid brother of his best friend.

I'm the outlier.

I always have been.

My next sip of whiskey unsettles my stomach. "Phoenix is inconsistent as shit. I swear he likes being sporadically early and sporadically late, so who the hell knows where he is?"

"Probably dicking down his boyfriend," Scally says, watching my face form a tight grimace. He laughs. "Phoenix and Tom have been dating for almost a year, man. You still pissy about it?"

"No, they're good together. I just don't like that he ended up with someone named *Cobalt*. Sue me."

"Getting my law degree tomorrow." Scally taps the table, craning his neck toward the bar. "I've got an opening. Be back in a sec."

As soon as he slips away, my phone buzzes with a text.

AUDREY

I can pay $300 per hour.

I choke on my drink, the whiskey surging up my nose, searing my brain. I cough into my fist. Jesus *fuck*. She's out of her mind. I text back quickly.

BIRDIE

This is a joke.

AUDREY

I can do $400.

That's not...what I meant. I rub a hand across the back of my neck. The heat in the bar suddenly spikes. Fuck. She's either so rich she doesn't realize the going rate for tutoring—or she's overinflated the price thinking I'd only do this for a fortune.

Either way, I don't want to take advantage of the situation just to line my pockets. I wasn't lying to her earlier on campus when I said I didn't want her money.

I still don't.

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But not long after I ditched her, I found myself needing thirty thousand dollars to solve a massive headache.

Thirty thousand dollars I do not have.

Tutoring a rich heiress for a little while is hardly the worst pill I've had to swallow.

I stare at my phone. Fuck it. I have morals.

BIRDIE

I'll do it for $300. What class is this for? Send me your syllabus.

AUDREY

Not a class. Will explain tomorrow. 6 a.m.

What. The. Fuck. Not a class? What does that even mean? And six in the fucking morning? I despise early mornings. I'm struggling as it is to make it to Intro to Post-Tonal Theory at 9 a.m. on Mondays.

BIRDIE

Sorry. I'll be asleep.

AUDREY

I'll pay you $400 per hour for the early start.

BIRDIE

You can't buy me, Virginia.

Oh, but she can. I'm considering it. I hate that I'm suddenly this hard up that my resolve is wavering at all.

AUDREY

This is really important to me. Every minute counts. I assure you, I'm not trying to be a spoiled, entitled rich heiress.

I called her that back on campus. I don't regret it. It is what she is. The way she's flinging money at me doesn't even disprove it.

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BIRDIE

Fine. 6 a.m. Meet me at the Delaney Music Hall. I'll reserve a practice room.

AUDREY

Can we keep this between us? I don't want our brothers to know.

I don't read too much into that. Her five older brothers are the last thing I need in my business, and I really don't want Phoenix asking too many questions. So I'm more than happy to keep this little thing a secret.

BIRDIE

My lips are sealed, Virginia.

AUDREY

It's Audrey.

"Hey!" Phoenix up nods at me. Dark pieces of his nearly jet-black hair fall into his lashes. He unzips his motorcycle jacket, the helmet in his other hand, and he eyes the phone in my grip. My brother is two years older and a whole hell of a lot moodier. He's already staring at my phone like he can wrangle the fucker on the other side. "Who's pissing you off now?"

"Neil can't find the detergent. Roommate problems. You wouldn't know." I wave him off with a hand.

"I am your roommate." Phoenix makes a face like I'm already cutting him out, but he's the one spending more and more time at his boyfriend's place. And I don't even blame him. We live in a storage unit compared to Tom Cobalt's ritzy Hell's Kitchen apartment that he shares with his brothers.

Plus, Neil, Steffi, and Scally—the members of Nothing Personal and our roommates—haven't exactly been rays of sunshine ever since I quit the band. They're stressed trying to find my replacement before the music label starts putting more pressure on them.

I was with the band for four years. We made two albums together. Phoenix wrote most of the songs, and he left Nothing Personal a year before I did. So I shouldn't feel bad about it, especially when people

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move on all the time from bands. But I hate feeling like I'm ditching my friends and possibly closing the door on the best chapter of my life.

"No offense, but when's the last time you actually did laundry in our building?" I ask my brother.

Phoenix scowls. "What are you implying? That I'm less of a roommate because I'm not doing laundry there anymore?"

I smile. "And he mathed it out all on his own."

Phoenix gives me a middle finger and places his helmet on the table. "You want me to throw my dirty underwear with your load tomorrow? Will that make you feel better?"

"My feelings haven't been hurt. I get it. Your boyfriend has a washer and dryer *in* his apartment. That beats having to babysit a machine because Gary from 5A has zero fucking patience. Can you believe he threw my wet clothes in the literal trash? When I was *seconds* from moving them to the dryer."

Phoenix takes out a pack of cigarettes. "I'm sure Tom wouldn't mind if you did your wash at the Co—"

"Don't even finish that sentence." I wince. "I'd rather lick the pavement outside this bar and develop tongue lesions than do my laundry at the Cobalts' apartment."

Phoenix rolls his eyes. "They're not that bad."

"Because you're fucking one of them," I remind him.

He glowers. "It's more than that, Birdie."

Yeah. *Yeah*. I know my brother is happily in love with Tom. They're in a band together, The Carraways. Speaking of…

"You still heading to LA on Friday?" I wonder. The Grammys are this weekend, and The Carraways have been nominated for seven awards. Not only that—they're *performing* and need to be there early for staging, blocking, soundchecks.

Phoenix is living *our* dream. The one we shared when we were teenagers banging out rock music together in our garage.

Only he ended up in The Carraways. I ended up in Nothing Personal. And while my band had some success, it was nothing like the cultural phenomenon that launched The Carraways into the stratosphere last summer. I wouldn't even call it an overnight success, although many do. My brother worked too hard for too long to reduce it down to that. It was a grueling, well-earned climb.

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And that's part of the reason why I'm not jealous that he's going to be walking a red carpet next Sunday. I'm so proud of him, it hurts.

Phoenix taps his cigarettes to his palm. "That's the plan. You sure you don't want to fly out with us?"

I'm attending the Grammys as my brother's plus-one. I heard Tom is taking his brother Eliot. I'm more excited to see Phoenix play on a Grammy stage than I am to be one degree away from famous fucks. Could not care less about any pop star sightings.

"I can't fly out that early," I remind him. "I'm booked for the Symphony on Saturday night." They need an extra cellist, and I'm first on the substitute list.

His jaw clenches.

Phoenix wishes I would bail on my obligations because he knows they're just that—*obligations.* He would rather I throw the responsibility in a bonfire and watch it burn, but I can't…I can't do that.

I've always been on the sub list.

When I was in Nothing Personal, I would get pulled into the orchestra constantly. Just because I'm in grad school now, this hasn't changed.

I tell him, "I still have a ticket for the five a.m. Sunday flight. That's plenty of time to make the show."

"I'm not worried about you missing it, Bird. It's just *a lot.*"

I shrug, my brain immediately circling my sudden money issue like a shark. *He has no idea.* "It's whatever," I mutter.

"Or you could just fly out with me," Phoenix offers *again.* "It's more comfortable than being crammed in economy on commercial."

I frown. "Commercial?"

"We're taking Tom's private jet." He glares. "Stop looking at me like that."

"I'm not looking at you like anything. I just momentarily forgot you now fly private. I think Tom would take that plane to Hell if he had an appointment there."

Phoenix smiles fondly. "I think he'd agree."

Because of course he would.

"Ego the size of fucking Jupiter. *All of them,*" I say, immediately thinking about Audrey. I really shouldn't have her anywhere on my mind. Up until this afternoon, I had no conceptualization of the

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youngest Cobalt. Avoided photos of her. Avoided most descriptions. I wanted *no* part in anything to do with that family. Tom, I talk to because he's Phoenix's boyfriend. And I love my brother more than life itself, so by extension, I have to withstand Tom Cobalt.

It is what it is.

But I didn't have plans on making nice with any of the others—and I'm not sure I have to be nice to her if I'm just going to be her tutor. We don't have to be friends.

I solidify this fact in my head when Phoenix says, "Why'd you ask me for her number?"

"Who?" It takes me a bone-stiffening second to realize he means *Audrey*. "Oh, Tom's spoiled little sister? A real treasure to society."

Phoenix grips the table's edge a little too hard. "Let's focus on the part where she's *Tom's* sister—as in my boyfriend's sister, as in my bandmate's sister."

"You're the one who gave me her number," I retort.

"Because you said you needed it," he snaps. "I didn't ask what for, and now you're making me regret it."

A rough groan scrapes out of my throat. "We bumped into each other, man. She was annoying as hell, badgering me, and I felt a *little* bad for being hostile." That's not a lie. There was a toenail-sized amount of guilt within me. Enough to flick in a toilet and flush.

"*You* apologized to Tom's sister?" He says it like it's inconceivable.

I glare. "That's what's surprising? Not the fact that she pestered me for a solid five minutes?"

"Don't be a dick to her."

I press my fingers to my eyes in another groan. "Sure, sure." I drop my hands. "If you tell her not to be a brat."

"She's like eighteen, Bird. Give her a break."

Reminder of her age makes me doubly cringe. I'm *twenty-two*. This is such a bad idea, and usually Phoenix is the one who walks into those. Not me.

Being one hundred percent transparent with my brother isn't an option. Because A) I just promised Audrey I wouldn't tell him, and B) I don't want him to know I'm in need of thirty grand. So I'm doing my best to keep the whole tutoring situation under wraps without being a shitty brother.

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I finish off my drink. “Can we talk about something that doesn’t make me want to hurl?”

“Yeah.” He slips his cigarettes back in his jacket. “How’s school?”

“Good.” I don’t have any other colorful adjectives to add.

Phoenix stares hard like he’s trying to unearth the truth.

I give him a casual shrug. “Seriously.” There’s nothing deeper there. Grad school was a whim. I applied shortly after I quit Nothing Personal. I felt like it was a better route for me than joining the Manhattan Symphony full-time.

I don’t know if it’s the right path.

I’ve never felt more fucking lost than I do now, but it’s about the very last thing I’d tell my brother. He’s got mountains of concern for me, and I desperately want him to believe it’s misplaced.

I glance at my phone. Fuck—it’s already midnight.

“Hey, I have to go. I’ve got an early morning.”

“Class?” he asks.

I hate lying to him. But it’s one of those times where it’s better if he doesn’t know.

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5

BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

She brought me a *coffee.*

It takes a literal moment to register the outstretched hand. And not because I'm dog-tired at 6 fucking a.m.—but because I did not expect her to come with an offering. Not when she's already paying me too much for too little.

A silver charm dangles from a delicate pearl bracelet around her wrist. The coffee is still and unwavering due to the steadiness of her arm.

Her perfectly plucked orange eyebrows rise at me expectantly. "It's not poisoned," she snaps.

"How sure are we?" I stuff my hands in the pockets of my unzipped jacket, mostly trying to warm my cold fingers.

The third-floor practice room is intimately small. Not my preference, but it was the only space available at Delaney Music Hall on such short notice. Just enough room for a couple of chairs, a piano, and my cello that's still inside its soft-sided case. The gothic arched window overlooks a stone fountain in one of the many pocket courtyards on campus.

It's so fucking early, the sun hasn't even risen yet. If it weren't for spotlights illuminating the fountain outside, it'd be pitch-black.

Her blue eyes narrow into determined pinpoints. "Why would I poison the *one* person who can help me?"

I laugh dryly. "Your brother could help you. I'm not asking why you're not running to Tom, but let's not pretend I'm your only option here." I take the paper cup from her. Partially for the warmth against my palm. Mostly because I bolted out of my apartment too fast to down any caffeine. I unclasp the plastic lid. "And I don't know you,

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Virginia. You could have a sadistic bone in that body." I twirl my finger at her, then ditch the plastic lid in the trash.

Her jaw is agape. "What...what are you doing?"

I have the cup to my lips. "Drinking the coffee you brought me..." I frown. "Did you actually fucking poison this?" I hold it under my nose to inspect the caramel-colored liquid. It smells like coffee. Heavy on the cream.

I squint skeptically at Audrey.

"The lid has a sip hole." Her eyes flit to the trash can where I ditched the lid.

"You mean the hole that limits the flow of coffee. *Yeah*. No. I hate those things." I chug half the coffee in three gulps.

Her blue eyes are wide and judgy. She takes her aghast expression to the metal foldout chair and mutters to herself, "C'est un barbare." *He's a barbarian.*

Her back is to me, so she can't see me roll my eyes.

Not surprised about her mumbly little French when all the Cobalts are fluent and like to randomly whip it out. Even Tom speaks in French to my brother and vice versa—which is so bizarre to me, considering *I* don't talk to Phoenix in French. We grew up speaking the language with our grandfather, who's from Bordeaux, but we don't care to use it around each other.

I watch Audrey place her oversized tote bag on the chair, then she unspools a soft pink scarf from the collar of her merlot-colored trench coat. Frilly tassels of the scarf catch in the clasp of her tote. She yanks them loose and curses in frustration.

Between *that* awful scarf thing, the pastel-pink sweater dress she's wearing, and high-heeled boots, she's hands down one of the girliest girls I've ever met.

She peeks over her shoulder, seeing me staring, and I make no effort to look away. She just called me a barbarian for not using a *coffee lid.* Audrey tosses her hair backward at me like she's flipping me off.

She's also one of the prissiest girls I've ever met.

I down the coffee, then trash it, just to shove my sleeves up to my elbows. Hot all of a sudden.

Audrey rummages in her tote, only to unearth a Tupperware container. "Before we start, can you try one of these?" She extends the

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container but doesn't actually *hand it* to me.

"Are your ankles broken?" I ask her.

She glares. "Are yours?"

I scrape my tongue against the backs of my teeth. *Fine.* Swallowing the urge to call her a little princess, I push toward Audrey, bridging the distance between us. Then I tear the Tupperware out of her grasp and pop the lid.

I frown. "Are these muffins?"

Her cheeks redden. "Scones, actually. I'm working on the recipe. I'm a baker—well, not a professional baker. But I bake." She waves toward the container. "Are you allergic to anything? Dietary restrictions?"

"So you can make me go into anaphylactic shock next time you feed me?"

She glowers. "I would *never*. You're my brother's boyfriend's brother."

"You've got to stop saying that."

"It is what you are," she says firmly, standing by this.

"How many ridiculous hills have you stood and died on?"

"*Zero*. They've all been absolutely pertinent, though their pertinence is likely to escape you."

"Absolutely pertinent," I repeat with the shake of my head—but me saying it isn't the same. I can't capture the exact rhythmic cadence of her voice. It's unique. A smooth, measured pattern with weight on certain words. Passionate inflection here and there.

Her face begins to flame. "Now you're going to make fun of the way I speak."

I choke out a noise because *I wasn't.* If anything, I was about to compliment her lack of vocal fry—but fuck that.

She gestures me onward. "Go ahead. Say I talk funny because I elevate my diction. Say I'm weird for sounding like I stepped out of a Jane Austen novel—which, by the way, is not exactly how I sound, but go ahead."

She's too defensive for me to believe this is all about me. I pick out a scone. "Who bullied you for sounding like Amy March?"

She frowns, shifting her weight uncertainly. "Amy March is from *Little Women*."

"I know."

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"It was written by Louisa May Alcott, not Austen."

"Yep." I nod.

"Amy March is also the youngest, *littlest* sister."

I plaster on a smile. "*Yep*."

She eagle-eyes the scone in my hand but jerks the container out of my other. Before steam shoots from her ears, I tell her, "Ragweed and pollen—that's all I'm allergic to."

"Then it's safe to eat." She nods to the scone in my possession. "I want to bring these to my first practice on Thursday. If I don't win over the team with my musical knowledge, I figure a little treat wouldn't hurt."

"Team?" The scone is warm. I sniff the sweet scent. *Blueberry?*

"Quiz bowl team." She takes a seat, opening a laptop on her knees, ankles crossed. "That's what I need you to tutor me for. I barely made it through tryouts, and I'm on probation until I convince them I'm a music genius."

I blink. "You're joking."

"Why would I joke?" she huffs. "This is *serious*."

"You're paying me three hundred an hour and bringing me coffee and scones for an extracurricular?" My face scrunches.

She glares. "The scones are not a sweet treat for you. They're for you to taste-test, so that I can bring *perfect* scones to my team."

"Oh okay, so I'm like your lab rat?"

She growls. "I didn't say that."

I take a bite of the scone, chomping half in my mouth. It's...really fucking good. The blueberries aren't overly sweet. But I wouldn't know how to judge it when I've been satisfied with biscuits that have the consistency of hockey pucks. I swallow a dense piece, crumbs going everywhere.

Audrey's eyes are frantic. "Is it too dry? I thought I added more sour cream this time." She reaches into her tote, taking out a pocket-size notebook. She flips pages hurriedly.

I hold out a hand. "Calm down," I tell her, then stuff the remaining half in my mouth and chew. "*Is goo.*"

"I'm sorry, I can't understand you," she snaps. "Did no one tell you to swallow your food before you speak?"

I flip her off.

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She tosses her hair over her shoulder in response. Someone ripped this girl straight from a John Hughes movie, I swear. The rich princess. The classic bitch.

The last bit of scone goes down. "Si je suis un barbare, alors tu es une petite fille arrogante." *If I'm a barbarian, then you're an arrogant little girl.*

She stiffens. "Pas petite." *Not little.*

I skim her. "Fine. Une fille arrogante." *Arrogant girl.* I can't decipher her expression, other than she's haughty and aggravated. "You forgot my brother speaks French or just assumed I didn't earlier?"

"I remembered, and I assumed you could understand me."

So she was okay with me hearing the dig? That actually makes it better. I prefer she shit-talks me to my face. I take a swig from a water I brought, then screw the cap back on and ask, "Why aren't you using your brothers as lab rats? Don't you live with at least one of them?"

She sighs, and her sigh is different than most people's. It's breathy. Airy. Like it's made from springtime wind and not the oxygen in her lungs. The sound throws me off, especially when I try to recreate it in my head again.

Audrey scribbles something in her notebook, then offers me another scone by outstretching the container.

Of course I take another. I'm hungry.

She finally says, "Most of my brothers are horrible taste-testers. They flatter me with empty compliments or tease me by feigning disgust. I thought maybe you'd be an honest critic."

"Prepare to be scandalized—my favorite sweet is a gas station honey bun." I break the second scone in half and pop the chunk in my mouth. Chewing, swallowing. "Your little treats have big competition."

Her eyes are combative, unafraid, fierce. "Unlikely. I'm better than a honey bun."

"Yeah right. Have you ever eaten one?"

"Of course. My favorite boulangerie in Le Marais makes the *best* brioche au sucre."

"Virginia, that's not a fucking honey bun."

"It is."

"It's not. Your bougie French pastry is not the same thing as a gas station honey bun wrapped in fucking plastic. End of story." I toss the

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last piece down the hatch.

She cringes. "You are a vacuum."

"Barbarian or household appliance, make up your mind."

I take another long swig of water, washing it all down.

She writes with more urgency, then folds the notebook over her pen, slipping both back in the tote. She's also muttering to herself, and I'm not sure if she's cursing me out or cursing herself for an imperfect scone. I don't ask.

She concentrates on her laptop. "Do you know anything about quiz bowl?"

"Is it like *Jeopardy!*?" I recap my water.

"Marginally. They both test academic knowledge, but *Jeopardy!* clues are short. Quiz bowl clues are vastly different. They're long and pyramidal, starting hard and growing easier. The key is to buzz in and answer before they become *too* easy and your opponent buzzes first." She types on her computer. "What's your email? I can send you some packets with example tossups—that's what quiz bowl questions are called. It might be easier if you see them for yourself."

While she sends me the packets, I drag the second chair farther away from Audrey's right side. She peers up in confusion, but I'm not explaining how I'd prefer to give her breathing room and not accidentally brush up against her arm.

Mixed signals aren't happening. I'd rather stick ballpoint pens in my eyes than have this rich girl believe I'm flirting with her. Not at 6 a.m.

Not ever.

The sound of metal chair legs scraping the floor is brutal against my eardrums, so I lift it with one hand and set it about five feet in front of her. She says nothing, just studies me too intently. I feel like a zoo animal, but I can't call her out without being a hypocrite. I've been scrutinizing her to a certain degree.

Taking a seat, I unzip my camo-green backpack at my feet and grab my laptop. "And you're not getting graded on being in quiz bowl?" I ask her. "It's completely voluntary?"

"Yes, and I lucked out on the *one* open spot on the team. I can't mess this up."

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I'm almost about to ask if her parents are putting pressure on her, but then I remember something.

I don't care.

She's a Cobalt. I'm sure being top of her class and going the extra mile is expected of her. I'm sure she rides horses and attends high society luncheons with tea and those small cucumber sandwiches or whatever the fuck.

I try not to think about that and find the packets in my email. When I click into one, I blow back on the chair.

Damn.

She wasn't exaggerating about the length.

I read a sample question.

> *Distin & Son constructed an oversized version of this instrument for the 1857 Crystal Palace Handel Festival. A descendant of the Ottoman davul, this instrument was introduced into 18th century Europe with other Janissary instruments. In orchestral playing, this instrument is struck with a double-headed beater in a rapid oscillatory movement, a technique used in Dukas's* L'Apprenti sorcier *and Stravinsky's* The Firebird*

I stop reading at the asterisk, but about five more sentences come after it. "What's with the random asterisk?"

"That's ideally the last point where I'd want to buzz in. If I answer any later than that, I won't earn the power, which is five extra points for an early correct answer."

"And if you buzz in early with the wrong answer?"

"I get a *neg*. Negative five."

I shake my head. This seems wildly stressful for a little extracurricular. I can't hold my tongue. "Why do you want to put yourself through this?"

"It's fun." She smiles. Kid you not, it's a *genuine* smile. I take it back. She is not from a John Hughes movie. She is a different fucking species altogether.

"Go-kart racing is fun," I say. "This is sadistic."

Her smile vanishes into an eye roll. "I don't expect you to understand, okay. But I do need your help. It takes way more time to self-study. Recall is easier if I have someone teaching me." Her eyes drop to

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her laptop. “For the first question in the packet, when did you know the answer?”

“Second sentence.” I rub the side of my neck by my birthmark. “*Davul* gave it away.” The answer is a bass drum. Obviously.

She beams. “So you understand? There are *clues* within the questions. I just need better recognition. Even if I didn’t know it by the second sentence, if I recognized Stravinsky’s *Firebird*, I think I could have landed it early enough to get the power.”

Okay.

Yeah, I see how this works.

I skim another question. It’s the same thing. Lots of clues pointing to one answer. The answers range from instruments like the bass drum to composers, genres, music forms, orchestral pieces, and so forth. It’s a lot of knowledge for someone who claims they know nothing about music.

It’s hard for me to believe that Audrey would agree to a highly competitive academic team without the basics. Either her confidence is through the roof or she’s a fast learner.

I’m getting paid whether she wows MVU’s team or not, but I can do math. And I need more than a few tutoring sessions to get that thirty grand. If she blows it this week and gets kicked off the team, I won’t even make a dent.

Shit.

“I can’t make you into a music genius in three days. I’m no miracle worker.”

She sighs again. My ears heighten, trying to pick up each detail, only for it to fade away too fast. “I only need to be *passable* in three days. Just good enough to convince the team that I’m not a fraud. We have until the National Championship to make me a genius.” I don’t ask when that is. A championship doesn’t matter if she can’t hack it in three days.

I open another packet on the computer. “It looks like a lot of these questions are about the same twenty composers.” My eyes meet hers. “What do you know about Bach?”

“Johann Sebastian Bach.” She sits straighter.

“That’s our guy.”

“He’s German.”

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I wave her on.

She waves me on.

Really? "Not a single famous work of his comes to mind?"

She narrows her gaze at the ceiling in deeper thought. Her face pinching tight. She's trying *way* too hard to scrounge up information she clearly does not have.

I stand up and collect my cello. "Don't think too hard. We don't want to burst one of your precious blood vessels."

She scowls. "I didn't hire you so you could insult me."

"Not an insult," I tell her. "It was a recommendation." When I sit back down, I position the cello between my knees, bow in my hand. "Let me know if you recognize this one."

I brace the varnished maple body against my chest, the end pin resting on the floor. As soon as I begin to play, recognition glitters in Audrey's blue eyes. Her rosy lips part as sound flows. I stop quickly, not needing to play much. It's a famous movement.

"I know that one," she says. "Just not the name."

"Bach's Prelude from *Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major*. Things you need to know about Bach. His devotion to the Lutheran faith is woven into his music. Spirituality is inseparable from his work."

Audrey types notes on her laptop as I talk.

I continue, "Fortspinnung. German for—"

"*Spinning out,*" Audrey says correctly.

I'm shocked. "You know that but not the Prelude to *Suite No. 1*?"

She lifts her shoulder. "I have a lot of random knowledge. But despite the fact I know what the word stands for, I don't actually know what it means."

She's…interesting. I can't get a handle on her, and I try not to let that get to me.

"Fortspinnung," I explain, "it's a technique usually associated with the Baroque era. You can hear it in Bach's work. It's when a short musical idea keeps unfolding and extending, so the melody feels unbroken, as if being spun out continuously."

"Play it again," she says earnestly. It surprises me that I don't care that she demanded it rather than asked. Maybe it's because there's deep curiosity in her expression. It feels more genuine than I would've anticipated.

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I guess I assumed she'd just silently take notes and leave it at that.

Drawing my bow across the strings, I play again, but this time I perform the entire two and a half minutes of the movement. My left hand climbs along the fingerboard with more instinct than thought, my fingers sliding and landing on strings. A path they've traveled since I was a toddler.

There is nothing I've ever loved more than the feeling of sound.

I hunt for the precise note. Because when I find it, the vibration resonates against my chest like a second heartbeat, and I'm met with an endorphin rush that lifts me out of hell. All my mental discord unravels into the melody I coax and nurture.

Making music feels like unwinding the frayed knots of my soul.

Which is why I don't look at her.

Not beyond the first fifteen seconds. I never look at anyone when I play the cello. Even when I'm behind a drum kit or holding a guitar, I remain iron-barred inside my own world.

I finish with one breath and finally glance over at Audrey.

She's fixated on the cello between my knees and the bow in my hand. Right as she meets my gaze, her smile widens and lights up her face like she achieved some sort of enriched enlightenment. "Fortspinnung," she says.

I roll my eyes. She doesn't need to be giving herself a pat on the back already. There's a long way to go. "Cute, you know one thing. Now we need you to stuff about two hundred thousand different facts in that brain of yours."

Audrey glares. "Has anyone every told you that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar?"

"Why would I want to catch flies?" I say into a dry smile.

Her glare intensifies.

I continue, "Major works linked to Bach: *Brandenburg Concertos, The Well-Tempered Clavier, Goldberg Variations*, and *The Art of Fugue*."

She frowns. "What's a fugue?"

I blink.

Again, she's serious.

Yeah...this is going to be a long morning.

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6

AUDREY COBALT

He's horrid.

The way he eats like a caveman.

The way he can't bother to withhold an eye roll when I ask a *valid* question.

The way he looks at me like I'm a grotesque alien monster with three horns growing out of my forehead.

In so many ways, I find Birdie St. Pierre to be utterly, entirely loathsome.

Then he plays the cello, and I *almost* forget all the galling things he's said to me this morning.

Chills prick the length of my arms as hauntingly beautiful sounds spill into the space between us. With the sizable instrument settled against his chest and held between his steady knees, he's not rough or careless with his hands. His fingers crawl and press the strings with precision and control while he skates the bow back and forth.

He's in an intimate waltz, one I feel as if I'm not supposed to witness. Likely because he never looks over at me.

His eyes tighten closed, his head tipping as though he's catching and cradling the sugary notes against his ear. More chills race down my legs when he rolls his neck—absorbed like I'm no longer present—and I stifle a sharp breath before it can escape. I see the strong flex of his forearms, and for a traitorous blip, I imagine his hands on me the same way he works a cello.

He's disturbing my resolve.

That's all.

He opens his eyes to the floor while he plays, and I tell myself to focus more on the music, less on the man creating it.

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Frankly, I don't want him to stop. The soft melody stills the air and clears some of the clutter from my head. It's easy to imagine he'd be a part of a noble court if he lived during the sixteenth century among kings and queens.

I shake out the picture and do my best to concentrate. Quickly, I discover that Birdie isn't a mediocre tutor. He's better-than-average. Quite possibly *excellent*. Though his snarky sidebar comments can *go*.

Still, it excites me as time flies by in the practice room.

Four hours talking about German composers and music forms, I feel more confident about Thursday. I have a real chance to actually succeed. It's why when the clock nears ten, I'm not eager to end our study session for my English Lit class.

As soon as I have thoughts of skipping, Birdie stands and starts packing away his cello. "I've got a class in ten minutes," he tells me. "We can continue tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? We've barely made a dent." My newfound confidence in music begins slipping into the gutter. "I was hoping you'd be available tonight."

He stares at me *again* like I have three horns, not made from this planet, as he zips up the soft-sided case. "Don't you have a life? Friends? Things you can do other than study for something that counts toward absolutely *nothing*."

I could strangle him—if I wanted to add murder to my resume. Which, I don't. My CV is complete without it. But I despise how he doesn't get the importance of quiz bowl. It might just be the most frustrating thing about this whole arrangement.

"It's a Tuesday night," I remind him. "My friends are also studying."

At least I do know Kinney has a calc exam this week, so it's not a complete lie. My other two friends...well, that's complicated.

He hikes the strap of the case higher on his shoulder. He must be strong to be able to carry a cello across campus. It reminds me of how he lifted the metal chair with one hand as if it weighed nothing—and I momentarily, *momentarily*, found that attractive.

That attraction vanished when he opened his mouth and called me *Virginia*.

"Okay, let me reword this then," Birdie says. "*I* have a life. I've got things to do that don't involve teaching rich girls about Franz

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Schubert."

My heart speeds. "I know nothing about him. What did he compose?"

"*Tomorrow*," Birdie emphasizes as he strides toward the door.

I shove my things quickly into my tote, snatch my coat, then manage to block the exit before he reaches it.

"Virginia," he warns.

I bristle. "Is your middle name Impatient or is it just Prick?"

"It's Haydn." It sounds like *high-den.*

Interesting. "How do you spell that?" I wonder.

"Move," he demands.

I don't back down. "*You*, Haydn, are the one who said you need the money," I remind him. "Is that not true? Or did you already meet your target?" That worries me suddenly. He could very well toss me aside with no warning as soon as he has what he needs.

His nose flares. "No, I need a lot more than twelve hundred dollars."

"How much then?" I ask.

"It's none of your business."

"Are you in debt for something illicit?" I question. "Drugs?"

He smiles bitterly and runs a tongue over his bottom piercings. "You know I was just starting to like you."

"Really?" I frown.

"*No*." He moves around me and leaves the practice room, and much like our first encounter, I'm jogging to keep up. He makes an annoyed sound. "Why are you following me? Tutoring is done. Skedaddle." He shoos me away with his hand.

"First, that is *rude.* Second, what class are you going to?"

I don't feel like disappearing. Something about Birdie makes me want to be around him. Like maybe I can absorb his vast knowledge by osmosis. Ridiculous, but I'm desperate, and ridiculous propositions might be all I have.

"I'm going to my locker on the first floor so I can store my cello. And *then*, I have History of Chamber Music."

"How many students are in the class?"

"Twenty-five grad students. Fifty undergrad."

My lips upturn. "Fifty?"

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His eyes flit to me, and then he groans. "*No*. No. Whatever is going on in your conniving brain. Just *no*."

"No one will notice me. I'll be a church mouse."

"Have you looked in the mirror lately? You're a redhead." He stops in the checkered marble hallway. Various-sized burgundy lockers flank the wall, and he stands opposite a massive one.

I watch him type in the code as I say, "It's more likely someone will recognize my face than my hair."

He laughs. "Don't flatter yourself."

"Because you didn't know who I was."

"Because not everyone is neck-deep in Cobalt Empire lore."

I grin. "You just called it the Cobalt Empire." It's how people refer to my family legacy. The myths. The legends. The little pieces of Cobalt history, some known to the public and others kept as guarded secrets among me and my siblings.

He groans and yanks open the locker with a hard tug. "I probably heard that from my brother."

I pay attention to how he carefully fits the cello inside the empty locker. "Well, if you don't think I'll be recognized, then there should be no problem." I smile widely, and Birdie looks ready to power walk away from me. I'm more surprised when he doesn't. I add, "Anyway this will be better than going to English Lit. I'll learn something new for a change."

He shuts the locker with a *thud*. "Wait. You're skipping class?"

"I've read *Beowulf* three times already. I'm not missing anything."

He runs a hand through his unkempt hair. "I obviously can't stop you from auditing this class, short of shoving you in this locker—which I've been contemplating."

"Charming," I snap.

He forces an acidic smile. "But if you're insisting on this, then I have one rule."

"And that would be?"

"Do not talk to me," he says and turns toward the exit, blowing open the double doors with two angry hands.

My teeth ache as I grind them in irritation. Keeping my distance, I follow his purposeful, driven stride to the stone-turreted building next to Delaney Music Hall. Morning sun casts shadows against the gothic

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buildings and pavement, and Manhattan high-rises jut up behind the secluded college campus.

Birdie checks over his shoulder once, and I catch the vigorous roll of his eyes.

Yes, I am still here.

So what if he believes I'm an annoying, obnoxious pest? I've heard it countless times. When I relentlessly pursued drama club my senior year at Dalton and was unjustly denied due to something *Eliot* did years past. When I challenged the administration after they said I couldn't take four AP classes on top of cheerleading—but Bonnie Lawson could? When a boy in the caf told me to "shut the fuck up" for simply correcting his use of the word "decimate" which actually means to destroy one-tenth of something—not everything.

Yes, I am that person.

Being told to fuck off does not propel me to change. It actually makes me want to grow deeper into this version of myself.

But I will follow Birdie's rule.

Not out of the kindness of my heart.

I need him to keep tutoring me—and I don't know the depth of his money issues. I've theorized how he could be in debt. Student loans? There is a chance he's trying to save money for a dream purchase, but I'm unsure *what* that would entail. A new cello? A Maserati? Though, he doesn't strike me as a car guy.

Inside the lecture hall, warmth returns, and Birdie heads into the middle section of the small auditorium. It's not what I expected. He seems more like a back-of-the-class burnout.

When I take the open seat beside him, he gives me a look as if I just parallel parked in *his* spot.

I smile with a shrug. *I'm not talking to you, bud.*

He shakes his head and flips open his textbook while I pull my arms out of my coat, careful not to elbow him. I splay it on my lap, then fix my hair over my shoulders.

The room fills rather quickly with mostly upperclassmen and grad students. In these higher, mixed-level courses, the lectures are the same, but grad students usually have an extra project or more course-work than the undergrads.

CamScanner

Birdie completely ignores the petite blonde sitting to his right, and to my left, the cable-knit sweater guy barely acknowledges me except to ask if I have a piece of gum.

"All out. Tragically," I tell him.

He nods, then returns his focus to the whiteboard. Another prospective romance evaporated into thin air. *Goodbye, Cable-Knit Cutie.*

Though, I do have a chance to ask him a question.

I don't.

I'm more eager to learn about chamber music. I crane my neck toward Birdie's textbook, skimming over *trio sonata* and *Arcangelo Corelli.* Lifting my chin, I try to see the small print underneath Corelli's biography.

Birdie lets out a long breath before he places the book on my desk for *me*. I frown at him.

He hoists his shoulder in a casual shrug, but his eyes scream, *do not make this a big deal.* "I'm not missing anything," he whispers.

"Does it bore you?" I whisper back, a calculated risk. "Already knowing everything?"

"I don't know everything, Virginia."

He knows quite a lot though. My brain buzzes, but I bite my tongue, withholding dozens more questions.

The professor moseys into the auditorium, her demeanor serious despite her parachute pants and the bird's-nest-esque bun piled atop her head. She immediately faces the whiteboard and starts the lecture. No taking attendance. No scoping out the students for interlopers.

I'm grinning so wide.

Another successful ruse.

My brothers would be so proud. At least Tom and Eliot would be.

Music has never fully interested me, but I find myself engrossed in how the professor teaches. Trio sonatas have three musical lines, but they're often performed by four players. She turns on her portable speaker and plays classic sonatas by Corelli and Handel, and the auditorium echoes with melodies we all quietly drink in together.

I'm so immersed, I almost forget why I'm here.

That this isn't even *my* class.

CamScanner

When she shuts off the speaker and stuffs it in her bag, she says, "Don't forget to do your reading before next class. And grad students, you owe me that fifteen-page paper by the end of week."

Birdie doesn't blink. As if it's nothing, but a collective wave of sighs sweeps through the students surrounding me.

I swallow hard. *He's a grad student, Audrey.*

Of course he doesn't have endless amounts of free time to tutor me. Even if he does need the money, I'm sure it's not worth flunking out of college for. I foolishly pushed myself on him as if he's not busy. There's no disproving the selfish bitch allegations then.

I inwardly groan.

As students gather their things, I just hold my coat and quickly slip my tote on my shoulder. I hand Birdie his textbook, and he gives it a rough shove into his backpack. "Thank you for that," I say genuinely.

He shrugs again like it was a meaningless gesture. Maybe it was for him.

I scoot toward the end of the aisle. "See you tomorrow morning at six?"

He frowns as he follows me. "You're done begging me to tutor you tonight?"

"I was never *begging*," I huff. "But yes. I'm done. See you tomorrow." My cheeks are on fire, and I hustle away from him.

Once I meet the sidewalk, I feel my phone buzz with a text.

UNKNOWN

Hey. This is Guy from quiz bowl.

My heart sputters, and my feet halt on the pavement. I quickly add him to my contacts, then shoot a response.

AUDREY

Hi. Everything okay? Practice is still Thursday?

GUY

Yes. We just forgot to tell you that you're going to be in charge of trash. Is that something you can do?

I blow out a breath. *Fuck.* Julius Caesar returns to my head. Alea iacta est. *The die is cast*. I'm in far too deep at this point. I text him

CamScanner

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CamScanner

back.

AUDREY

No problem. I can handle trash.

CamScanner

7

AUDREY COBALT

"This is an actual crime," Kinney deadpans. "Just tell me what happened." Over the video call, my best friend glares at me like I'm personally smiting her with bunions and a lifetime case of acid reflux.

I am immune to her "I will murder you in your sleep" death glares. But I didn't expect one at 10 p.m. in my apartment on this lovely Wednesday Eve (Tuesday night).

My cellphone is perched against a thick Christmas-cookie recipe book that I won't need until December. Ingredients have been meticulously laid out on the marble countertops: flour, sugar, a carton of eggs, my favorite steel mixing bowls, a pastry cutter, and a canister of wooden spoons.

I lean my elbows next to the tub of sour cream and stare at Kinney. She must be sitting at her vanity since I have a perfect view of her rumpled black bedspread and the framed *X-Men* comics mounted behind her—all featuring her namesake, Laura Kinney.

Kinney only framed the moodiest, angriest-looking issues where her namesake is either crying or screaming. I suggested she hang the pink *All-New X-Men* issue where Laura is clearly smitten with the hunky Warren Worthington III as he caresses her cheek. My best friend's reaction was as expected—one would think I told her to nail a dead skunk to the wall.

At this moment, Kinney isn't hidden in darkness. The white light from her makeup mirror brightens her contrasting features. Like her soft, round face. Heavy black eyeliner. Edgy dyed-black hair, the strands grown out to her chest.

CamScanner

Seeing her clearly, I say, "It would be silly to repeat myself three times. We can wait a little bit longer for them to call us back."

Kinney groans. "The call has dropped *two* times already, Audrey."

"Third time is the charm." I crack an egg into the mixing bowl.

She looks like she could crawl through my phone and strangle me. "*Or* our best friends are currently in some remote campground in Arizona with shitty signal, and waiting around is completely useless."

I sigh. She's not wrong, but I've been carrying double the optimism these days just to counterbalance Kinney's continued cynicism.

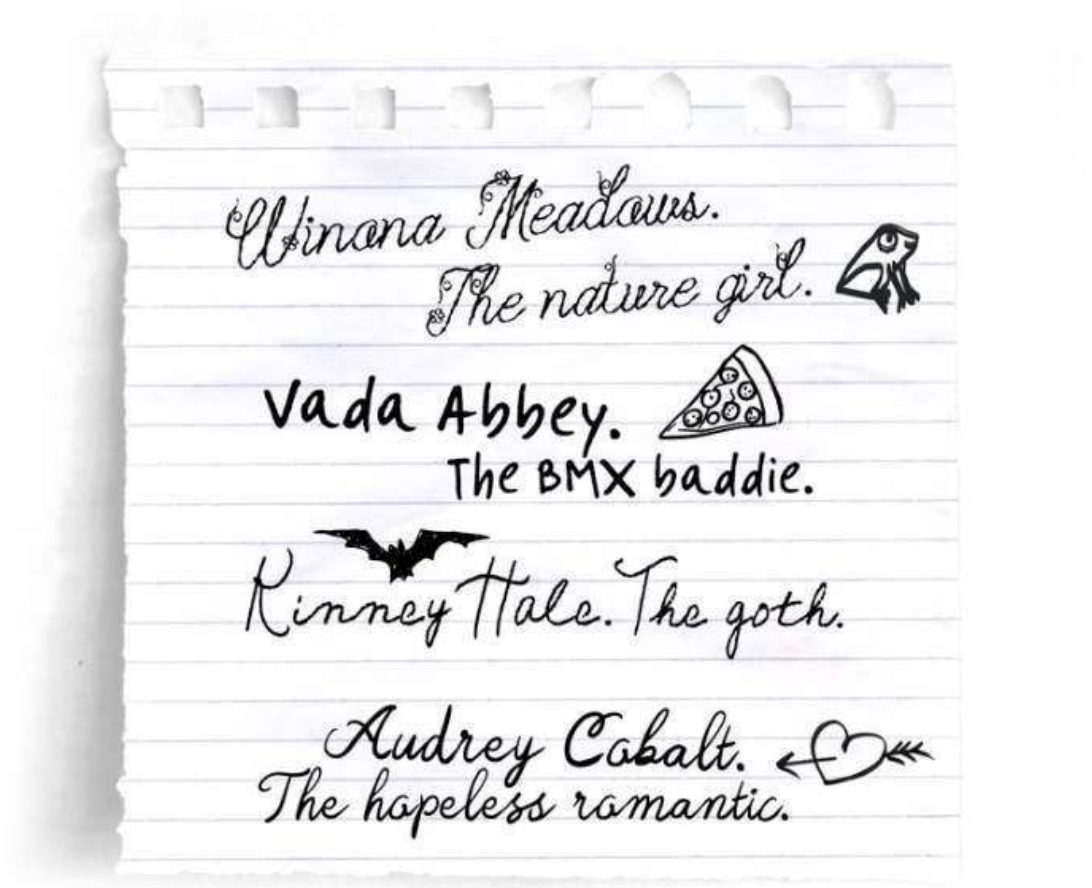
Our best friends are a year older than us, but we grew up as an unbreakable foursome, stumbling through the awkward phases of life together. We'd known each other since we were in diapers—thanks to Kinney, Winona, and me all being cousins and the youngest of our respective families.

The fourth, Vada, isn't even really the fourth. She could very well be considered the second to join the group. She's related to Kinney and Winona on each of their fathers' sides, so she's been my friend for just as long as my cousins have been.

We did it all together: elementary field trips, homecoming dances, high school ragers, skinny-dipping in the Tyrrhenian Sea. We were inseparable to the point where our families coined a cutesy middle-school nickname for us. *The girl squad*.

We'd all pass around a notebook during pep rallies (before I became a cheerleader), and we'd each scribble a moniker and draw a doodle beside our names.

CamScanner



It felt like we were all so unique that we were destined to be together always. How else could we go through life without our perfect counterparts?

College had been my dream that I'd mapped out for years. The four of us would share an apartment in whatever city—the place didn't matter as long as we were together—and we'd be studying and falling in love and seeing each other grow into remarkable young women.

It felt destined...until it didn't.

I must've idealized my friendships too much because when it all began changing, the hurt burrowed and burrowed. Until it became harder to ignore. Though I tried to keep the hope alive for Kinney.

When Winona and Vada graduated from high school, they announced they'd be backpacking across Europe and parts of the US for a yearlong wild adventure. No college together. No future where the four of us live in a four-bedroom apartment.

CamScanner

It was a silly dream anyway.

A longshot, really.

As I whisk the eggs, a new screen pops up in our video call with the name *Winona.*

My excitement bursts, then fizzles out just as fast. The background is blurry and her face is just a fuzzy blob.

Kinney scowls. "Hello?" she asks Winona. "Are you there or did you drop your phone into a swamp pit?"

Winona's voice crackles. "Sorry—I…" The call drops. Her screen disappears, leaving just Kinney and me…again.

Third time is not the charm.

Kinney gives me her classic *I told you so* look. "Pointless."

"Do you think they're having fun?" I ask her. "Maybe they met boys while they were camping and now share tents with them. I heard Arizona nights can get cold."

Kinney twists off a cap to black nail polish. "Or maybe we'll never know because staying in communication is a pain in the ass."

At least I have her. Losing Kinney after this unexpected breakup of our friendship foursome would be literal hell. I feel firmly on earth because she's still a phone call away. One that doesn't drop out.

Kinney swipes polish on her thumbnail. "*Please* just update me on your drama-filled life already. Mine is depressing. I decided not to sign up for a lesbian dating app, and instead, I messaged Viv."

I gasp. "*The* Viv? As in—"

"My ex from middle school. Yeah. She ghosted me after we chatted for a whole two hours."

My lips part, aghast. "She did *not*. I will message her—"

"Noooo," Kinney draws out. "Please save me from further embarrassment. Just tell me what's going on with you."

"The team wants me to take on trash."

She glares. "They're giving you *garbage*?"

"It's not literal trash."

"Good because I was one second away from calling campus security on them for hazing."

I measure the cream. "No need. It's just what the pop culture category is called in quiz bowl."

CamScanner

Kinney looks offended for a short blip. Then her jaw drops even farther than when she thought I was being delegated to man the dumpster. "They want *you* to do pop culture?"

"I think I can get away with it. I know movies and some TV."

"You know rom-coms and historical dramas. When's the last time you watched an action movie?"

I put a hand to my chest. "I've seen *Speed*."

Kinney laughs. "*Speed* is like ten thousand years old, and you only watched it for young Keanu Reeves."

"I'd watch it for older Keanu too."

She releases a deep breath from her core. "All right."

"All right?" I tilt my head with a slow-rising smile.

"As your best friend, I will help you."

I smile so wide. I didn't even have to ask. She just knew.

"Merci infiniment." I say *thank you infinitely.*

"But I'm not calling the best subject *trash*."

"The word is hereby banned." I grab the vanilla and start to measure out a teaspoon and it's…empty. "Rats." I tap the bottom of the bottle. *Nothing.* "I'm out of vanilla."

"Make it without it."

I look at her like she just told me to fly into the raging hot gas ball that is the sun.

Kinney blows on her fingernails. "Or not."

"I think my brothers might have some."

She bows forward. "Wait, wait. You promised you'd tell me about Birdie tutoring you."

I dry my hands. "Infuriating personality. Semi-decent tutor. And he's…" I stop myself from calling him *barbaric*. It feels a little cruel. If I'm going to speak so ill of him, I'd rather bring my grievances directly to the source. Birdie deserves to hear it.

"And?" Kinney's brows rise.

"And he's doing me a favor."

"One you're *paying* him for." She has a protective expression.

"Money well spent so far. I'm on my way to reaching my end goal, and nothing will stop me, not even lack of vanilla. Which I have to go find."

"You need me to curse out your brothers, I'm always here."

CamScanner

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"You need me to curse out your brothers, I'm always here."

CamScanner

My smile hurts my cheeks.



I CRAWL HALFWAY INSIDE A CABINET IN MY BROTHERS' APARTMENT, PULLING OUT tubes of icing in various colors. I find an expired box of puffed wheat cereal, red velvet cake mix (also expired), and instant potatoes (shockingly *not* expired).

"Looking for something?"

I startle and smack my head. "Ow!"

Laughter echoes behind me. *Lovely*.

Slinking out of the cabinet, I massage the top of my throbbing skull. My stomach twists when I see the source of the laughter—of course, it's *this* brother. The one I am actively hiding something from. But there is truly no reason I should fail at keeping this secret. Especially when Tom is too preoccupied with laughing at me.

Tom falls back into the kitchen counter with deep-chested chuckling. I don't know why he's so amused—he's the one who's *suspiciously* shirtless and sweaty.

His messy golden-brown hair sticks to his forehead, and the last thing I want to see is the Calvin Klein underwear band peeking out from his acid-wash jeans. He should pull his pants up, but instead of calling out his wardrobe malfunction, I tell him, "You'll regret laughing when you find out I'm *concussed*."

Tom releases *another* laugh.

I narrow an unamused look at him.

Mischief should've been his middle name, but instead our parents were too kind to their fifth-born and named him Tom *Carraway* instead. The "troublemaker" tattoo on his bicep suits him, but it's still jarring seeing the definition in his muscles.

He's been my skinniest brother.

The one who looks like a twig—or rather *looked* like one. Ever since he went on tour for his rock band, he not only appears his age of twenty-two, but he also has *abs*.

I always thought Tom could've maybe, possibly (there was a chance) passed as the youngest, but now...I can't hide the fact that I am the seventh-born.

CamScanner

"My pain is your enjoyment then?" I combat, turning on the faucet to wash the dust and grime off my palms and elbows.

His laughter fades. "Please. If I was going to take any enjoyment in whatever *this* is"—he makes a circular motion with his hand—"I'd have pushed you in the cabinet and held the door closed."

"Which you did multiple times when I was seven."

"A legend always repeats the classics."

Truthfully, he hasn't done anything that childish toward me in years.

Tom grips the counter he's leaning against. "There's a thing called knocking, you know."

I frown. "You gave me a key." Technically *Beckett* gave me the key, but it was a universally agreed-upon act. No one has made a comment about me coming over unannounced before.

"I meant *my* door, Audrey Virginia," Tom emphasizes by pointing to the hallway leading to his bedroom. "Instead of diving headfirst into the cabinets like a rat—"

"I am not a rat." I glower.

"Being inside a kitchen cabinet has rat-like qualities."

I shut off the faucet. "This will be the very last time I come to your apartment. Your wish has been grant—"

"Whoa—not my wish," he cuts in fast, pushing off the counter. "And you love it here. Like *so much.*"

I do. "I love my place with Eliot just as much though."

"Great. Good. Perfect." He claps his hands together, keeping them pressed to point a finger gun at the cupboard. "What are you looking for? I am your multi-talented brother. I can sing, play guitar, find my little sister's...?" He waves at me to fill in the blank.

"Vanilla extract. Do you have any?"

Tom scans the several cabinets from afar like he has X-ray vision. It takes way too long.

I frown. "Maybe I can substitute the vanilla—"

"No, we have it...I think." He clucks his tongue. "Ben might know. He was making some vegan muffin thing last week with Harry." He means *Harriet Fisher*. Ben's pre-med girlfriend, also a junior at MVU. She's all-consumed in the sciences, so I rarely see her on campus.

Sadly.

CamScanner

I like to think of Harriet as my sister. We may not text as frequently as I do my actual sister, but we're getting there. *Building blocks.*

I also know which muffins Tom is referring to since Harriet dropped off a half-dozen at my apartment. "I ate those," I tell him. "They might've had vanilla in them." I try to remember the flavor profile, but all I remember is how Ben was noticeably missing in action when Harriet made the delivery.

Since I moved to New York, Ben has avoided me on and off. He has OCD, a type where he blames himself for all the bad things that happen within our family—to the point where he fears hurting us. His magical thinking has taken direct hits at my relationship with him.

But I will not let it divide us.

I'm giving him time, room, space—all the things he may need. I don't want to be too pushy. Even if I'm dying to insert myself everywhere. Restraint is difficult, but I have it. I can wield it. *I must.*

Tom claps his hands a second time. "Great, Ben will know where the vanilla is. You should wait for him."

I hesitate. "Where is he again?" I'm about to pop open our shared calendar.

"Bar. He's celebrating some dude's birthday tonight."

That's right. And "some dude" is Ben's teammate: Dylan Dorsey, Manhattan Valley's star defenseman and my brother's good friend. Not that Ben has introduced me to him.

But it's okay.

In time, he will.

And Tom may not care to get to know Ben's hockey teammates, but *I* would love the chance to be well-integrated into Ben's life again.

Just like he involved me when we were kids.

We'll get there.

But if Ben is at a bar right now, he could be out until 2 a.m. or even later. Staying up that late sounds downright painful when I have a 6 a.m. tutoring session with Birdie.

I glance back toward the door. "I don't know—"

"No, no, I insist. I'll wait with you." Tom puts his hands on my shoulders, steering me toward the living room. "Lead the way."

I don't move. "If you're hoping to help reconcile my friendship with Ben, it's really not that broken. I'm just letting Ben come to me."

CamScanner

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CamScanner

"Employing the stray dog technique?"

My cheeks roast. "I did not call him that—Ben is *not* a stray dog."

Tom smirks. But not for long. "Fine, this is not about Ben. You need to stay here so you can tell me what the fuck is going on."

"What's…going on?"

"Yeah. What's going on with you and Birdie?"

My face heats under the accusation. He can't know about Birdie tutoring me. Unless…Eliot told him about the music textbooks? But that's such a far stretch that I can't even do mental backflips to get there.

I tighten my eyes. "This is all very odd."

"What's odd is that Birdie asked Phoenix for your phone number."

Ohhhhh. This suddenly makes sense. "I can't speak to Birdie's intentions. You'll have to ask him."

"*Intentions?*" His eyes widen. "What fucking intentions?"

My pulse skids. "Poor choice of words." I narrow a look at Tom. "Why are you naked?"

He chokes on a sharp noise. "I'm wearing *pants*. This is not naked." He motions to his body.

"You are shirtless and sweaty." Deflection is my specialty, but I let out a real gasp at a thought. "Is Phoenix here?" I whirl on my feet toward the hallway, then squeeze my eyes in suspicion at Tom. "You've been having sex."

"Oh my fuck, you cannot—"

"Cannot what?" I side-eye the exit. *I can make it there.*

Tom skates both hands through his sweaty hair with a strained breath, then drops them fast to race ahead of me before I can reach the front door. "You are not leaving until you tell me what the fuck is going on with you and my boyfriend's brother."

"Nothing," I say simply.

"Liar liar, your pants are on fire, Audrey Virginia." Tom braces all his weight against the exit. "You want me to move, you'll have to physically pry me off this door."

I grimace. "I will not wrestle you."

"Exactly. So start speaking." He snaps his fingers at me. "What are you two up to?"

"We're not up to anything."

"He asked for your *number*. Did he text you? Call you?"

CamScanner

Holy...I expel a strained breath. How did we get here? I was just looking for some vanilla! "I can't recall," I lie.

Tom threads his hands on top of his head. "You can't recall whether Birdie St. Pierre texted you?"

"I'm feeling rather faint all of a sudden." I touch my forehead dramatically.

"Yeah, pass out, that's the only way you're getting out of telling me the truth. EMS is going to have to wheel you out of here."

Ugh.

I drop my hand. "We promised each other we wouldn't say," I admit truthfully. "Let me keep my promise, Tom. *Please*." Begging is the next tactic.

His fingers remain laced on his head. Eyes even wider than before in sheer panic. "You're making promises to each other?"

"I joined MVU's quiz bowl team," I confess quickly. "Under the guise that I can be their music specialist. Birdie is tutoring me. That's *it*."

His breathing slows as he absorbs this. "He's tutoring you?"

"Yes."

"Why not ask me to tutor you?" Hurt flares in his eyes. "Is it because you think I'm too busy? Or I'm too focused on Ben? Because I'm not too busy for you, and I know Eliot is your roommate, but if you need me *specifically*, I am here."

A smile instantly tugs at my lips. I've hoped Tom would try to make time for me. While he's busy writing his second album, he's still carving out moments to be with all of us, and I have a feeling that won't change much when he embarks on a world tour soon.

He's such an important ingredient among all my siblings. Everything would taste bland without Tom, and nothing would rise without Eliot.

Maybe I should've asked for Tom's help.

No.

No, this is better. "I can manage quiz bowl on my own...and with the help of a music tutor. But I'd rather that tutor not be a Cobalt."

He shuts his eyes for a long moment, then opens them on the ceiling. "Birdie wouldn't do it for free. So what for?" His protective gaze descends on me. "If you offered him sexual favors, if he accepted, holy shit—"

CamScanner

"Why would I—*no*, don't take out your phone." He's seconds from either speed dialing his boyfriend or Birdie. Either way, phoning a St. Pierre right now is not the answer. "Tom!" I reach for it, but he's pulling away. "Why would you even think I'd offer a sexual favor?"

"Collegiate quiz bowl is your childhood dream, and I don't know the lengths you're willing to go to achieve it."

"Not to those lengths, I assure you," I say quickly, then frown. "Do you really believe Birdie would accept a sexual favor from me?" He doesn't strike me as that type of person, but how well do I even know him?

"Five minutes ago, I would've said *no*," Tom says tightly. "Now, I don't know." He's still scrolling through his contacts. "I will murder him if he—"

"Tom!" I jump for the phone but catch air. "It's not *that*."

He drops his attention to me. "What then? Because I know Birdie wouldn't do it for the money."

My heart hammers. I freeze. "Why would you say that? College is expensive." *He needs money for student debt, right?*

Tom frowns. "He's on an academic scholarship at MVU. His grad school is completely paid for."

I stiffen.

"Did he tell you it was for money?" Tom asks me, this time more concern in his voice. I'm not entirely sure if it's just aimed at me. Birdie is his boyfriend's *little* brother.

"I...promised..." I mutter. "J'ai promis." *I promised.*

"You already caved, Audrey. If something is going on with Phoenix's brother, I should know."

"I don't know if anything *is* going on," I admit. "He just needs some money. I need a tutor. That's it. That's all."

That's all.

As if it didn't take me less than forty-eight hours to break a promise.

Tom suddenly looks past me.

I swerve my head, and behind me, I see Phoenix with a blue terry cloth towel around his waist. Dark hair wet like he just emerged from a shower. Beads of water roll down his tattooed chest. His eyes carry triple the concern of Tom's.

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He must've heard me.

"I have scones to bake," I say fast. Luckily, Tom steps aside, and I bolt out of the apartment.

There is no deep breath of relief. Not when Beckett is coming down the hall and sees my panic-stricken face. He's only ten feet from the apartment with his own concern and yellow-green eyes that say, *What the fuck?*

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8

AUDREY COBALT

"Everything is fine," I tell Beckett while I peel myself off his apartment door and walk backward toward mine.

He adjusts a gym bag on his shoulder, coming home from a production of *Romeo and Juliet.* One I've seen him dance in a thousand times. It never gets stale. With his lithe movements, lighter-than-air leaps, and calm way of existing, Beckett has personified the word *exquisite.* He's like a madeleine. The sponge cake is best served warm.

It's too firm when cold.

His brown hair—darker than Tom's and Charlie's—tickles his ears, the longer pieces hanging over a rolled blue bandana and kept out of his face. A face that is currently very, very serious and edged with *severe* concern. A little too much for someone who knows nothing about what happened between me and Tom.

"No need to worry," I smile, trying to blow this dust storm away from me. "Have the best, most glorious night."

"Il faut qu'on parle," he says in a smooth, even-tempered voice. *We need to talk.* His unflustered demeanor feels the most commanding of my five brothers. Maybe because he's most like our father in this way.

"Yes, we do." I nod, taking out my phone. "You haven't sent me any photos to post on your socials this week, and while I can take pictures of my tuna salad and pass it as your lunch—I think your ballet company would prefer more body shots, face pics, even backstage photos."

I run Beckett's Instagram account since he detests being online in any fashion. He's the most private in my family, but his ballet company requires him to promote each new production.

For years now, he's trusted me with this task, and I've enjoyed curating a "Beckett Joyce Cobalt" online presence. He deserves the praise

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and fanfare, and I love seeing people gush over him. Even if, at times, they're unknowingly gushing over my latte and my paperback of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and not Beckett's.

It's a harmless little ruse.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket. "I'll send you Beth Anne's number. She'll text you more backstage content to post."

I startle as my phone pings with Beth Anne Blanchard's contact info. She's NYBC's prima ballerina and one of his closest friends.

I could tuck my phone to my chest and twirl. It's as if Beckett just named a planet after me. He's ushering me into his universe and stamping *Audrey Virginia* in his solar system of friends. This is exactly what I dreamed of when moving here.

To be included.

I save her contact while I dazedly reach my apartment door. When I glance backward, my smile drops.

Beckett has followed me.

I clear my throat. "If that's all—"

"It's not all." He reaches around me and unlocks my door. "Nous devons encore parler." *We still need to talk.*

Right.

I need to mount a defense, but I'm unsure of what I'm even defending.

"What is this about exactly?" I ask as I lead him into my apartment. "Because I'm positive there's a reasonable explanation." I aim straight for my mixing bowl.

"It's..." He trails off, only a few feet inside my apartment. He shuts the door gently, like he's trying not to trigger a bomb. His pinpointed eyes skate over the tornadic clutter. Rumpled throw blankets and pillows on the living room floor. Dirtied wine glasses on end tables. The surface of the coffee table undiscoverable beneath books, ceramic bowls, colorful stationery, a glue gun, and ribbons.

"I was scrapbooking," I say, taking in his shifting gaze. "It's not a pigsty. It's organized chaos."

"Which one of you is organizing?"

"Joint effort. And you can blink."

He hardly does. "Where's Eliot?" His eyes veer back to the kitchen. Flour dusts the marble counters, and Eliot forgot to put away a stack of

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dessert plates. He asks, "Are these clean?"

I nod. "But I can…do that." He's already dropped his gym bag, and he puts the plates in a cupboard. "Beckett, you don't need to clean up after me."

He's begun to wash my oil-coated measuring cups in the sink. "Where's Eliot?" he asks again.

"Still out after his show, I suppose." It's close to midnight.

"When does he usually come home?"

I sense his concern. Maybe his worry isn't about me at all. "It varies, but I'm not a snitch." I pick up my recipe book. "You'll have to ask him about his nighttime routine."

Beckett releases a weighted breath.

My frown deepens. "Did Eliot stay out late very often when he lived with you?"

"All the time."

"You didn't think he'd change just because he's living with me, did you?"

"I did, actually. Charlie did not." He sighs. "Looks like he was right."

"When is Charlie not right?" It's rhetorical. Charlie is *always* right, which is both annoying and extraordinary.

I'm more surprised when Beckett mutters very quietly, "There've been times." Maybe I wasn't supposed to hear him, but I will mark this in the category of *Audrey has fabulous hearing*. I like when Beckett and Charlie talk about each other. They hold their twin bond so close, it feels more secretive and clandestine than the love Eliot and Tom share —which is as boisterous as they are.

"Well, I'm glad Eliot is still out," I tell him. "I don't need a babysitter. Just a roommate."

Beckett looks over at me. "You're our little sister—"

"Which I like being," I cut in.

Beckett almost smiles. His eyes do, at least. He shuts off the faucet and shakes water off his hands. "Eliot promised to look out for you while you two are living together."

"Which he has been. He's been a wonderful roommate. Exemplary."

Beckett scans the untidy living room.

I add, "I even like the clutter." With no vanilla, I decide to abandon the scones and make something else. I start flipping through my recipe

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book. “Did you just want to check on my apartment and ask about Eliot?”

“No.” He dries the pink one-third measuring cup with a dishtowel. “Charlie said you’ve befriended a grad student.”

I choke on a noise of disbelief. Charlie *tattled* to Beckett because he failed at prying Guy Abernathy’s name from my unyielding grip.

I set my book down and spin to him. “Is it a crime to speak to grad students?”

“You’re a *freshman*.” The warning is brutally clear in his lasered yellow-green eyes, and yet, I want to fight against these ridiculous standards.

“A *college* freshman.” I maintain direct eye contact, not at all scared. “I’m an adult, and as an adult, I can speak to anyone I’d like. Just as I’m sure you did when you were eighteen.”

“Who is he?”

“Quite possibly my one true love.” I perch my hands on my hips. “And you’d deny me the greatest romance of my life because he’s in grad school? Why don’t you just lock me in a tower and rename me Rapunzel.”

“Audrey—”

The door swings open. “Sister, I’m home?” Eliot’s voice shifts to confusion while he interrupts a standoff between me and Beckett. “Brother?” Eliot throws his peacoat over a barstool. “Care to explain what I’ve missed?”

“Audrey might be falling for a grad student.”

I very much dislike the way he says it. Beckett doesn’t *believe* I might’ve found real love. I want to chalk this up to Beckett being a romantic Scrooge, but I worry it’s worse. He thinks I’m a foolish little girl with a foolish little crush, and really, I have myself to blame.

I’m the girl who cries wolf when it comes to romance. Always talking, never *doing*.

At every opportunity to have a meaningful chance at love, I turn my attention to other things. My goals, my studies, my hobbies and ambitions. Romance has taken a back burner in everything but in my mind.

“This isn’t a one-sided crush,” I defend.

Beckett looks alarmed. “Has he flirted with you?”

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"So what if he has?" I whirl toward Eliot. "You wouldn't treat me like a baby, would you, Eliot? You understand I'm a grown woman."

"Of course." His blue eyes shift over my head toward Beckett. "What grad student?"

"She won't say."

I swat my hair off my shoulder. "*He's* wonderful, intelligent, studious, dapper—everything I've ever wanted in a man." I return to my recipe book, feeling their eyes on my back. "I can't wait for the night he fucks my brains out." I internally wince.

Word vomit. I'm trying to be better and not purposely rattle my brothers. I suppose these habits are going to be harder to break than I thought.

They're far too quiet, so I cast a glance backward just as they stop sharing "a look," and unfortunately, I missed what that look could be.

Eliot slips me a conspiratorial smile, which makes me feel like I'm a part of the plot. I ease a little.

Beckett raises his hands like he's leveling the tension. "You're a Cobalt," he says. "Do you truly understand the number of men who'd love to sleep with the youngest girl now that you're legal?"

"*Yes*," I state firmly. "Some of them are *truly* vile. I also know that none of them can have me, as I've been holding out for my one true love, and you all need to accept I've possibly found him."

Eliot leans up against the counter beside me. "Whisper his name. Beckett never has to know." He smiles. "Just between us roommates."

I open my mouth. Eliot's rising grin nearly entices me to share, but after I broke a promise so quickly tonight, maybe it's better if I keep this card close to my chest. "It's for you to find out. Not for me to share." I land on a page in my recipe book. "Now, if you don't mind, I have cupcakes to bake."

The last thing I hear is Beckett whispering to Eliot, "He's not real."

Determination scorches my eyes, and I increase the mixer's speed, the whisk spinning violently.

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9

BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

What is wrong with her? I thought Cobalts are supposed to be like God's gift to all liars everywhere. Schemers. Co-conspirators. The way my brother put it, they love to play mind games and are loyal to a fault.

Did all the loyalty get used up on the first six children and leave the seventh empty of even a drop?

Because how in the *fuck* am I now on the receiving end of my brother's absolute distress.

"You don't have to come down here," I tell him. My phone is pressed to my ear. I carry my cello on my back with shoulder straps while wearing my actual backpack on my chest like a BabyBjörn. My footsteps pound hard against the pavement as I make my way across campus. Forgot my jacket at my apartment. Do not care. The wind cannot even touch the inferno building inside me.

Lights illuminate the pathway along the grass. Otherwise, I'd just have the glow of a full moon. It's twenty till six, and my dumb ass is still on my way to tutor Brutus.

Phoenix lets out a rough breath. "You can't expect me to just sit around—"

"Don't sit. Please. Do something productive. Bang out a new song on the drums. Write a poem. Go fuck your boyfriend—"

"*Birdie*," he growls. "This is serious."

"It's not. That's what I'm trying to tell you, man. It's nothing. I need the extra cash and Little Miss Primadonna showed up. Wrong person, right time. And look at me, prioritizing my time over who I'm keeping company with."

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9

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Phoenix expels another heavy breath over the phone. "Man, this isn't normal for you."

"Don't you think I'd tell you if I were in trouble?" I wince as soon as I say the words.

"You wouldn't," Phoenix says. "That's the issue. You think your troubles are yours to bear alone, and I am fucking concerned...is it Mom and Dad? Are they putting pressure on you? Because I thought that stopped."

I step over some duck shit on the pathway. My temple throbs, and I *seriously* wish Audrey's assumptions were right and I was just into drugs. Maybe this would be easier. At least, I wouldn't have a mind-splitting headache right now.

"Mom and Dad are fine," I tell Phoenix. "They've been fine ever since I quit the rock band." It'd been their lifelong goal to uncloud my head of my rock music dreams. It's not every day the golden son is the second son. But things went wrong when I was four.

I have no memory of it, but it's been recounted over and over. How my teacher would play a simple tune just once, and I could recreate the notes perfectly on any instrument. *A gift like that can't be wasted,* my grandfather told my parents. I'd been crowned heir to the St. Pierre legacy before Phoenix lost all his baby teeth.

How Phoenix doesn't hate me—resent me—it blows my mind every day. He didn't grow some caustic form of jealously toward me. Instead, he loved me.

He loved me more than I've ever loved myself.

"So you need the extra cash for..." He trails off, waiting for me to fill in the blank.

"A vacation in the Maldives. Tom couldn't shut up about the snorkeling. It totally sparked the urge to splurge."

"Now I know you're full of shit. You told me last week you'd rather suck a cactus than take Tom's advice."

I roll my eyes. "Can you just trust me for once?"

"I do trust you, Bird. I trust you with my life."

Just not my own. It's the unsaid thing hanging in the air, but I don't bring it up. "So believe me when I say it's nothing to worry about."

Phoenix lets out a defeated sigh. "And you think tutoring Audrey is a good idea? You have enough going on with grad school and the

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Symphony. You don't need the added stress."

"It's not stressful." I surprise myself by how genuine I sound. I think…I think I am telling the truth. Tutoring Audrey hasn't compounded any pressure on me. To be fair, this is only the second session, but I wasn't dreading getting out of bed for it.

"Really?" Phoenix sounds as shocked as I feel.

"She's a nutcase," I add. "But yeah."

"Okay, keep the name-calling to a minimum."

I snort into a laugh. "Man, she's called me multiple names already. In English and French. I'm allowed to dish it back."

Phoenix makes a disgruntled noise. "Just…don't cause problems. I am dating her brother."

"Like I could forget. She reminds me every chance she has." I push open the doors to the music hall and head for the stairs. "Look, I have to go. If you have any other parting words for your little brother, say them now."

"Stay out of trouble."

"Loud and clear. Love you, asshole."

"Love you back."

We hang up, and as soon as I reach the practice room door, I see it's already ajar. I check my watch. I'm ten minutes early. She's not already here, is she?

Frowning, I push the door wider and spot the carrot-orange hair of the youngest Cobalt. Stay out of *trouble* feels like it has new meaning.

Because it's clear…she is trouble.

And she's holding a Tupperware container as she rockets to her feet.

"Birdie—"

"More scones?" I ask, slipping off the straps of my cello. I unzip the instrument from its soft-sided case, then pry off my backpack from my chest. I feel her watching my movements, and I snap a glare at her.

She's not the least bit skittish. I don't know what I'd have to be to scare her off. I'm starting to think if I grew wings, claws, and a fucking razor-sharp tail, she'd still face me.

"No, actually…" She closes the distance between us, then stops a foot away and holds out the container in reach. Not demanding I come to her this time. "These are confession cupcakes."

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I make a face. She's not serious. Oh, but the earnestness in her eyes tells me otherwise. She's confessing with...*cupcakes*. My stomach growls as if to say, *Wonderful, we skipped breakfast.*

Except. Not wonderful. I'm still mad at her. I run a hand against the back of my neck, not reaching out for them. "What kind of cupcakes?" I ask.

"Chocolate. I prefer vanilla, but there was an unfortunate shortage of vanilla extract in my kitchen. I also didn't have any vanilla bean paste, so..." She shifts on her feet. "Do...do you like chocolate perhaps?"

"Perhaps I like chocolate from someone who can keep secrets."

She closes her eyes into a deep wince. "You know."

"Yeah. *I know.*"

She opens her gaze on my waist. My plain white shirt has ridden up after I untangled myself from my backpack. I yank down the fabric to cover my bare skin. "Eyes up here, Virginia."

"You have a pretty waist."

It's so off-the-cuff, I almost laugh, and I glare at her for making me *almost laugh.* "Is that a compliment?"

"I can dole out more if it'll lead you into forgiving me."

"Those are *empty* compliments. You can keep them." I take off my winter beanie, then slide a hand through my hair. "And it looks like you don't need to confess anything with your cupcakes."

Her blink is slower, sadder.

It should not soften any millimeter of my hardened heart. *She's playing me.* Still, I find myself shoving the beanie in my back pocket and ripping the container out of her hands.

Audrey startles, her eyes quickly meeting mine. Her genuine surprise makes me believe she hadn't been using a pity tactic on me. When she sees the cupcakes in my hands, her lips lift in a warm smile.

"I made sure they're not too sweet," she says, watching me sit on a metal foldout chair. "Will you text me your thoughts when you try them?"

I frown at her as I pop the lid.

"I'm sitting right here. I'll tell you to your face."

Her shimmery-glossed lips begin to part. "It's six. As in six in the morning."

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"Great, you know the time." I unwrap the swirly orange cupcake liner. "Is this to match your hair?" It's a serious question, but her blue eyes are turbulent waves trying to drown me. Luckily, I'm a good swimmer, but I prefer long-distance running.

"No, I was not matching *my hair*." She smooths a crease in her puffy-sleeved white dress. "I was guessing your favorite color."

"Well, it's not orange."

"Of course it isn't," she snaps back. "You clearly have a hatred of redheads."

"I don't hate redheads."

"So you just hate me then."

"I knew you were smart." I shove half the cupcake in my mouth. It melts against my tongue with a powerful burst of flavor, rich cocoa without the sharp sugary bite. First word that pops in my head...*moist*. Fuck, I hate that word. But there's no other accurate way to describe it.

Hands down, this is the best cupcake I've ever had.

"And?" Audrey stands on the tips of her toes in anticipation. It's somewhat endearing.

Barely.

I lick frosting off my thumb. "Are you looking for a four-page review or a letter grade?"

Her face goes rosy red. "Which one are you offering?"

"Neither." I finish that one off. Then I smash two more cupcakes together, frosting in the middle, and stuff the cupcake sandwich in my mouth. I eat it in about four bites, but she's acting like I swallowed it whole.

Her nose wrinkles in disgust.

As I chew, I mumble out the truth, "Ten out of ten."

Her revulsion vanishes instantly, and a soft smile eases across her face. She goes for her small flip-up spiral notepad. Her pen has a furry little blue puffball on the end. I'm not kidding. It wiggles as she scribbles a few words. Then she pauses above the pages. "Truly?" she asks me.

I nod, washing down the cupcake with a swig of water. I study her for a longer beat as she smiles wider and jots more notes. She makes this tiny noise of elated affirmation. Like a melodic squeal—but

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squeals sound too harsh, so not a squeal exactly. More like a humming, high-pitched sigh. I strain to hear it again, but she only does it once.

You do not like the sound of her being pleased with herself. I don't. *No.* Oh but I do. I scrape a rougher hand through my hair, then go grab my backpack. "Are you giving cupcakes to your quiz bowl team too?" I ask.

"No. Just the scones."

So her obsession with perfecting her recipes has little to do with impressing the team. It's just *her*.

I return to my chair and unzip my backpack at my feet, slipping my water bottle back inside. "Are you planning to be a pastry chef or something?" I realize I don't even know what her major is at MVU. Though she mentioned English Lit, but that could be a requirement for just about anything. I don't know her aspirations—do nepo kids even have aspirations? Or do they just plan their life around freeloading off Mommy and Daddy's hard-earned money?

I don't know.

I know more about *Tom*. Her brother. He could literally live off his trust fund, but he's passionate about rock music. He fueled all of that into a successful music career. I guess it'd make sense if Audrey was into baking. Maybe she's hoping to open a pâtisserie in Paris.

I can see it.

Audrey trades her notebook for her laptop, then takes a seat across from me. "I don't want to be a pastry chef. Baking is just a hobby."

Holy fuck. How many times am I going to be wrong about her?

It bothers me more than it should.

Leaning back in the metal chair, I ask, "So you give a hundred and ten percent to all your nongraded, pointless hobbies?"

"Yes," she says with an emphatic nod. "And I get it. It's not 'cool' to be a tryhard. But can you make fun of me later? I don't understand the difference between a recitative and an aria."

I wasn't…trying to make fun of her.

If anyone understands giving a hundred and ten percent, it's me. I grew up having to soak my fingers in Epsom salt baths just to relieve the pain after hours and hours on the cello. Giving my all has been my standard since birth.

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I don't know how to do anything halfway, which is why the four years in Nothing Personal *and* playing the cello could have killed me at any time.

But I don't explain any of this. Instead, I carry my chair over to hers. Her surprise is a blip as I set the metal legs down and motion to her laptop. "Do you mind? This will be better if I show you."

She nods.

Sitting again, I lean over to type on her keyboard that remains on her thighs. I don't want to take possession of her computer because I'll be two seconds. Just two. And yet, the air stills in those two seconds, and I'm holding my breath.

I smell her sweet, sugary perfume. *Vanilla.* Maybe caramel. Probably a scent that costs a stupid amount for each spritz. I hate admitting that I might like it. My eyes flit to hers.

She's staring too intently at me, tracing the lines of my jaw and the birthmark on my neck. Why does she always look like she's painting a picture of me every time I catch her staring?

Not quickly enough, I pull up videos of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. She touches the tips of her fingers together in thought, and I go on to show her act one where Figaro and Susanna sing in a back-and-forth exchange. "This is a recitative," I explain. "It almost sounds more like speech than a song."

Her lips lift. "I see."

"Then we have Figaro over here belting out 'Se vuol ballare' in his aria." I pop up the video so she can watch it. "Arias are solos where a singer gets to unload all their feelings, make a big declaration, or confess their deepest thoughts to the audience." When I glance back at her, she's looking at me and not the laptop. "Eyes on the opera, Virginia."

Her inquisitive blue eyes narrow harder on me instead. "How do you know so much? Did you learn all this at Berklee—" Her voice cuts off as I stand up and lift my chair with a hand. I take it back across the small room, away from her.

"New rule," I tell her. "No personal questions."

She rolls her eyes. "That was *hardly* personal. Maybe I want the qualifications of my tutor."

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I laugh. "You should have thought about that before you begged me on the street."

"It was a sidewalk." She crosses her arms. "And I didn't *beg*."

"Unfortunately, we don't have time to go over the definition or for me to throw a copy of Merriam-Webster at you." I flash a smile.

"Une tragédie." She glares.

"What do you know about Wagner?" I ask.

We stay on task for the next four hours, and as we close in on 11 a.m., Audrey carefully slips her laptop into her tote. Apparently, *Astronomy* is a class she can't skip. I don't ask why she chose it. Maybe she's into zodiac signs and mistook it for astrology. Maybe she wants to work at an observatory.

I'm trying not to care.

The next morning, she brings me blueberry scones, these softer than her first batch. I'd like to think I'm an expert on stress. I can diagnose it pretty much on the spot. So I recognize her stiff posture, the way she inhales tighter and takes her seat faster. The strictness in her collarbone. The strain in the tendons of her neck.

"What time is the quiz bowl practice?" I ask as I finish the last scone.

"Seven p.m."

"I get done with my last class around four. If you want to meet up before your practice, I can run drills with you."

"You'd do that?" Skepticism draws her brows together. "Really—how much are you in debt?"

"This isn't about the money," I tell her with an agitated eye roll. "You look seconds away from sweating. Maybe I'm saving you from stinking up the quiz bowl team with BO."

She glares. "I don't get body odor."

"Oh, so you're immune to human bodily functions?"

"Yes."

I am *seconds* away from calling her an intergalactic freak, but she's wafting her thick-knitted burgundy MVU sweater. "Am I perspiring?" She pats her forehead and cheeks. "I'm truly not that nervous. It's just my whole dignity on the line. Nothing special." She mumbles under her breath, "I can do this."

"You can do this," I tell her. "Because I tutored you."

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"Oui," she agrees to my surprise.

Then I ask her, "What do you know about Verdi?"

She starts listing ten different facts. All correct.

We go on for hours, until we both need to leave for our classes, and when we reconvene late in the afternoon, Audrey has ditched her sweater. She wears a navy-blue tank top with thin straps, and she's begun to full-on *pace*. But as I drill her with questions, there isn't a single answer she gets wrong.

Whoever's on this team better not give her shit.

It's the last thought I have before she angles toward the clock and says, "It's time."

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10

AUDREY COBALT

"While at Eisenstadt, this composer wrote three symphonies known as *Morning*, *Noon*, and *Evening*," Guy says, already midway through the question. The moment to buzz in and earn a power has sailed past me. My pulse races so fast it's all I hear. Sweat builds on my palm, slicking the handheld button, its wire running to a small control box on the desk.

This is the very first question I'm struggling on, and we're thirty minutes through drills. I just need to answer before he finishes reading the tossup completely.

"Several of this composer's 'Paris' symphonies helped spread his fame abroad; among the works was *Symphony No. 85*, nicknamed *La Reine* as a tribute to Marie Antoinette—"

My thumb hits the button with a *beep*. The light on the control box flashes green.

"Haydn," I answer.

Guy gives me a look like I just boarded the S.S. Stupid and volunteered for a trip to Venus.

My face burns so hot from embarrassment, but I know this is right. I'm positively *sure* of it.

And then Wilcox says bluntly, "It's HIGH-den."

I pronounced it *HEY*-den.

I am bowled over, stunned, utterly *confused*. That...that is how Birdie's middle name is pronounced, but he'd never told me the spelling. Oxygen rushes out of me like a cabin losing pressure. I had no clue that the pronunciation of Joseph Haydn—the famous classical composer—was *high*-den and not *hey*-den. It's spelled H-A-Y-D-N. And clearly, I had no clue Birdie was named after him.

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Wilcox turns to Guy. “This is going to be a problem.”

“Not a problem,” I say, gathering small lungfuls of air. My chest is tight, and I rub my slick hand against my skirt. “It was a minor slipup.”

Lia gives me a friendlier, more encouraging smile. “You need to know the pronunciation of the names. You won’t get points for that.”

“I know,” I say and watch in horror as Guy turns to the whiteboard and slashes a strike underneath my name. The shame buries itself beneath complete bewilderment. Birdie never discussed Haydn with me. Had he, I would have known exactly how to pronounce his name. I would have also known Birdie was named after the composer. Avoiding talking about Joseph Haydn seems like a purposeful misstep. But *why*?

The question warps my mental state for the next hour. I can barely concentrate, and my upward momentum collapses into a shaky, disjointed performance with more valleys than hills.

At the end of drills, the MVU lecture hall goes oddly quiet. I take small sips from my water, trying to think of anyone other than Birdie *Haydn* St. Pierre.

“She’s not ready for the invitational on Saturday,” Guy concludes.

“She’s not ready for a scrimmage with Rutgers. What do you mean *invitational*?” Wilcox has his palms on his head, exasperated.

My heart drops. “There’s an invitational this Saturday?”

“At NYU,” Guy explains without looking at me, a nubby piece of chalk between his fingers. Not even his picture-perfect hair can tear my eyes from the twelve—*twelve!*—strikes on the blackboard. Twelve failed answers. I’d hoped to miss *none*.

Seeing the wrinkles on Wilcox’s forehead, I assume he wished for that as well. Lia is seated on the professor’s desk, busy flipping through a practice packet like there must be a solution to *me*.

Guy is much harder to read.

I sit straighter in the creaky chair of the musty auditorium. First row, front and center. And yet I can’t tell if Guy is upset, dejected, aggravated, or even marginally *pleased*. He simply rolls the chalk between his fingers and stares more methodically at the twelve strikes.

“We’ll skip it,” Guy suddenly decrees.

“Skip the invitational?” Wilcox says with a frown.

Guy nods. “We’ll have her debut at Princeton.”

CamScanner

Princeton. My mother's alma mater.

I inhale deeply, my lungs swelling. I have to compete there. It feels imperative now. "When is that?" I ask, ready to do whatever is necessary.

"In a few weeks."

"That's all I need, really," I say, hope surging. "I promise, I won't let any of you down."

Wilcox crosses his arms at our captain. "It's not too late to recruit Giddeon. He'd know who Ron Burgundy is."

"I will never forget Ron Burgundy again," I interject, causing both Wilcox and Guy to look over at me. Under their intensity, I lift my chin to add, "Fictional anchorman of an uncreatively titled comedy starring Will Ferrell. Called *Anchorman.* Ron Burgundy."

"Which every frat guy would know," Wilcox tells the quiz bowl captain and not me.

Angry heat flames my neck. "You can speak to me. I'm right here."

Guy smiles, the corner of his mouth quirking. "We see that, freshman." A nervous flutter courses through my body. My lips twitch in the start of a smile too.

Until Lia shuts the test packet. "We could always divvy up trash between the four of us," she tells them. "It's not fair to put that all on Audrey."

"No." Guy dusts chalk off his fingers, his calculating eyes on mine before he tells Lia, "There might be three trash tossups total in an entire tournament. Only one person should waste their time studying for it."

"I will be that person," I volunteer. "As the new member—"

"Probationary member, probie," Wilcox cuts in.

"It's my *honor*," I shoot back at him, "to take the trash and excel. I just need another chance."

"She's a Cobalt," Lia reminds them. "She might distract our opponents just by being on our team."

It's a good point, but I will prove to them I'm competent too. *I will.*

Guy is assessing me, so I scoot forward in my desk and tell him, "There are many advantages to keeping me around. That's one—and also, minor mispronunciation aside, I did well at the music portion."

CamScanner

Birdie would be proud…I think. Or maybe he wouldn't care at all. The thought caves my chest, but I do my best to hoist my carriage.

"You missed five in music," Guy reminds me.

"That number will be *zero* next time."

He cocks his head. "You're so sure?"

"Positive," I nod. Or else I will cry in my closet if I'm wrong. Where no one can see me sob pitifully. Before I can launch a nuclear defense, Lia hops off the table. "I have to go." Her phone is to her ear. "It's—"

"Izzy," Guy and Wilcox deadpan in unison.

Lia already warned us she'd be leaving at 8 p.m. on the dot. "Have a wonderful sushi date!" I call after her. She says a quick, "Thanks, Audrey! And thanks for the scones! Izzy will love these!" before she races out the door with the to-go container I gave her. Wilcox clasps Guy's hand, then they give each other a goodbye back pat.

Wilcox barely acknowledges my existence as he exits.

You are the lowly probie, Audrey. I will redeem myself, then he won't be able to ignore me. I consider skipping dinner to study in the library when Guy bends down and picks up my fallen pen off the floor. He slips it into my tote for me.

My heart skitters, and all my thoughts scramble. "You don't have somewhere you need to be?" I ask.

He's lingering.

Better yet, he's lingering around *me.*

He shrugs his arms through his black peacoat. "Depends." He slips on leather gloves since it's freezing tonight. "What are your dinner plans?"

"You tell me," I smile.

He drinks me in slowly, from head to toe. "I can make a call. Get us into Prime Cut. It's a block from my apartment."

Will he invite me to his place afterward? I temper the giddy anticipation…but should I study? Having dinner won't derail my goals. And what if Guy really is the one? What if *this* is the opportunity that could change the trajectory of my love life? From fictional to *real.*

"I've never heard of Prime Cut," I admit, buttoning my cream trench coat over my collegiate sweater and tweed skirt. "Am I dressed properly?"

CamScanner

I love his little smiles, the corners of his lips nudging upward just slightly while his eyes glitter tenfold. "Your mother is a fashion designer. I doubt there's a day you haven't been dressed for the occasion."

"I've been overdressed plenty."

"How about undressed?" he asks bluntly. Yes, he said *un*dressed. Not *under*dressed. I heard him clearly.

My cheeks heat. "Very few have succeeded."

"I bet," he smiles back, and warmth burrows in my core. I smooth my lips together, trying not to overflow with excitement.

Guy has his hand on the small of my back, walking me out of the lecture hall. "The restaurant isn't far. I live close to campus."

This is not my imagination at play. I'm strolling through MVU with the hot quiz bowl captain en route to a dinner date. *See, Beckett. See, Charlie. I'm not just talk*, I want to tell my brothers. I restrain myself from snapping a photo for evidence.

This is hardly my first date.

Most have been professional and unromantic at Cobalt Inc. corporate functions—where my dates stayed at least two feet away from me like I had scurvy. I would've taken more offense if I didn't know my brothers threatened them with *dismemberment.* Bhodi Cross wouldn't even so much as hold my hand in fear of his being chopped off. I realized then that I might need to make the first move.

Not exactly the "sweep me off my feet" imagery I had in mind. But I am persistent, if nothing else, so I attempted an iconic kiss under the mistletoe during a Christmas party. It ended with Marty Barnes biting my lip on accident.

Bleeding in the bathroom, I wept to my older sister, the firstborn of the family, about how much I hated having older brothers. More dramatic than true.

"You don't need to force things, Audrey," Jane said sweetly. "One day, everything will fall into place exactly how you want it to."

That was the last time I forced something I only partially desired. I told myself I'd be besotted and taken one day, but the day never really came. I invited Kinney, Winona, and Vada as my plus-ones to events and put more effort into cheerleading and my friendships than I did into romance.

CamScanner

Then I began to count on leaving Philly.

Maybe I was destined to fall in love in a place I haven't lived all my life.

Even with a cloudy February haze, New York City feels bright and beautiful—full of opportunities I could never seize until now.

I smile to myself while Guy calls the steakhouse on our walk. After he reserves a table for two, he pockets his phone, then asks me, "You warm?"

Yes. Anticipation is an inferno beneath my coat, but I'd love nothing more than for his arm to wrap around me. "A little chilly."

Guy hugs me to his side, his arm sliding around my shoulders. He even guides me away from the uneven crack in the pavement. Chivalry isn't dead after all.

I learn this quickly when he helps me take off my trench coat at Prime Cut. He coat-checks it for me, and when the server leads us to a dark corner of the candlelit restaurant, I slip into the curved leather booth and he settles right beside me.

My heart can't stop pitter-pattering. Air is thinner as we lean into each other and share a menu. He knows what he wants (the veal), but he's giving me suggestions.

"The salmon never disappoints."

"How about the sirloin?" I ask.

"You like steak," he realizes with a smile. "It's decent. But I prefer the New York strip."

"I'll try that then."

He sets aside the menu for me and orders a French red for us to share. I like when he stretches his arm along the back of the booth behind me. I even like when he leans close to hear me ask, "Are you from here originally?"

"Born and bred in Manhattan. I grew up in a brownstone near Central Park West. My father still lives there. He does board work for a few Fortune 500s."

"And your mother?"

"Deceased—before you apologize, she's been gone since I was a child. I don't mourn what I can't remember." He searches my eyes for a beat. "But I'm like you."

CamScanner

I crave to banter, so I quip, "I didn't realize you're a natural redhead."

"Sadly, a natural brunette." He smiles. "But I am just as beautiful as you." His mossy-green eyes skim my features before his finger brushes against the soft edge of my cheek, moving aside a tendril of my orange hair.

My breath hitches, especially as he tucks the strand against my ear. I imagine his hands cupping my face, him shoving me into the bedroom wall and kissing me without a moment's pause.

I would very much like to order that off the menu. *Merci beaucoup.*

Taking a sip of wine, I shelve these fantasies. "You're just as humble as me too."

He smiles into a light laugh. "Your brother did call me out for being conceited."

My face plummets to the Earth's core. *He knows my brother?* "Which one?"

CamScanner

11

AUDREY COBALT

"Ben," Guy answers right off the bat.

Ben.

I try to relax. This makes complete sense. Ben is the only one who's enrolled at MVU, and one of his greatest talents is befriending anyone with a pulse. Scrolling to the bottom of his phone contacts takes longer than flipping through *War and Peace*.

Guy explains, "I know his girlfriend, Harriet, better than I know your brother. She lives at the Honors House, and I was president during my junior and senior years before I started my MBA program." *He's getting an MBA.* "If you want to join the Honors House next semester, I can give you a rec when you apply. There should be multiple openings."

My head is spinning, and I resist the urge to gulp more wine. He was *president* of the prestigious Honors House on campus. Yet I'd never heard of a Guy Abernathy. Ben and Harriet never mentioned him, and I never bumped into him when Harriet gave me a tour of the house. Apparently, a girl named Kiki Kershaw is president this year.

I perk up a little at an encouraging thought. If he's here after Ben called him *conceited*, then he's clearly not easily deterred. Maybe he'd even push back if Eliot threatened to chop off his dick.

Maybe he'd give my brothers a run for their money.

I'd very much like to witness *that*.

I wonder if my smile is more triumphant or devious.

Guy is looking more at my eyes than my lips. "And in all transparency," he says, tucking another tendril of hair behind my ear, "my father sits on your dad's board."

I frown. "The board of Cobalt Inc.?"

CamScanner

He nods. “It hasn’t been long, or else I’m sure I would’ve run into you at social events and galas.”

“When did he join?”

“Last year. He’s an independent director. He doesn’t work for Cobalt Inc. He just provides oversight at the board level. Something he does for two finance companies. Cobalt Inc. is his first diversified conglomerate.”

My father’s company owns and invests in companies across many sectors. Chemicals like paints. Manufacturing of magnets and diamonds. The tech space with video gaming. Consumer retail and transportation. Each division keeps its identity, so the average person has no idea Cobalt Inc. owns it.

Hence, a conglomerate.

Very different from what I’m most known for—being the daughter of Rose Calloway, a soda heiress. Fizzle is the preferred soda of the East Coast and available all over the world. Prime Cut doesn’t even carry Coca-Cola or Pepsi products.

So it’s a bit strange to hear someone so in tune with Cobalt Inc. If his father is on the board, then my parents would trust the Abernathys more than they would other families.

It’s most certainly a check mark in the *one true love* column.

The restaurant packs full, chatter amplifying, and I can’t hear his next words. His lips skim my ear as he whispers, “I am like you.” It’s what he said earlier.

Intrigue grips me more. “How so?”

“Like you, I could live off familial wealth for the rest of my life, but I still have *ambition*. Drive. Purpose.” He rests a hand on my knee. The warmth of him radiates through my tights. He drags his large palm up my thigh, and my heart pumps harder because his eyes never desert mine. “I see all of that in you, Audrey. In how you’re unwilling to give up your goals. So many in our positions just waste the fuck away like dogs on their backs, and there’s something so attractive about a woman who’s striving for *more*. You remind me of me.”

I intake a sharper breath, dizzying for a moment.

My phone suddenly vibrates in my tote. I snap into focus. *Birdie*. He might be wondering how the practice went. “Sorry, one second.” I dive into my tote’s interior pocket.

CamScanner

Guy never shifts his hand. On the contrary, his palm slides *underneath* my skirt toward the inside of my thigh. Scandalous.

Except I can't delight in this illicit, carnal activity when my nerves are haywire. What if Birdie has been on edge all night? He'd shown real interest in me succeeding. I think even beyond being paid by me. Maybe I shouldn't care, maybe I...the thought dies when I stare at my phone.

I definitely should *not* care. Because Birdie didn't text me.

ELIOT

I made crab cakes and a burrata salad for you. It's in the fridge. I'll be at the theater late tonight. If you stay out, please tell Beckett exactly what you're doing so he doesn't crucify me. Love you, dearest little sister.

I text him a quick thank you.

"Sorry," I apologize to Guy again. "I have to text my brothers."

"Take your time. I'm not going anywhere." He drinks wine with his right hand and lets his left inch higher, his knuckles grazing against the thrumming spot between my legs. I force myself not to shiver, and I wonder if the burn against my face is noticeable beneath the dim lights.

With flying fingers, I message Beckett. Even if he never texts, he still reads his incoming messages.

AUDREY

I'm out to eat with the grad student I was talking about. Will be home later.

I press send and quickly realize my text might come across purposely evasive. Possibly even provoking. I'm truly not trying to hide anything or stir up more drama. I want to lead with maturity, so that my brothers will finally start taking me seriously when it comes to dating. And maybe that means being completely honest.

AUDREY

His name is Guy Abernathy. He's the captain of the quiz bowl team.

CamScanner

His father is on the Cobalt Inc. board. He is trustworthy.

There. Hopefully that will put Beckett's worries to bed.

I shift my hair over my shoulder and keep my phone on the table.

"Where were we?" I ask, spinning toward him a little. It causes his hand to slide away from my thigh.

Still, Guy stays intimately close. His roving gaze strips me bare, especially as he lingers on my chest. My breasts push harder against my sweater with each breath. "Maybe we could see where this thing goes," he whispers. "Toi et moi."

You and me.

My smile edges again, so very enticed. He's saying what I've always desired. I have the urge to take the wheel, so I ask, "What about skipping dinner?"

He grins. "I'll get the bill."



A DOORMAN LETS US INTO THE HISTORIC BUILDING. GUY'S TWO-BEDROOM APARTment overlooks the Hudson River, the water glazed with ice. Skeletal trees rattle with gusts of heavy wind along Riverside Park. The gas fireplace blazes, and Guy hangs my coat in his closet.

I'm not admiring the view as much as I am his book collection. He's converted his dining room into a study. Floor-to-ceiling ornate bookshelves are stuffed full of leather-bound classics. I skim my fingers over the titles.

"*Paradise Lost, Frankenstein,*" I smile over at him. "I thought Wilcox was the lit specialist."

"I've read just about everything." He rolls up the sleeves of his light blue button-down, then tosses his phone on the oak desk, a focal point of the study. We still wear our shoes, so my feet aren't cold on the pretty herringbone floorboards.

"Do you have a favorite?" I motion to the books.

"Not particularly. I just like knowing more than the person next to me." He sidles beside me, then draws out a shrewd smile.

I return one. "I might know more than you before the year's end."

"That's impossible."

CamScanner

"I'm a Cobalt. Nothing is impossible."

Guy comes behind me, just to warm my arms, his hands running up and down them. "How many years do I have on you, freshman?"

Five. My neck tries to flame. "That means nothing to me. Brainless middle-aged men exist among brilliant twentysomethings." My fingertips graze a broken spine.

"Vintage," he tells me. "My mother loved to read, apparently. I don't know much about her other than these were hers."

I'm about to reply, but he gently shifts my hair off the nape of my neck. Exposing the tender flesh. *This is really happening.* Anticipation steals oxygen and my giddy smile. From behind, Guy places a soft, teasing kiss to my throat. The sudden warmth sends a shockwave down to my toes.

Then he twirls me like a dance move so I face him. Breathless—I'm so very *breathless* around him, especially as he says, "You're fucking beautiful." His hand claws at my hair, fisting the strands. My pulse threatens to burst from my veins.

I can't catch my breath.

Guy crushes his lips against mine. It's rough and harsh with an overwhelming vigor, as though he wants to claim every single inch of me. A noise tries to break free from my body. He pushes me up against the bookshelves while we're lip-locked.

I hold on, unable to come up for air. He's only a couple inches taller than me while I'm in heels. Easy access to my face, my lips, and I try to bask in each second—but it happens so fast.

He's suddenly lifting me against his chest by the thighs. I'm clutching his shoulders while he sets me down somewhere. His kisses never cease. Our tongues become a wrangling, beautiful mess.

Then he reaches under my skirt for my tights, and out of instinct, I put a hand to his chest and tear my mouth off his. "Wait," I pant, nearly *gasping.* My lips sting from his force.

Guy listens to me. He places his hands on my knees, my legs split apart around him. It dawns on me that I'm sitting on the desk. "I want you, Audrey," he whispers darkly against my ear. "I want to fuck you so hard, you won't be able to walk without feeling where my cock has been inside you." He pinches my chin. "You want that?"

It sounds exciting, erotic, heady, and I dizzy at the image.

CamScanner

But everything is happening at lightning speed. “I don’t hook up on the first date.” I shove him backward and place my feet on the floor.

Guy thumbs my swollen bottom lip. “I can wait.” He presses a kiss to my cheek. “If we’re doing this thing—”

“This thing?” I arch my brows. “Sex?”

“Dating. We could be a power couple,” he clarifies, resting against the edge of the desk. “I want to be clear that I’m interested in something more serious, and I only want you.”

My heart flutters. “Okay.”

“Okay, yes?”

“Okay, I will contemplate this more.” I’d rather be the one to set the pace. I check the time on his antique clock on the shelf. It’s almost 10 p.m. *When did it get this late?* “I need to study.”

I really want to spend the next few hours poring over quiz packets. The tickle in my brain says, *You mustn’t forget your goal. You want to excel at the Princeton Invitational, don’t you?*

I start to say, “I should g—”

“I’ll call my driver for you.” He reaches for his phone on the desk.

“I can call mine.” I text Hans and see a missed call from Beckett. *Shoot.*

Guy doesn’t detect my slight anxiety. I flash a cheery, confident smile while he collects my coat and gives me a goodbye kiss.

Focusing on the flutter in my chest and not the pit in my stomach, my dreamy smile grows and grows all the way to the idling Range Rover.

“Where to, Miss Cobalt?” Hans asks.

I fall backward, swooning. “Home.”

CamScanner

12

BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

I'm going out of my mind.

It's nearing 10 p.m., and I'm seconds away from texting Audrey Cobalt. Unprovoked. Out of my own goddamn free will. It's fucking me up thinking I actually want to throw out a line of communication to her. Have I not had enough of her already?

I've seen Audrey more this week than my own brother.

And I live with him.

I pace my bedroom. My breath smokes the air, and I rub my ice-cold hands together to keep warm. Heat went out an hour ago, and Scally hasn't been able to get the building manager to come look at it. I feel bad because that's on me.

Not the heat pump going kaput. But Freddie, our building manager, won't so much as toss us a roll of fucking duct tape. I blame it on one drunk night. He was a bad lay. Too much tongue, not enough listening, and I was quick to ditch him as soon as he fell asleep on the couch. That was years ago, and he still lords it over me and my roommates like he's Emperor Supreme of this beat-up building in Chelsea.

I've never wanted to be in a relationship. I'm barely even halfway good at ending things with hookups. French exits always get me into hot water, but I keep doing them anyway.

I take out my phone, tossing it between my hands. My window offers no view of the city, just a brick wall from the building next door. I've been living here ever since I joined Nothing Personal four years ago.

Four years.

My stomach knots. It's hard to think that part of my life is just... gone. Door shut closed. Steffi texted me this morning that they've nar-

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rowed down the drummers to two final candidates. She keeps giving me updates in hopes that maybe I'll change my mind and come back.

There's no Reverse Uno card up my sleeve. When I walked away, it was the hardest decision of my life, and I owe it to myself to at least see grad school through.

I sigh out and fog the air again.

Checking my phone, I don't see any new texts. None from Audrey. It's official—I am *dying* not knowing how her quiz bowl practice went. And it's not because I'm worried about losing the tutoring gig. It almost feels like *I'm* the one on probation and up for judgment. Her knowledge comes from me. And I need her to do well.

She *should* do well.

I rub the back of my neck. Fuck it, I'm calling her.

Just as my thumb hovers over the screen, my phone rings with an incoming call from my brother. *Shit.* We are roommates, but Phoenix is not currently here. He's been spending more and more time at Tom's while they work on their second album.

I was hoping he wouldn't know about the heat issue. But as soon as I answer the call, Phoenix asks, "Why are you still at the apartment?"

I roll my eyes, not at all surprised he knows where I am when we share each other's locations on our phones. "Hello to you too."

"Scally just called me. He said it was twenty-two degrees in the building and dropping."

"He also ran out of here like he was the asshole boyfriend on *Titanic* who claimed a lifeboat with the women and children. So we all know who not to trust during a natural disaster." I open my closet door and start rummaging through the bottom.

"And you're just going to stay on the boat and drown then?"

"I'm more like Jack, man. Going to swan dive off the edge. Hold on..." I find what I'm looking for in the bottom of my closet and snap a pic and text it to Phoenix. "You get that?"

"What am I looking at?"

"A space heater, dumbass. I'm *fine*."

"Scally went to stay with a friend. Neil and Steffi are at her parents'. I don't understand why you're still there. Go get a hotel room."

I stare at the full-size mattress pushed up against the window. I never bought a bed frame for it—which is always a fun talking point

CamScanner

with hookups. I like sleeping close to the floor. It reminds me of being in the bottom bunk on the tour bus.

It makes me feel at home.

"Maybe I want to sleep in my own bed," I tell my brother.

"Maybe you like torturing yourself."

Maybe that too.

Cold bites my exposed skin, and I rip a light gray Nothing Personal hoodie off a hanger then pull the heater into the middle of the floor.

"Future Favor," Phoenix blurts out just as I have the heater plugged in.

I groan and stuff my arms in the sleeves. "*No.*"

"You don't even know what I'm going to say."

"I do. Because I know you." I pull the hoodie over my head with a hard tug. "You're going to cash in your favor by forcing me to spend the night at a hotel somewhere."

"That's not really a favor to me, Bird."

My brows furrow, confusion skittering down my skin. "Then what?"

"You're coming to spend the night at Tom's."

Fuuuuuck. I grimace. "And how is *that* a favor to you?"

"He's my boyfriend. You're my brother. You don't think I've noticed how you make convenient fucking excuses every time you're invited over here?"

I grind my jaw. He's not wrong. I've managed to avoid being at the Cobalt brothers' apartment in Hell's Kitchen. Skipped parties. Skipped game nights. Skipped casual invites for power hours and jam sessions. It's easy to pretend that Phoenix hasn't changed too much if I don't have to see him in that world. In *that* environment. He's still the same big brother who blew out amp after amp in the back of our garage in Quincy, Mass. Not the guy eating filet mignon and watching the sun set over the city in a multimillion-dollar luxury high-rise.

But our Future Favors aren't small things—and I've never rejected one.

Not in my entire life.

"It's that important to you that you'd use a Future Favor?" I ask.

"*Yes.*"

My chest is tight. I hate this. But then I remember something.

CamScanner

Audrey.

She lives next door to Tom. Maybe I can conveniently run into her without it being a big deal. Conveniently find out how she did on her quiz bowl practice.

It's convenient.

I take a deeper breath. "And Tom's okay with this?" I ask my brother.

Phoenix must hold out the phone because the next thing I hear is Tom Cobalt's voice. "Dude, if you don't come over, I'm going to take it so personally. Like I'm starting to feel as if you think my brothers and I have a contagious flesh-eating bacterium."

"No, but you've got something called nepotistic sinusitis. Been trying to make sure my nasal passages remain all clear."

"I think that one is inherited, dude. You're not in any danger of catching it. Though there's no cure for your shriveled dick syndrome."

I smile. "Says the guy who's never seen my dick but has a way of always talking about it."

"Dude, I do not—"

"It's okay. I know you like my brother's dick more."

Tom lets out an infuriated growl, which is about how our back-and-forths always go. He has no trump card to play on me, but I can mercilessly tease him for eternity since he had a crush on me *waaaay* before he ever met Phoenix. It's ancient history that I like to unearth just to kick the sand in Tom's face.

Phoenix cuts in. "Pack a bag, asshole."

He hangs up, already knowing I won't back out of a Future Favor. It's only when I grab my backpack out of the closet that I remember Tom doesn't just live with his little brother Ben.

There's also Charlie and Beckett. The two oldest Cobalt brothers.

The ones I haven't really met. Seen them, sure, but I've avoided introductions.

What's the probability I run into them tonight?

Fuck.



THE THINGS I DO FOR MY BROTHER.

CamScanner

I can't remember the day we started Future Favors, and how our simple acts of goodwill turned into IOUs to be cashed in at a later date. It's been a St. Pierre staple like that worn out moto jacket Phoenix has had since he was a teenager.

I also can't believe I'm in the Cobalt brothers' living room.

I guzzle water from a cylindrical glass bottle my brother offered me when I asked for a *drinking glass.* Silly me, thinking I was going to drink from the tap. I just pray it doesn't ruin me for when I return to my shitty filtration system.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. The pull-out couch is unfurled, and I was honestly hoping it'd face a wall. Maybe be pushed in a corner where cobwebs collect in the ceiling crevices.

Nope.

My eyes are pinned on the most breathtaking view of Manhattan I've ever seen. Stunning at night, the expansive window reveals a full panoramic masterpiece of glittering skyline. It burns my retinas. A reminder they're not like me.

I'm not like them.

I'll never *be* them.

When I tear my gaze away, I spot a Monet framed on the wall. I go still, my body ice-cold. It's called *Bridge over a Pond of Water Lilies.* And it depicts exactly what the title suggests: a bridge arched over a green, lily-speckled pond. There are over two hundred water lily paintings by Claude Monet. His muse had been his real-life flower garden in Giverny, France.

The painting catches me so off guard that I'm struggling to take my next breath. Visiting Giverny when I was seven isn't what throws me back.

It's a memory here in New York.

Some tech bro had the Met loan him the real painting for a private event on the Upper East Side. Where he also hired a string quartet.

He specifically requested "the best of the Manhattan Symphony," and I was the chosen cellist. I prefer art events where the attendees are actual patrons of music who thank us personally and give us food breaks like we're fully functioning humans and not set decorations.

This host didn't even allow us *water.* The event staff relayed a message from Mr. Tech Bro that if we got up, it ruined the "ambience" and

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so did cups near our chairs. And then his wife told us, “Play something more upbeat. No, not that. Can’t you play something like Vivaldi but not Vivaldi?” So I played Boccherini. “But not that. I don’t like that.”

I have a mountain of bad experiences at these status-driven parties where I was just a fucking symbol of their wealth. Where I was treated like the canapés being served and not an artist. There are so many twisted memories, it should be hilarious at this point. Something to laugh at.

I still can’t laugh about it.

Wonder where the fuck my funny bone went.

And Phoenix—he understands so much of my life, but he doesn’t get this. My brother was never paraded from home to home like a show pony. Whatever bad taste he had in his mouth from this gilded world, it clearly could be washed away with a gargle of Crest.

I’m not even sure burning off my taste buds would help.

Sure, Tom might be different than the rich heirs I was hired to play for, but how do I know his older brothers aren’t? I want to take Phoenix’s word for it, but I’m so cautious, my ribs won’t untighten from a deep compression around my lungs.

Phoenix tosses a couple bed pillows on the sleeper sofa. Tattoos scatter his cut biceps, the sleeves of his gray Henley shoved to his elbows. The apartment is noticeably warm. Yet Tom is messing with a thermostat on the wall like we’re about to meet an arctic frost.

Phoenix catches me finishing off the water in one final swig. “You ran here?” he asks.

Yeah. “It was a fifteen-minute jog, if that. I didn’t even break a sweat.”

“Because it’s ten degrees outside.”

“Man, that’s a stretch. It’s more like thirteen degrees.”

“Wow, some stretch,” Phoenix snaps.

I laugh at his sharp tone. “Why are you even surprised? You know I prefer running five miles to lifting two hundred pounds. One clears my head, the other pisses me off.” I outstretch my arms to Tom—his back to us—and lower my voice to Phoenix. “You should be happy you finally have a gym buddy. And bonus points, you get to fuck him.”

“Don’t say that shit to Tom.”

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"I didn't, I said it to you." We stop whispering the second Tom almost spins around. Then Tom groans and presses his forehead to the thermostat like it's not cooperating.

I look back to Phoenix. "You want to be the hero? Save the day and get a blow job out of it?"

Dark hair hangs in his eyes, but his glare is apparent and hostile. I love ribbing my big brother, especially now that he's *in love* and all, but I can't push too hard. Not when Phoenix would kill for Tom, and it'd hurt if he ever felt like he'd need to come at me.

I wouldn't put my brother in that position. *I won't.*

"You okay?" he asks now. "Seriously."

"Are *you* okay?" I refute. "You wasted your Future Favor on a fucking sleepover."

He almost smiles. "How else was I going to get you to come over here?" He drops his voice. "Tom was starting to stage an elaborate plan. He *was* taking it personally. He doesn't want you to hate him."

Great. "I don't hate him."

Phoenix's brows rise.

"I don't," I emphasize. "I hate...this." I jab my empty glass bottle toward the view. "It's just too much."

Phoenix tilts his head toward the window. "If you had the money, you don't think you'd buy an apartment with a view?"

A vicious knot twists in my chest. It's even harder to breathe. "I don't know, man. I don't have the money." Before he can bring up the whole tutoring thing and my mysterious financial pickle, I quickly say, "I like this for you. The private jets. The Michelin-star dinners. Doormen that push the elevator button for you. It's just not for me."

Phoenix nods slowly. "It doesn't have to be for you, Bird. But I don't like you avoiding me just to avoid *it*."

I throw open my arms. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Phoenix pushes his hair back with a rough hand. "By force."

"Baby steps, man." I kick off my sneakers and make a show of collapsing onto the pull-out mattress. My arms slide against the smooth sheets. "What is this? Silk?" Admittedly, it feels like heaven.

Tom plops down so hard in a midnight-blue swivel chair, he spins three sixty while saying, "Mulberry silk." He brakes using his feet, and I'm not calling him cool. *Will not cop to that.* But he's not an awkward

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dork. My brother is dating an *overly* confident rockstar who happens to be the same age as me.

Tom cranes his neck toward a hall, then eyes me. "Don't tell Ben."

Confusion warps my face. I look over at Phoenix, who's grabbing beers from the sleek, marble kitchen. "I'm not following," I say. "Don't tell Ben about the mulberry silk sheets?"

"Ben is vegan," Phoenix explains, passing a Yuengling to me, then one to Tom.

Tom twists off the cap with the bottom of his Rolling Stones tee. "Ben thinks we swapped out all the silk sheets for bamboo, but I found those in my closet."

Phoenix gives me a hard look to *shut up.*

I start to smile. I could so easily make a joke about Tom giving me special treatment. But this is kind of sweet. The brother's boyfriend is trying to be nice to me. I don't exactly deserve it.

We chat for another ten minutes. Mostly about logistics for the Grammys this weekend, and I learn Ben is already home but asleep since he's a student at MVU with an early class tomorrow. I've already met the youngest Cobalt brother a handful of times since he bartends (for fun) on the weekends at a cool dive in Hell's Kitchen. He's an environmental engineering major, which makes even more sense now. The vegan brother being the environmental guy.

I'm at the bottom of my beer when the door blows open.

One of Tom's brothers has arrived, and the intensity throws me. He slams the door and hurls a peacoat onto the kitchen counter. Sleeves of his white button-down are already bunched to his flexed forearms.

"Eliot?" Tom says, half-confused. "Shouldn't you still be at the theater?"

"I left after curtain call." He's unpocketing his wallet, phone, at a vicious rate.

Right, he's the actor.

I haven't seen *Amadeus* on Broadway yet, but I was almost poached to be in the live orchestra for the play. Had to turn them down due to a conflict with my grad school schedule, but it's another substitute list where my name is at the very top. The only bad *Amadeus* review I've seen said no one who's six-four should be cast as the five-foot-four Mozart.

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Seeing Eliot Alice Cobalt now, I can see why his height doesn't fucking matter. He commands attention without seeming to try.

It's hard not to feel that in this second. When I'm instantly swept up in his simmering rage. It blazes and chokes the room and even prods Phoenix and Tom to their feet.

Eliot is a straight burning line toward Tom. "Have you heard from Audrey?"

Audrey?

My lips pull into a deep frown. Is this about her probationary practice?

It's hard imagining a scenario where she'd fail. Not after all the hours she put in and the real interest she had in concertos, German romantic symphonies, and Amy Beach.

Audrey perked up at my mention of Beach. "Who is she?" she asked, and I told her about Beach's *Gaelic Symphony*, the first symphony composed and published by an American female composer. Audrey wanted to know more and more and *more.*

I found myself reading up on Beach during my Advanced Orchestration class today.

Fucking dumb. Like I need to be cramming for *her* quiz bowl thing, but there is this weird light in her devilish blue eyes that I don't hate to see.

Amy Beach is just among the hundreds of things Audrey has wrapped herself up in like Cindy Lou Who on Christmas, and she's been twisting the overly merry paper around me.

I'm not trying to rip out of it. I need this.

I need to keep tutoring her.

I need the money.

No way did these quiz bowl pricks sniff out her bullshit. So she might not be a musical savant—but *I am.* And I'm teaching her so... *fuck.*

I drop my feet to the floor, sitting stiffly on the edge of the pull-out.

"Haven't heard from her since this morning, dude," Tom says to Eliot. "She texted me St. Cobalt GIFs with a bunch of hearts at like ten a.m." She must really love our famous brothers together. I've blown up Phoenix's phone with fan-made videos too. Of him sticking his tongue down Tom's throat in the least cute kiss I've ever seen.

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Phoenix replied with about five middle fingers. *Good times.*

Eliot releases a hot breath, then he pauses at the sight of me. Surprise in his eyes. "You're here—*good*. Are you still tutoring Audrey for quiz bowl?"

"Yeah."

"That ends tonight," Eliot says, point-blank.

"What?" My eyes blow wide.

"No more tutoring," Eliot demands. "No more quiz bowl for Audrey. No more dating the team captain."

My ears ring. Captain? Dating? What the fuck is happening? "What? No."

"Yes," he growls.

All I know is I don't take demands well from rich fucks. "*Fuck off.* No," I snap back.

Then I tense up—zero time to do shit. Eliot is a cannon blast toward me, and before my body can break free of its deep freeze, Phoenix takes the impact like a fortress. He shoves Eliot back, but I blink once and they're suddenly gripping and wrestling on the floor.

"Whoa, whoa! Stop!" Tom shouts at them. I set my beer on the ground, standing and trying to find an opening to help Phoenix.

Tom also flinches forward, then backward, unable to get in the mix because our older brothers are tearing, pulling, trying to pin one another down with unrestrained aggression.

They don't throw a single punch.

Eliot isn't balling his fists.

I blink slowly in realization. This is how I fight with Phoenix. Never wanting to maim or truly hurt. I wonder just how long the Cobalts have been treating my brother like family.

Good. I'm glad. Like hell would I want Phoenix to be decked in the face tonight—especially when I was meant to be the recipient. My brain is whirling and pounding.

"This can't be happening," Tom mutters. This must be worse for him. His closest brother and his boyfriend going at it. We both wince when Phoenix coughs like he took a knee to the chest.

Tom twists in pain. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." He motions to me. "Get in there."

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I can't find a fucking opening, and I'm not exactly excited to get an elbow to the windpipe. "You get in there."

"I'm like ten pounds lighter than you, dude."

"Uh, you are more than ten pounds lighter."

"Exactly. *Go.*" Tom looks like a fencer, still bouncing back and forth.

The second Phoenix gains leverage and roots Eliot's back to the floorboards, Tom and I bolt into the brawl, and I wrench my brother off the hotheaded Cobalt while Tom ensures Eliot doesn't chase after Phoenix.

Everyone is on their feet.

"I'm cool, I'm cool," Phoenix says to me, his breath heavy and hands raised in defense.

I let go of him before he jerks away.

Tom has his arms outstretched between Eliot on one side and Phoenix on the other. "Do. Not. Do. That. *Ever.* Again." He's warning both of them. Several buttons are missing from Eliot's shirt, and the collar of Phoenix's Henley is ripped.

I hear their blistered breath. They're still riled. The air is thick with tension.

I'm the common denominator here. "I can just fucking go," I state.

"*No*," Phoenix growls, then glares at Tom's brother. Eliot's deep-blue wrath-filled eyes are only on me. Phoenix doesn't even have all the details, and yet he's willing to raise his fists again, for me.

It's his blind faith in me that says so much about who he is. It's what I love about Phoenix.

That at the end of the day, he knows the type of person I am, and I don't have to unravel myself at the seams to prove it.

Phoenix sneers, "Whatever you want my brother to do, Eliot—drop it."

Eliot hasn't blinked. He completely ignores Phoenix to tell me, "I'll double what my sister is paying you."

I laugh bitterly. "Fuck off."

Phoenix takes a step forward. Tom puts a hand on his chest, his other still outstretched toward Eliot.

"We can't force Audrey to quit quiz bowl, dude," Tom says to his brother. "It's been her dream since she was like *five* to follow in Mom's footsteps. She'll hate us until the end of time."

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Eliot inhales deeply, his jaw clenching. After a long moment, he finally expels a breath and says, "Okay...okay." He runs a couple hands through his wavy hair and blinks a ton, cooling himself down quickly.

Phoenix is far from cooled down. My brother is so on edge, a blood vessel might burst in his temple. He's ready to go for round two, but I don't want that. His boyfriend definitely does not want that.

Eliot tilts his head toward me. "Whose side are you on, Birdie?"

"I don't know," I admit. "I don't know *what the fuck* is going on."

"My sister is on a date with the quiz bowl captain," Eliot explains. "The same quiz bowl you're tutoring her for."

Yeah...that's...news to me. My throat feels like sandpaper.

Fuck.

I have about a million questions, but all are for Audrey.

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13

BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

Thirty minutes later, and still no Audrey Cobalt. I'd say her brothers are handling this well—but that'd be a bald-faced lie. Tom pinches the bridge of his nose, his cell in hand. "She's still not answering my calls."

Eliot checks his watch, then his phone. "She hasn't answered mine either."

I found out the only reason Eliot knows anything at all is because Beckett, one of the older brothers, called him during intermission and told him to make sure Audrey gets home in one piece.

One piece.

As if they're preparing for their little sister to get broken to smithereens by the time she shows up on the doorstep. I don't know if it's just your average overprotective brother bullshit, or if there's real history there that's shading their reactions. Hard to say.

It's made me more paranoid than usual. She hasn't reached out to me. Not that she would've texted me. The princess probably did not think twice about me after she left the practice room. But I don't know if I could live with myself if I did *nothing*. So I sent her a text twenty minutes ago.

BIRDIE

You ok? Haven't heard from you.

No reply. Of course. So she could be either getting laid or passed out in an alley. I should probably be hoping for the former—but I'm not.

I don't know Guy Abernathy.

I don't know how I feel about this situation at all.

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I do know that I hate his name.

Hypocritical, sure, coming from someone named *Birdie*. But I stand by it. Guy is a stupid name.

"She's still not home?" That's Tom's younger brother. *Ben.* He suddenly appears from down the hall, hair wet and only in a pair of blue boxer-briefs. He pulls a burgundy MVU tee over his head. Ben had woken up ten minutes ago and got looped in. But then he quickly said he needed to clear his head in the shower.

"Not yet," Tom answers.

Ben can't hide his emotions. He turns to Eliot with visceral heat. "Tu avais promis de la surveiller." *You'd promised to watch her.*

"I have been, brother, but I can't duplicate myself when I'm onstage five nights a week." Eliot leans his back against the wall. Arms crossed, emotions folded inward. "You're the one who knows Guy Abernathy. If you told us he's a great person, we could have all gone to bed."

"Sorry, yeah," Ben sighs out. "I don't know him well enough to vouch for his character. Other than he's incredibly pretentious, and he has a good reputation at the Honors House." He smears a hand down his mouth. "I just don't see how any of this is true," he says strongly. "Audrey must be lying. Because she would've told me about him...she would've..." He trails off, his eyes haunted on the floor.

I'm guessing there's a strained relationship there.

"She's trying to let you come to her, dude," Tom says gently. "She wants to know *you* still want *her* in your life. We all know she wants to be a part of ours."

Ben takes a sharp breath. "*Fuck.*" It's a pained *fuck*, and it makes me wince.

Tom laces his hands against the back of his own neck. He's stressed. Phoenix picks up on it and leaves the pull-out beside me. He draws Tom against his chest and wraps his arms around his boyfriend.

I cup my phone, glancing between everyone. My stomach knots the longer they're silently freaking the fuck out.

Ben pats his thighs. "I left my phone in my room—have you called her again?" he asks Eliot.

"Yes, and it keeps going to voicemail. She either lost service or her phone died."

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Tom sighs. “I’m with Ben—I’m not ruling out her faking the whole date. She was mad at Beckett for treating her like a baby the other day.”

That’d be fucking annoying. I remember how she bristled when I called her *little* in French. Did not do that again, even if it was tempting.

“So she’s pretending to be on a date as payback?” Phoenix asks like this is nuts. He twists to me as though I’m the sane one here, and I want to point out that he’s dating into this madness.

“Yeah,” Tom smirks. “Masterful payback.” His smirk fades. “I hope.”

“You hope, wow,” Phoenix deadpans. “Because the inverse is?”

“She’s with someone we know little about except that he’s older and willing to make a move on a new member of *his* team—that is *infinitely* worse, Phoenix.”

“Won’t your family just do background checks on him?” Phoenix asks. “They did one on me when I was just your bandmate.”

That’s a good point. I’m sure they’ve also done one on me for being in sneezing distance, but my record is pristine.

It’s not new news that the Cobalts are overprotective and mistrusting and do not open their gilded gates for anyone on the street. I don’t pretend to know what they deal with “threat-wise,” but yeah, I’m sure it’s not always safe.

I stare off for a long moment. Just barely catching Eliot saying, “I don’t think she’s faking it this time. She’s never given us a name before. She’d never go that deep into a lie.”

It’s dead quiet.

Ben has left for his bedroom, I think.

Tom blows out a heavy breath. “I don’t know, dude. Until I get *real* proof. It’s going to be hard for me to believe Guy Abernathy isn’t just one of the fantasy guys in her head. She’s smart—using a real name of a real guy Ben knows. Level 10 duplicitous, our sister.”

It’s wild that Tom would really rather her be *lying*. But I get it. I have weird feelings about her seeing the captain of the team. I’ve had some regrets in college. One was hooking up with a TA when I was an undergrad. It’s messy. I didn’t think Audrey would go for messy.

Eliot’s phone beeps, and we all go quiet in anticipation. “It’s a text from Hans.”

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"Beckett's driver," Phoenix says to me.

Because, of course, they have a personal chauffeur.

Eliot lets out a relieved breath. "He picked her up. She's fine, and she's plugging in her phone."

"Thank fuck," Tom groans into a deep exhale.

Seconds later, my phone buzzes in my fist. I click into the text.

AUDREY

I'm okay, but I let myself down just a little. I didn't perform as well as I hoped.

I'm not sure how to respond when a million questions stampede through my head. Is she sure she didn't do well? Did she get kicked off the team? Is that why she went on a date with the captain? To convince him to let her stay on?

I just text her that I'll talk when she arrives and that I'm spending the night on the pull-out next door to her apartment. I also add:

BIRDIE

Btw your brothers are panicking like you're hitchhiking home with Hannibal Lecter and powder sugaring your heart for the creep.

AUDREY

You can tell them he's not a creep.

BIRDIE

You can tell them yourself, your highness.

AUDREY

Are you not panicked for me too? I could be in GRAVE danger.

I almost laugh at the all-caps on *grave.* Maybe she is just fucking with her brothers. I feel my lips lifting while I send my next text.

BIRDIE

You seem like you can hold your own, Virginia.

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AUDREY

Is that a compliment, Haydn?

BIRDIE

No.

I catch Phoenix staring at me. He gives me a probing look, so I overturn my phone on my thigh.

Ben is back and stepping into blue sweatpants while he announces, "I'm leaving to find Audrey."

Eliot stops him. "Beckett's driver picked her up. She's on her way home."

Not even a second later, the door unlocks. My stomach cramps when I see it's not her walking through.

Tugging at his golden-brown hair, this Cobalt brother looks *bothered.* He shoves an ebony cane in a shiny wooden stand.

I'm pretty positive this is Charlie—Audrey's oldest brother and the most famous of them. Therefore, he's the most recognizable to me outside of Tom. He's tall and lean with an almost too-perfect face. Like he should be posing for a men's cologne ad. Maybe he does do that for an extra buck—I don't know. Don't care.

As he shrugs out of his wool coat, he surveys everyone with one sweep and a curled lip, like the ground is rotting. "I'm so glad no one has overreacted," he says dryly. "A miracle." He must've clocked the rips in Phoenix's and Eliot's clothes.

The second my eyes catch his, he says, "What is he doing here?"

I stand up, ready to leave, but Phoenix and Tom shove me back down. *Fine.*

"Birdie is spending the night," Phoenix says. "Our apartment is an icebox. Heat is out."

Charlie assesses me like I'm a suspect in a lineup. "You've signed an NDA?"

"*Yep,*" I nod. "More than once. You're welcome."

"I'm not thanking you for the bare minimum." He pries off his loafers.

"Yeah, we can do pleasantries *never*. I just don't want to be near the stake Eliot is trying to burn."

Eliot flicks open a Zippo lighter. Almost on cue.

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I could laugh, but I can't. My ribs ache in my chest.

Charlie cuts Eliot an unamused glance. "The witch you're trying to hunt isn't in our apartment, *brother*."

Tom wags his finger. "Because witches are *fictional.* Just like her date. Good one, Charlie Keating. And well played to our sister. She's—"

"*Being serious*," Charlie bites back. "She has seriously been with Guy Abernathy all night. They went out to dinner, then he took her back to his place—"

"No fucking way, Charlie," Ben interjects. "After the frat thing, Audrey would never go home with a guy she just met. Not unless she thought one of us would be there."

The frat thing?

"You really believe she acquired good instincts after that?" Charlie retorts.

"Yeah," Ben says, "and fuck you for thinking she hasn't."

My brows shoot up. I cock my head to Phoenix, and he just shuts his eyes and shakes his head at me like, *don't ask questions.* I am questioning the full-moon effect that Audrey Cobalt has on her brothers, making them go absolutely bonkers.

Charlie looks Ben over. "Cursing me out doesn't change the facts you hate," he says more plainly.

Ben doesn't reply—because the door opens again.

All five Cobalt brothers are now here. This, I'm certain, is Beckett. I've been in the orchestral pit at NYBC's ballet productions more than enough to have caught glimpses of him. The posters hanging around Whitney Theater showing his ethereal, cut-glass features are hard to miss.

Beckett strides inside with more caution than heat, his dark brown hair sweaty and his skin pink and raw, like he scrubbed off makeup after the ballet. While he's prying off his gloves, finger by finger, Charlie tells him, "Phoenix's brother signed an NDA."

Beckett regards me with what I'd call a nano-glance. I am a dust particle to him.

It annoys me at first, but then I remember I don't want to be the center of any Cobalt's attention.

Eliot crosses his arms. "Charlie was just telling us our sister had a dinner date and went back to his place."

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Ben shakes his head like this is still unbelievable.

"She wants us to see her as an adult now," Charlie says, slightly limping over to the swivel chair. "And to make that insufferable point, she's going to skip the dinner portion of the date."

Tom cringes.

Beckett pinches his nose like he has a migraine.

Eliot is glaring.

Ben is staring up at the industrial chandelier. Eyes right in the light.

I can't comprehend their reactions. Dates lead to sex. Not abnormal. They're acting like she's…

My face sobers. How much experience does Audrey have?

Is she…?

Yeah, I am starting to sense she's a virgin. Very inexperienced to be dating a grad student—to the point where her brothers believe she's in over her head.

"I seriously hate this guy." Tom blows out an angry breath. "Is there anything we can do?"

"Skeletons in his closet?" Eliot turns to Beckett.

"His dad is on the Cobalt Inc. board, so any skeletons he has will have to remain there," Beckett says.

Eliot curses under his breath.

Beckett adds, "We all know Audrey—the more you tell her someone is bad for her, the more she'll want to prove you wrong."

Charlie takes a seat, stretching out his right leg. "Let's play a game then," he says to his brothers. "We have no reaction toward her being with Guy. First one to act like they care has to make the person they love most recite the 'Full Fathom Five' song from *The Tempest* at three a.m. daily for an entire month."

That's weirdly specific.

Phoenix is sitting beside me again, his leg jostling too much. I might as well be on a water bed. He's probably amped from lack of sleep already.

Tom knows my brother struggles with insomnia. So he says, "I can't make Phoenix do that."

"Then don't lose," Charlie snaps. "You don't get a *gift* when you come in last."

Tom glares.

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"It's fine, Tom," Phoenix says.

Ben is slowly shaking his head. "Harriet has exams, labs, research. Some of her classes are at eight a.m."

"You do know the definition of *punishment*?" Charlie asks.

"I don't think Harriet and Phoenix should be *punished* in a game they're not even playing," Ben argues. "They aren't chess pieces you can use, Charlie. It's not fucking right, and maybe you would understand that if you—" He stops himself from adding the end note.

"If I what?" Charlie has a cold glare on his little brother. "Had a girlfriend? My collateral damage will be Beckett, and I assure you, waking him up at three a.m. for a pointless monologue wouldn't be a joyous experience for me."

Ben takes a breath. "I'm sorry." He sounds sincere.

"Don't lose," Phoenix warns Eliot. I'm guessing Tom would be Eliot's collateral damage.

"There is no way I would," Eliot assures him. "I'm most likely to win this game."

"That's true," Beckett says to Phoenix.

I butt in, "So who's most likely to lose it?"

They're all looking at Ben. I wonder if he's closest to Audrey then.

Ben grinds his jaw.

Charlie reminds him, "You forbid her from being with him or caution her against him, you will push her toward him even more in her pursuit to prove that she can handle an older guy. So *please*, on behalf of your girlfriend's GPA, do not try to protect our *impulsive* little sister."

I lean back a little to whisper to Phoenix. "Reverse psychology?"

"Mental warfare is like their morning snack," Phoenix says just as hushed.

Ben draws in another lungful of air, and Beckett sets a calming hand on his brother's shoulder. "No reactions, Pip," he says to Ben. "It's not easy for me either. But Charlie is right. I've already made a mistake treating Audrey like she's still little. Her date tonight feels like an overcorrection to me."

"Or she could really like this guy," Ben mutters.

I have no time to process that—not when Audrey finally makes her grand entrance and her brothers disperse like nocturnal animals es-

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caping daylight. Even Tom pulls Phoenix away to his bedroom.

I'm the only one who remains.

CamScanner

14
AUDREY COBALT

"Interesting," I say, skimming the length of the empty kitchen. The only person in my brothers' apartment is the twenty-two-year-old who knows how to rile me. But I'm not even a little bit unhappy to see Birdie here.

He rises from the pull-out in the living room. "What's interesting?"

I gently shut the door behind me. "I had theorized what my brothers would do if I finally started dating someone. Avoiding me was low on the list." I try to bottle the hurt because this is precisely the *opposite* of what I wanted this year.

Birdie walks into the kitchen in a pair of athletic pants and a Nothing Personal band hoodie that instantly draws my attention. I don't think I've seen him in anything this dressed down. It's like catching your professor at the gym.

Not that he's my professor.

He's just a tutor. *My* tutor.

My skin feels warm.

"I definitely didn't think I'd cause a mass exodus," I say. "They *were* here, weren't they?"

"Just a minute ago." He nods.

I narrow my gaze. "And you haven't evacuated."

He jabs a thumb toward the couch. "That's my bed for the night, so there's really no other place for me to evacuate to." His steel-gray eyes land on me. "Not that I *want* to evacuate. I'm not scared of you, Virginia." He rakes a hand through his unkempt hair. "So...who names their kid Guy?"

The mention of names flames my insides.

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I just fumbled practice because of Birdie's namesake, but I don't want to bring up Joseph Haydn right now and risk pushing Birdie away. The last thing I want is to be alone—and he's doing exactly what I wished my brothers would. Show interest in me and my date.

"The kind of parents who live on Central Park West. At least, that's where Guy grew up."

Birdie laughs. "Of course, your dream guy is a rich trust fund baby."

"I'm not privy to the details of his bank account."

"Virginia." Birdie tilts his head like *come on.*

I shouldn't care what Birdie thinks, but it sparks greater annoyance through my body. "His money is not what makes him my dream guy. I assure you, he has far more important qualities."

His jaw tics before he asks, "Like?"

"Like…he's indisputably handsome, intelligent, *and* chivalrous." I flip my hair off my shoulder and give Birdie a tight smile. "A quality that current company is lacking."

He laughs dryly. "Sorry I left my chain mail and horse over at the stables."

"I doubt he has horses…being from New York." My cheeks are hot the longer Birdie stares at me, unwilling to look away. "What is it?"

"I feel like we're avoiding the elephant in the room."

My face burns. "Which is?"

"He's your quiz bowl captain, Virginia." His eyes flare with anger. "Is that why you wanted to join the team? For a guy?"

My lips part, and pain blossoms against my chest. To be accused of something that I would never do—it hurts. I'd thought he knew me better than that by now.

His expression breaks into a wince. "I didn't mean…" He mutters a husky, "*Fuck*," under his breath.

"It's a side quest," I explain matter-of-factly.

Birdie nods back, just once. "I'm going to take a shower. The kitchen is all yours." He leaves before I can gather a reply.

I'm left feeling horrible, and all I want to do is course correct. Birdie and I didn't even talk about the practice, which is more important than my date with Guy. I would end things with Guy tomorrow if it jeopardized my spot on the team.

Quiz bowl comes first. My goals *always* come first.

CamScanner

I need Birdie to understand this about me. It's killing me that maybe he doesn't.

I waver in the empty kitchen for another five minutes. My resolve won't let me leave, even though I should. Even though that'd probably be wise.

To hell with it. I dig a binder out of my tote and then strut toward Tom and Ben's bathroom. The lock notoriously doesn't work, so it's not a surprise when the knob turns smoothly. I hold the binder up to my eyes, blocking the view. Steam immediately engulfs me.

"Virginia." The deep, annoyed groan sounds over the rush of shower water. "What the fuck?"

"I need to make it clear that I am not on the team for a man."

"You made it clear. Now *shoo*."

"You're not at all curious what questions I got wrong?"

There's a moment of silence before he blows out an exasperated breath. "*Fine*. But first, is there any normal body wash in this place? All that's here is Dior and an ancient crusty bar of soap."

"What's wrong with Dior?"

"I assume it's Tom's, and I don't want to smell like your brother."

"I can grab you a bottle of Dawn dish soap if you'd prefer to smell like the flatware."

"Just a *normal* body wash would do, and then we can talk about your practice."

"Deal." I'm smiling as I head out and quickly grab an unscented foaming body wash (for sensitive skin) from my own shower next door. When I return with it in hand, I forget to cover my face with the binder, and I catch sight of Birdie's figure through the fogged shower stall.

I'm too stunned to move, frozen with one foot inside the bathroom. The outline of his masculine body rushes heat through my core. He's looking at me—he can see me.

I keep my eyes on his. "I see nothing," I admit. "The glass is fogged."

"Sure. Bring that here." He cracks open the door an inch. Just enough for steam to mushroom out of the stall. He holds out a hand, and I do my absolute best—which is above average—to keep my gaze rooted purely to his face. But even that causes my heart to beat faster.

Water droplets slip down the carve of his jaw.

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His wet hair sticks to his temples, and in the haze of the steam, his gray eyes look more like storm clouds than steel blades.

Oh, and he is absolutely *glaring* at me.

"*Virginia.*"

"Apologies," I say in a breathy tone. "For you." I put the bottle into his palm.

He points the body wash toward the bathroom door. "If you stay, open that door. I don't want your brothers getting the wrong idea."

"Wise," I say into a strong nod and circle back to the front of the bathroom. Opening the door, I let heat escape into the hall, and I take a strong inhale of the fresh, crisp air. *Better*.

"You know I thought Phoenix was exaggerating when he told me Cobalts have *boundary* issues—but I'm beginning to think he was right."

I roll my eyes. "You haven't kicked me out, so might I humbly suggest you have issues too." I climb onto the sink vanity to take a seat.

"No shit," he mumbles.

The bathroom lighting suddenly dims, and a soft neon blue glow illuminates inside the shower. "What…the fuck?"

I smile. "It's the LED lights. They must be on a timer."

"This is over-the-top," he states with another annoyed exhale.

"Not a lover of *blue*, I take it. Is red your favorite color then?"

"No," he says pointedly. No elaboration. *Lovely*. "What questions did you get wrong?"

I flip open the binder on my lap. Lia was nice enough to give me the packets they were using for drills tonight. "This instrument plays the melody 'A, D, E, F-sharp, G, F-sharp, E, D, C-sharp, long D' in a multi-movement work—"

"The violin," he says.

What… The quickness of his answer is an electric shock to my ego. I don't know what to say.

The silence must eat at him because he speaks first. "I'm not wrong. You just read the notes for Brahms's *Violin Concerto in D Major*."

"Yes, but *how* do you know that?" I growl in frustration. "Brahms only wrote one violin concerto. The question states a 'multi-movement' work. It doesn't point to a concerto at all. Not from that clue."

"I can hear the music in my head, Virginia."

CamScanner

"From me reading the notes?"

"Yes."

I knew he was talented, but witnessing *this* has me swept up in something headier than just the steam of the room. I'm lost for a second. If he's this extraordinary, what is he doing at college? What was he doing in a *rock* band? "Who are you?" I ask in a breathy, almost disbelieving whisper.

I don't think he can hear me over the water hitting the tile. He's scrubbing shampoo into his hair, facing the shower head.

"Read me the rest of the question," he tells me.

Taking a deeper breath, I refocus on the packet. "This instrument is tuned in perfect fifths to G, D, A, high E. *Balet Comique de la Royne*, devised for the French court by Balthazar de Beaujoyeulx, contains the earliest known published music for this instrument. The exact origin of invention for this instrument is unknown. Brahms only wrote one concerto for this instrument. In *The Madonna of the Orange Trees* painted for the church of San Cristoforo in Vercelli, this instrument is depicted. For 10 points, the same artist includes what instrument in his fresco in the cupola of Saronno Cathedral in 1535?" And...that's it.

I let out another growl. "I should've known the answer once Brahms was mentioned, but I must've been too hung up on the music notes."

"We can practice more music comprehension. That's not an issue. What else?"

All right. It's now or never...

"I mispronounced a composer's name," I admit, my insides twisting. "Why would you never bring up Joseph *Haydn*?"

Birdie is quiet.

He shuts off the water and takes the towel hanging over the lip of the shower glass. When he opens the door, his towel is knotted at his waist, and he quickly grabs his tee off the floor and tugs it over his head.

His hurriedness sinks my stomach. "Is this where you make a mad dash away from me?" I wonder. "Because the Road Runner is the most infuriating fictional creature."

He makes a face. "He's just minding his own business. He only runs away because he's trying not to get eaten by the coyote."

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"Is that how you see me then?" I ask. "Am I the coyote?"

His chest rises in a deeper inhale, his shirt sticking to the damp parts of his chest. "I don't know. Sometimes, I feel like maybe you all are."

"My family?"

"Your kind," he says. "Rich. Elite." He shrugs. "You all play by a different set of rules. For someone like me, trying to be successful starts feeling like just trying to survive."

Maybe this is deeper than just me. I don't want to assume I know what he's been through. I don't know much about him at all—and that's what I hate most. "I'm not going to eat you. I just want to know you," I say softly. "Is that so bad?"

Birdie swallows hard. "I don't know anymore." He shakes his head at himself and stares up at the vapor rising to the ceiling. "I never brought up Joseph Haydn because I knew you'd ask me questions about my middle name, and *yeah*, I've been trying not to get personal with you." He waves a hand around the room and laughs tightly. "But I'm in your brothers' bathroom. Yesterday, I would have told you I'd never step foot in here, and now I've *literally* stepped over some sort of line."

"A line *you* drew," I tell him. "I'm perfectly fine with no lines."

His gray eyes reach mine. "Of course. This is where the lack of boundaries comes in."

I smile. "Possibly. But you don't see me agonizing over sharing such a small detail as a *middle* name. I'm not asking for your Social Security number, Haydn."

"Virginia," he mumbles and sucks in a tight breath. Water slides down his ankles, puddling to the floor. He keeps a hand at the knotted part of the towel. "My parents named me after Joseph Haydn because of Phoenix."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

He lifts his shoulders. "His middle name is *Wolfgang*, as in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Then I came into the picture, and my parents hoped we'd get along. So they named me after Mozart's best friend...Joseph Haydn." He licks his bottom lip at the edge of his piercing.

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"Your parents must be happy," I say. "Their wish came true. You and Phoenix seem to get along very well."

He nods once. "Yeah." He rubs at his neck, near his birthmark. "So you got a Haydn question wrong. Are you still on the team?"

"Yes, but not officially. I don't think they'll take me off probation until after I do well at the Princeton Invitational."

"And you still need tutoring? Or do you get special privileges dating the team captain?"

I grimace. "If I did, I wouldn't take them. I want to be on the team for my academic merits."

He laughs. "Okay, then what about your scones?"

I huff. "Those are my baking skills winning me some *small* favor. And while I'd like to believe I'm an epically good kisser, I don't think Guy is the type to let that sway him."

Birdie's chest rises heavily, his brows raised. "So you kissed him?"

The steam is gone from the room, but the air thins, and an internal heat feeds the suffocating feeling. "It was a date," I say softly. "Kissing is what one does on a date."

He shakes his head. "Fucking is what one does on a date." He mutters, "On my dates, at least."

"We did *not* do that." I flush. "I've always imagined my first time would be more special. More intentional than something that I lose on a first date."

He's even more rigid than before.

"I'm a virgin," I say plainly.

His lips twitch into a fraction of a smile. "I got that, Virginia."

"Wonderful, so…" I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear and flip the binder closed on my lap. I slip off the counter, my feet thudding to the floor. "I'd still like to be tutored," I tell him. "We've only covered the surface, and my performance at the invitational counts on it. And I assume…you still need the money?"

He nods just once again. "Yeah. Thank you for that reminder." He angles his head to the door. "Now, if you don't mind. I'd like to get changed." He shoos me with his hand. "Scram."

I glare. "*Bye, bye*, Birdie." I strut out of the bathroom, my binder pressed to my chest.

I can hear his long, irritated groan as I walk down the hall.

CamScanner

15
AUDREY COBALT

Later in the night, I lie awake with swirling thoughts. My clock is a beacon for me to *sleep*. Watching the numbers tick by should be a warning. An omen of misfortune. I have studying to do tomorrow. Classes to take. Facts to remember. My brain endlessly scrolls, unable to just...relax. When I was little, I thought making lists would help relieve some of the unspent energy.

When I got older, I found a better solution.

My hand slips underneath my fluffy comforter. With my silk nightgown already hiked up at my hips, I slide my palm down below the hem of my panties. Snapping my eyes shut, I retreat to the depths of my mind.

The man that first pops into my head is tall. Dark brown hair, sultry bedroom eyes, and a towering stance that beckons with confident magnetism.

And he isn't real.

He's never been real.

I have fantasized about this dream man since I learned how to touch myself. He only exists inside my imagination. A shapeshifter—he's changed forms over the years. But his personality has mostly remained the same. He picks me off the floor with ease and throws me on the bed. I bounce onto the springy mattress, breath jettisoned by the carnal expression seeping off his gaze.

He crawls onto the mattress with wild animalistic intent. He wants to *devour*. I am his impatient prey.

When he reaches me, his strong palm cups the soft planes of my face, and he tears my nightgown with his bare hands, ripping the fabric right off my body.

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In my bed, my fingers move against my clit, rubbing with practiced efficiency. My breath labors as I envision my dream man handling my exposed breast. With my free hand, I touch my chest, my thumb flicking over my pebbling nipple.

Heat blooms inside my core, and my legs slip and slide against my velvety sheets.

Then something happens—my dream warps.

I'm standing against a kitchen island. My dream man's face shifts to one I recognize. The slanted, slow-burning smile of Guy Abernathy steals my breath. His hand drives below my skirt, and he cups my heat with a strong palm. I'm stilled against him as his lips slam into me in a throttling kiss. His fingers work against the outside of my panties, creating friction, building fire.

I'm so wet.

When he pulls away—he disappears. His face is replaced with…

I gasp.

My hand freezes against my clit. My heart beats so hard, but I don't open my eyes. I don't break the image of Birdie St. Pierre pinning me against the bathroom vanity. His wet hair stuck to his skin. His body slick from the shower. He's tugging my panties to the floor. He unknots the towel at his waist. His locked-in gaze never breaks from mine. He seizes every small piece of me. I'm unable to truly look away from his eyes.

Not even as his towel crumples to the ground.

Not even when his hand dives between my legs. A moan catches in the back of my throat.

He groans, "*Virginia.*" His voice in my head snaps me fully awake.

Eyes open.

Alert.

I'm sweaty and undone. Not nearly satiated. The darkness of my room doesn't bring me out of the carnal heat. Mixed feelings hit me in a shotgun blast.

This is wrong.

I'm seeing Guy. I'm *with* Guy.

But this is only a dream, Audrey. And we've only been on *one* date. Birdie is attractive, of course. It doesn't mean I want him. It doesn't

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mean there's another man in my life. He's just my tutor, and he thinks I'm an annoying pest. So there's that.

I stare up at the ceiling, watching my fan whirl around.

Still conflicted, I sigh and pull my hand out of my panties. Rolling onto my side, I snatch my phone from the nightstand. After I switch to incognito mode, I find my favorite porn site. If I can't trust my imagination, I'll just have to use visuals.

I plop down on my pillow and raise the phone overhead.

My body is slick with sweat as I move my hand back south. Oh...I am....swollen. My clit is so tender it aches to touch it, but I try. I do. Just for that mind-altering peak.

It doesn't take long before I reach it. My toes curl, my body levitates, my breath shudders. The release ekes out all the stored energy left inside my body. Exhaustion reaches the edges of my mind, and I let it take me.

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16

BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

I feel like death.

My head weighs ten thousand pounds, and a maddening beat hammers the front of my skull. Dark sunglasses cover my eyes, the bright fluorescence of the bathroom abusing me. Fuck, I don't remember how I made it onto this plane. After the Grammys ended last night, there was an after-party at some hotel.

Loud music.

A lot of free shots.

Everything after that is just a complete blur. I *faintly* remember this morning. Phoenix woke me up, told me I missed my commercial flight, and somehow got me onto Tom's private jet. Not my finest moment.

Never missed a flight before.

I can't actually remember the last time I got blackout drunk.

My whole body is paying for it. Aches and pains radiate in every muscle and tendon from whatever I did last night. I don't even want to ask Phoenix. I probably just danced too fucking hard—but it kind of feels like I ran into a thousand walls on the way back to my hotel room. Could have definitely done that.

I clutch my phone to my ear and lean my elbow against a porcelain sink. This is unlike any airplane bathroom I've ever been in. Not only is it triple the size, but on the countertop, there's a basket of mini-sized toiletries, a fancy lotion bottle, a fucking *vase* with red roses, and some sort of body oil. You'd think this is a spa and we're not currently forty thousand feet in the air.

"Did you have a good time?" My mom's voice sounds like a wood-chipper in my eardrums.

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16

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I bring the cell away from my face and put it on speaker. Still shocked I could get signal. "The best," I tell her. And I mean it. Before the free shots, at least. It was the best night of my life watching my big brother perform on a worldwide televised stage. Tom and Phoenix won four of the seven Grammys they were nominated for, including the massive one. Best Album of the Year.

I'd never clapped so hard. There's something euphoric about watching someone you love achieve their dream. It's shit I've always wanted for my brother.

Did I think we'd be doing it together? Yeah, but....life, I guess.

The Carraways is perfect as a singer/drummer duo. Literal magic. Would not want that to change for anything. Definitely not for me.

"Good," Mom says. "I hope you didn't party too hard." She lets out a breathy laugh like it's a joke. Because normally it *would* be a joke.

"Yeah. You know me. Pure party animal." Underneath my sunglasses, I rub the inner crease of my eye.

"Well, take it easy today," she suggests, which throws me the fuck off. *Take it easy* is not a Miriam St. Pierre colloquialism.

"Why?" I ask suspiciously.

She sucks in a breath. "Don't be mad..."

Jesus fuck. I press my forehead against the mirror, closing my eyes and bracing for impact. "What is it?"

"Your father and I entered you into the International Stravinsky Competition," she says. "As you know, it only comes around every four years, and you don't have much time left before you're ineligible."

"I have until I'm thirty."

"That's only one more competition cycle. Who knows what you'll be doing in four more years, Birdie. Right now, you're done with drumming. We just think this is best. Remember what the Youth Stravinsky Award did for you?"

I won first place when I was fourteen, and it was the main reason I got a full ride to Berklee. It's the glowing star on my resume. Hell, I'm sure it's why I got my scholarship to MVU.

Winning the adult award would open more doors for me. I could travel as a soloist instead of planting roots at the Manhattan Symphony. But do I want that? I don't know. Grad school is supposed to give me more options, but I'm starting to feel like the more options I

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do have, the more confusing everything is. Nothing makes me happy anymore.

"When is the competition?" I ask my mom.

"May."

I must have heard her wrong. "That's in three months."

"Plenty of time."

"Mom, I practiced for a *year* last time, and I was up against a bunch of teenagers."

"And now you'll be up against a bunch of twentysomethings. You'll do great. You always do." Her tone is warm, comforting. But I know better than to let that cloud my judgment. I'm the one who's going to be under the gun here. Not her. Not my dad.

"I don't have time," I say. "I'm in school—"

"I'm sure you can fit in practice time. Birdie, this is important. Papi is getting older, and do you know what'd it do for your grandfather to see his grandson win *the* Stravinsky Competition?"

I guess winning the youth award wasn't enough.

As I grip the sink, I glance down at the silver fede ring on my finger. Most would give family heirlooms to the firstborn son, but my grandfather has bestowed every St. Pierre honor on me.

It's a lot to live up to—my grandfather being a world-renowned conductor. My own dad didn't live up to Papi's expectations of an orchestral musician. So that's where I come in.

My throat dries. *Audrey*. I'm still tutoring Audrey Cobalt—but my mom won't find that to be an acceptable use of my time, so I don't bring it up as a defense. In truth, she is right. This competition is good for my career, good for my family, good for me. I just have to figure out how to fit it in.

"Okay," I say.

"Great. *Great*. I'll go tell Philippe. He'll be elated."

When she hangs up to go talk to my dad, I puke in the toilet. Suddenly, I'm thankful for the basket on the counter, and I use one of the mini mouthwashes.

Returning to the cabin, I see Phoenix, Tom, and Eliot talking among themselves in the middle of the plane, where a couch and a couple of recliners sit. I plop down in the open chair. Phoenix gives me a concerned look. "You all right?"

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I nod slowly. “Just feel like dying. I don’t know how you did this on the *Draconian* tour.”

Tom lifts his head from his phone like I’m providing some rare window into his boyfriend’s past that predates him. It’s not a secret Phoenix was a partier.

“Lots of water, man.” Phoenix tosses a bottle of Fiji at my face. I barely catch it before it clips my nose. *Fuck*.

He winces. “Jesus.”

“Someone can’t hold their liquor,” Eliot says, seated on the opposite recliner with fresh-faced energy. I swear he had just as much alcohol as me. From what I can remember.

“Not a big drinker,” I admit and unscrew the water bottle.

If I had more steam, I’d flip Eliot off. All I can muster is a dry smile. Do not like this guy—but I’ve been pocketing my disdain all weekend. Last thing I wanted was to ruin my brother’s big moment with petty bullshit.

Phoenix hasn’t removed his concerned gaze off me. “Is there a reason you went so hard last night, and I had to carry you onto the plane this morning?”

So he carried me. *Confirmed*.

I lift my shoulders. “Just celebrating.” I will never confess that I decided to take three tequila shots after I overheard Tom and Eliot talking about Audrey. She apparently was on a second date yesterday morning with Guy Abernathy.

A coffee date.

I don’t know. I just didn’t want to think about it. Getting obliterated felt like a good way to just erase it from the mind. It worked until about five seconds ago—now that I’m thinking about her again.

“You sure it’s just that?” Phoenix asks. “Because if it’s about money—”

I groan. “*Please*. Spare me.” I make prayer hands. “My head, man. I can’t do this right now.”

His jaw clenches, and he nods.

“Speaking of Audrey,” Tom says to Eliot. “She’s *still* seeing that prick, and I can only hold my tongue for so long. Have you seen his social media? His face is so smug, dude. I have so many things to say. It’s causing me literal internal distress keeping it bottled in.”

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I will not look up his social media.

Hell no.

Phoenix licks his lips, near laughter.

Tom glares at his boyfriend. "Dude, I'm dead serious. My sister is going to have to pay for a heart transplant."

"It can't be that serious, nepo baby," Phoenix says.

"My near-death is very serious, *Phoenix*."

Oh my God, they're killing *me* right now. My temple pounds.

"Stay strong, brother," Eliot says to Tom. "You don't want to give Charlie the satisfaction of us losing the bet." Then he turns his attention to me.

Leave me the fuck alone. I can't even groan out the words.

Eliot is able to capture my gaze, unfortunately. "Have you seen Guy on campus?"

"No." I start reclining my chair.

"You could fi—"

"*No*." I muster some energy. "I'm not taking part in any of your Cobalt bets, games, riddles, competitions, brain stews—leave me the fuck out." I make a peace sign, then grab a pillow off an empty chair and put it over my head.

"Unhelpful," Eliot chides.

I don't give a shit.

I'm not Audrey's brother. I'm not a *Cobalt*. They can all seriously fuck off.

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17
BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

When the private jet lands, I hightail back to my apartment, determined to sleep the day away until I realize how far behind I am on my composition project. Grad students are required to present a six-minute original orchestral work at the end of the semester, which the student-led orchestra will then perform in front of a faculty panel.

It's the biggest part of my grade in my hardest class, and if I fail it—I don't even know why I'm here. I have everything mapped out in my head. But as soon as I sit down on the edge of my bed with my cello, I get a text.

DAD

Sending you a link to the competition. You'll need to plan programs for all three rounds, with recital repertoire for Rounds 1 and 2.

Before I can reply, my phone beeps again.

DAD

I highly recommend at least adding a Piatti caprice in Round 1. Let me know if you need help. Excited for you!

All three rounds. Because there's no universe where I would be eliminated in the competition before reaching the final round. My chest is tight; breathing is agonized work. I press the edge of my phone to the front of my skull.

The mountain of work churns through my head. And with the limited time...pressure continues to compound. *Fuck.* I let out a strangled

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breath and wipe a hand across my mouth. There's no way I can do all of this *and* tutor Audrey every morning.

No way.

I need to just let her down easy. She'll understand, right? She's seeing the team captain now—she'll do fine on her own. Yeah, I still need the money. But there's a cash prize if I win the competition. Which would be in *May*, and that's way too fucking late...but I can make it work.

I can.

My fingers hover over her name. Her last text is on the screen.

AUDREY

Same time. Same place. Tuesday morning.

I start texting a reply: *Sorry, I can't*—I delete it and let out a long groan. Why does this have to be so difficult? She's insufferable. But she's not the worst part of my day. Not even by a long shot. There's so much other shit I'd rather jettison from my life than her.

And I didn't quit Nothing Personal so that I could bail on all the other stuff I enjoy. I can't go down that road.

I send her a text.

BIRDIE

See you tomorrow.

The next few hours I try to focus on *one* thing and not the million scrambling through my head. My project. My grade. Minutes slip past me as I toil on the cello, experimenting with different emotional beats. Trying to find something original, sourced from my core. The evening comes too quick.

Sweat coats my body, and I'm wired from the music, from the stress that has pulled every fiber of my being into one taut strand. I made *minor* progress. It feels as if I'm no closer to finishing than when I started hours ago. I set my cello aside and run a hand against the back of my neck.

Arousal is coiled low. Desire throbs unbearably in my body. I need pussy or dick. I need to fuck.

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I breathe hard as I scroll through my phone. I have so many different contacts from random people at bars. I have a foolproof filing system in my cell.

First Name: *Location of where we met.*

Last Name: *First name.*

Thumbing through the names, I skim past a few dozen and ignore the legitimate people I know.

Gillies Miranda
Gillies Shawn
Gillies Hampton
MoMa Jason
MoMa Elaine
NYBC Leo
NYBC Sasha
NYBC Hattie
Random Bar Natalie
Random Bar Kevin
Somewhere in Dumbo Rachel

I return to the top of the list.

2B Amara
2F Freddie
4C Daphne
Audrey Cobalt

My eyes land on her name like an electric shock. *No*. She is not even close to being an option for my quick lay. There are so many reasons that I give my brain a break and don't even file through them. My cock strains against my pants, begging me to fucking fix this already.

My hand isn't going to be enough.

I'm seconds from rouletting this shit and just picking a random name, when my eyes glaze over *Neon Cowboy Ryan*.

I faintly remember that night a couple months ago. We danced for half a second, talked for much longer, and he was drinking a Long Island iced tea. I have a rule that I don't fuck anyone so inebriated they can't say their ABCs, so I cut it short. But I got a number for later.

It's later.

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I'm on the curb of a strip of rowhouses. A slender, naked tree twists and sways on the sidewalk. The wind stings my skin from a sudden cold front. My fists are clenched and stuffed in my jacket, and I blow out a puff of smoked air. Freezing my ass off in the middle of the night does not temper the absolute *need* buzzing through my body.

Did not even mind the train ride over here. How the fuck did I get this horny? Oh yeah, I haven't had sex in like ten thousand years. (*Eleven days.*)

I'm going out of my mind.

My phone beeps with a text, and I brace the cold with my fingerless gloves to pull it from my jeans.

PHOENIX

What the hell are you doing in Bushwick?

I smile. He must be looking at my location, but this is good. It's a chance for me to show Phoenix that I'm fine. Up to my usual self. Nothing to worry about. I send him a quick reply.

BIRDIE

Getting dick.

PHOENIX

Sorry I asked.

BIRDIE

Get that Hell's Kitchen dick.

PHOENIX

Don't make me block you.

I laugh. He did that last week for about an hour.

PHOENIX

Be careful.

My smile slides off my face. I have a lot of experience with one-night stands and random hookups, probably more than my brother, considering he has exes from long-term relationships. I've never had

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one of those. If he wants to give me advice, it should be regarding that, not this. But I thumbs-up his text anyway and slip my phone in my pocket.

The door to a gray rowhouse opens, and Ryan ushers me inside. His face isn't remarkable, which is probably why I don't remember him that well. We share the same height and same build, and his hair is almost the same shade of brown as mine, but it's buzzed short.

We look fairly similar.

I think Phoenix would make a joke about me fucking myself.

"Christ, it's so cold," Ryan says as we walk up the stairs. "Spring can't come fast enough."

"I hear that."

"Where did you come from?"

"Chelsea."

He cringes.

I laugh. "You're the one who was at Neon Cowboy, man. That's a Chelsea club."

"My friend dragged me out," he admits. "I'm not regretting it though." His eyes flit to me as we stop at a door. He shoves his hands in his pants, trying to find his keys, but he's distracted. He fixates on my lips. My piercings. His chest rises and falls in a heavy, charged rhythm, and my dick screams at me to feel good. *Feel better*.

"No regrets," I say in a deep, low whisper. "Mr. Long Island Iced Tea." I flash a humored, flirty smile.

He shares it. "You remember that?"

"Yep." I pop the *p* sound against my lips.

He's lasered in. If he's not fucking careful, I will shove him on the ground and put my cock in his mouth in this very hall. He reads the threat in my eyes, and he lets out a heavier breath. "Wh-what were you drinking?"

"Jack and Fizz." I immediately, instantly, *regrettably* think of the redheaded granddaughter of the founding father of Fizzle.

I'd like to say that I get soft in this moment.

But my cock has never been harder.

Ryan's not looking at me as he finally jams the key in the lock. He's barely got the door open before he grabs the fabric of my shirt and yanks me inside. As soon as it shuts, our hands are all over each other.

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I'm ripping his tee over his head. He's undoing my belt. A few tattoos scatter his arms. The sun, stars, a handful of evergreens. Earthy shit.

"Kiss me," he breathes out, and I'm on his lips. My hunger is contagious. He feeds on me like I do him, and there's no hesitation. We've already texted all the clinical stuff. Negative tests. No sleepovers. I'm just looking for something fun to take my mind off the stress. I don't want a commitment. I don't want a morning after.

I just want *this*.

Lips on my lips. He's shoving me to the ground first, which is fine. I can be a giver—and I give exceptional fucking head. He's smaller than me, an easy fit, and I take his length into my mouth.

I can't tell which I like more. Cock or pussy.

It's all the same when the person underneath me is going absolute batshit over what I'm doing to them. He's clutching at my shoulders. Making noises he's probably never made in his life.

When he comes, he's half-lidded in a deep, euphoric descent that I don't need him to get swept away in. My cock is painfully erect, and I rub the edge of my mouth with the back of my hand. He tastes okay. Salty and a little too thick, but I've had worse.

"Hey, Ryan," I say with a playful smile.

"Huh?"

"Your turn, man." I gently put my hands on his shoulders, guiding him to the ground. He's buck naked, and the sight is a turn-on. But as soon as he brings my pants to my knees, I suddenly lock up.

My eyes dart around the room.

It's fine.

I'm not on a hidden fucking camera. It's not like I've had this worry ever before—and I don't need to get in my head about sex.

I love sex.

Sex drowns the stress. It is a stress-fucking-reliever. Losing it to anxiety will be the biggest pain in my ass. I already gave it up for ten thousand years. (*Eleven days*.)

Fuck.

I rub at my lips.

"You okay?" Ryan asks as soon as he grips my cock in his hand. Great, *awesome*. He can tell I'm silently freaking out.

"Yeah, man. Just put me in your mouth. Suck it hard. I like that."

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He grins. “All right, rockstar.”

I go rigid again.

“Birdie?” He frowns.

“Did I tell you I was in a band?” I wonder.

He nods. “Yeah, dude. I think it came up.”

He thinks. That has to be good enough for me. And what does it even matter if he found out that information on his own? It means he stalked me on social media. Do I care? I wouldn’t have until maybe ten days ago when my money problem started making me question *everything*.

Especially hookups.

Ryan starts rubbing my dick, and when he wraps his lips around me, I start worrying I might not stay hard. So I do a dumb thing.

A truly *stupid* fucking thing.

I think about her.

Her smile that dazzles the borders of her blue eyes. The way she tosses her hair at me like a middle finger. Her breathy laugh, and the pitch of her voice I can never recreate in my head. My nose flares, a groan scraping against my throat. My lips are shut, and I swallow the noise into my chest.

The visual of her is killing me—it’s not *just* her endless curves or her soft skin. It’s also the way I’ve caught her staring at me and she doesn’t back down. It’s how she follows me and jogs to keep my pace. It’s how she pushes her nose into textbooks that most would find boring. It’s her intensity and persistence and unwillingness to let go of me that pumps blood south.

The warm slickness against my cock starts to annihilate me. The pressure. The high. I’m dizzying, ready to release—and then Ryan pulls away and nods over toward the bed. I want to fuck. It’s all I can think about, and I’m aching to take him hard and make this night last as long as it needs to.

But I can’t.

Maybe he’s been thinking about someone else tonight. An ex or a lover or a fling that’s not *me.* I wouldn’t care. We’re just here to get off.

But that’s not me.

I’ve never been halfway in a moment. Halfway somewhere else. Not during sex.

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"I have an early morning," I tell Ryan. *Not a complete lie.* "You mind finishing me?"

He's back on my cock without pause. He's a nice guy. I like that at least. He continues sucking me off until I come, and then I'm grabbing my underwear and pants and pulling them on so quickly I could get an award.

He doesn't seem too shocked by my hurriedness, but I'm still apologizing.

He shrugs it off. "It's all right. I've been there."

I frown. "Where is that?"

His brows rise in surprise, but he's smiling like maybe I told a joke. "Hung up on someone."

I blow out a breath into a dry laugh. "Yeah, *no.*" I'm thrusting my arms into my shirt. "There's no one. I'm just stressed, man. My brain isn't totally here."

He nods slowly. "I get that too. But hey, you ever need a quickie. You got my number."

"Won't lose it." I'm out of his place in a dash. The cold air can't come quick enough, and I'm walking so fast down the sidewalk, I'm almost mid-jog. My lungs burn. My chest hurts. Sex is one of the few things I love—and it feels like I lost it tonight? Like why was I so nervous about a fucking *hidden* camera? This isn't a goddamn movie, and I'm not…I'm not…

My hands are on my head as I skate to a stop. I can't breathe.

I'm crouched down.

That wasn't supposed to happen. I need sex.

I need to fuck.

It's one of the few things I have that helps…and I just…I can't…I shove my hand in my pocket, looking for my lighter. *Motherfuck.* I left that thing at my apartment.

I let out a low, contained scream. Fists clenched. Eyes shut tight. I'm going to die.

You're not going to die, Bird.

I suck hard through my nose. The sidewalk. I stare at it for three long seconds. There's an ugly crack. The sky. It's dark. No stars tonight.

It's about how I feel—is my next pointless thought.

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My phone beeps. I sniff hard as the cold messes up my sinuses, and I pull my cell from my pocket.

PHOENIX

Text me when you get home.

My brother. It's like he knows. I don't know how. But sometimes it feels like he's tethered to my soul.

I hate that for him.

I pocket my phone. I stand up. I head home.

CamScanner

18

AUDREY COBALT

Birdie has never been late. Not a single morning. But it's ten past six, and he's a no-show at the practice room. I'm leaning against the window, peering out at the landscaped lawn. A lamppost illuminates the drained fountain, and the sidewalk remains deserted. I check my phone again.

AUDREY

Are we still meeting for tutoring?

I sent that three minutes ago. Still no reply. My thoughts are a minefield—running through every scenario why I'm being stood up. The last time I saw Birdie was before he left for the Grammys. We had a tutoring session that wasn't out of the ordinary. Barbs were thrown. Names were called. But I was on my *best* behavior. I never once prodded for more personal information. I was *proud* of myself for showing some restraint. Because outside of knowing the origins of his middle name, I haven't sourced any new information about Birdie.

Me being an absolute pest sounds like a good reason to stand me up—but if I've been somewhat pleasant, then what?

Is it because I'm seeing Guy?

Did something happen at the Grammys?

My phone lets out a soft buzz, and my heart ricochets through my chest. But as soon as I see the text isn't from Birdie, my shoulders slump.

JANE

He is cute!! I like the glasses.

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After I told my big sister all about Guy, detailing in depth our fortuitous body collision, she asked for a picture. So I texted her a link to Guy's social media. The majority of his photos, he wears thin-wire reading glasses. At least, I assume they're reading glasses since I haven't seen him wear them in person yet. But I have to disagree with my sister on this—he is not cute. Dachshunds and corgis are cute.

Guy is unquestionably *handsome.* Most would say *hot.*

But I won't deny it's nice having a third-party opinion about him. Seeing as how my brothers are all equally committed to ignoring my dating life.

Suddenly, the door swings open—I jolt up from my phone.

Birdie runs into the practice room, his chest rising and falling in heavy, arduous breaths as if he sprinted here. Sweat glistens on his forehead, and his white shirt sticks to his abs. He peels a black leather jacket off his arms, then unties the plaid long-sleeved tee from his waist. Using that one, he wipes trickling sweat off his face. He *definitely* ran here.

My first mode of action is to glare. I hold up my phone toward him, displaying the time. "Twenty minutes late."

"Sixteen," he argues.

"I rounded up."

He scowls. "This isn't math class, and you don't need to twist the knife, Virginia. I already feel horrible. I've never even been late to a fucking doctor's appointment." He runs a frustrated hand through his hair, the strands by his face damp. He truly looks like he's beating himself up over this.

I frown. "You care that much?"

"Being punctual is a part of who I am, yeah." He moves his backpack to the ground. "It has nothing to do with you." *Lovely.*

"I didn't say it did." I cross my arms. "But you being late does affect me. We've missed out on twenty minutes of study time."

"*Sixteen.*" He unzips his bag.

"Where were you?"

He pulls out a thick paperback book. "Asleep…I overslept. I had a late night."

"Doing what exactly?" I ask.

He holds out the book for me. "Doing someone."

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His answer instantly flusters me. One, that he answered *at all*. Two, that he admitted to something *so* much more personal than a middle name.

"A date," I say into a calm, casual nod and take the book from his hands. My pulse grows louder, thumping against my ears. *Stop*, I want to tell it.

Birdie shakes his head. "Not a date, no."

"You don't do dates?" I wonder.

"I wouldn't say that. I've been on dates." He tosses his leather jacket on the back of the chair, shifting away from me to his usual seat. "Last night just wasn't *that*."

Flush ascends my face as I try my hardest not to visualize Birdie doing *anyone*. Let alone this someone. "I'm happy for you," I tell him. "I hope all your desires were adequately fulfilled."

He lets out a shaky breath into a dry laugh.

I glare. "I'm being serious."

"I know you are," he says. "That's why I find it amusing."

"I'm so glad I could amuse you," I shoot back. Hostility, his and mine, amplifies the heat of the room, and I don't know how to temper it. But I wanted this—for him to open up to me. I can do the same so that we're on equal footing. "I've never been on multiple dates with someone," I explain. "Guy is my first."

He blinks. "I didn't ask."

I let out a huff. "I thought this was a back-and-forth with *two* participants. Apologies."

He rakes both hands through his hair and leans back in the chair. The posture is undoubtedly attractive, his biceps flexing as they rise beside his head. "Fine," he says. "I'm a little shocked you've never even been on three dates with your cotillion partner."

"That would have been impossible. I've never been to cotillion."

His brows hike. "So you turned out this way without any formal training."

I smile tightly. "There's an insult in there, but I choose to ignore it."

"Please do." He lowers his arms to his side, then points at the book in my hands. "Read that this week."

I finally glance down at the title. *Playing Before the Lord: The Life and Work of Joseph Haydn*. I smile. We're going to cover Haydn, then.

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"I'll read it tonight."

He frowns. "It's over three hundred pages."

"I'm a fast reader." I slip it into my tote. There's a long pause.

"Are you an English major or…" His words trail off, and his jaw clenches.

"Yes, Birdie, I am an English major. And what about you?"

"You already know my major."

"I also know your age. Twenty-two. But you were in Nothing Personal for four years prior to grad school. This isn't math class, but I can do math, and none of it is adding up. When did you go to Berklee College of Music if you joined a band at eighteen?"

He nods to my tote. "Do you have any sweet treats for me today?"

"Is this you avoiding?"

"No, it's me starving. I just *ran* here, remember?" He takes a deep breath as I pull out a Tupperware from my bag. "I graduated high school early."

I let out a tiny breath of shock. "Like me?"

"Two years early," he clarifies.

"Oh…earlier than me." I pass him the container.

"My early education was at intensive music schools. Same with Phoenix. We didn't go to normal public elementary, middle, and high school." He pops the lid, and his lips twitch into a smile. "Cake?"

"*Coffee* cake. I was bored, so I thought I'd try something new. It's going to be the worst you've had—" He's already shoving a piece between his lips. He doesn't chew with his mouth open, so at least there's that.

I study him as I ask, "Does that mean you left home at sixteen?"

He nods and mumbles through his bite of food, "Moved to Boston. Lived with my brother."

I grin.

He groans. "Don't say it—it's *not* like you."

"It feels a lot like what I did." *Moving to a big city to live with my brothers.* "We have something in common, you and I."

He looks like he could throw the Tupperware across the room. His face seizes into a grimace, and he swallows hard. "Too much cinnamon, Virginia." He coughs a little, then swigs his water.

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I inhale sharply and quickly grab my notebook to write down the critique.

"And I joined Nothing Personal halfway through my undergrad, so I completed the rest of the degree online." He pops another piece of cake in his mouth.

I'm hung up on his words. He was taking *college* courses while he was in a rock band. Creating an album. Going on tour. I can't even imagine the amount of pressure that would be. Tom's sole focus had been The Carraways, and he always made it seem like the Mount Everest of stress.

But there's something else I'm clinging to that has nothing to do with Birdie's obvious unrelenting ambition. My pen freezes on the paper as I meet his eyes. "That must have been hard, quitting the band you'd been in since you were eighteen," I say softly.

He lifts his shoulders. "New chapter, right?"

"Is this one better?" I wonder.

He expels an inexhaustible breath. "Fuck, I hope so." He lifts a piece of cake and motions to me. "Enough about me."

I sit straighter, thinking maybe he'll ask about me.

He takes a large bite of cake and mumbles, "What do you know about Beethoven?"

Oh...

Right. The train rights course, and we spend the next two hours deep-diving into music.

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19
AUDREY COBALT

The remnants of an uneventful Wednesday Night Dinner line my family's long ornate dining table in Philadelphia. Picked-apart goose, emptied goblets of wine, melted candlesticks in five-tiered candelabras. I love traveling to the Cobalt Estate once a week for the grandeur and drama and wit.

Our extravagant family dinners have always been a highlight of my week. It was the one day all my siblings would fight to come back home—where the big house I grew up in would fill with vibrant, lively noise.

Yet tonight was rather…boring.

No one said anything snarky. No one took a jab here or there. It was as if everyone came with rubber swords instead of sharpened blades.

So when the table clears, I don't immediately follow my brothers, who get ready to leave for the two-hour ride back to New York.

My mother and father are staring each other down at either end of the table. My mother, with her eviscerating glare. My father, with his rising grin, as he loves every weapon she brandishes toward him.

Their silent matches fascinated me as a child. Eliot had me fooled into believing our parents could read each other's minds. I remember being six and debating Charlie on the merits of telepathy for *hours*. He grew more irritated with Eliot than he did with me.

"You fill her mind with nonsense to entertain yourself and to aggravate me," Charlie said.

"It's harmless, brother."

I release a soft sigh at the table. There weren't even simple teeny-tiny pokes like *that* tonight.

My mother drums her matte black nails on the table. "Audrey."

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I look up. "Yes?"

"What is wrong, gremlin?" She's the antithesis of warm. Her voice, eternal frost. I feel proud to have her as my mother—a woman who can freeze men with her words and burn them with her glares.

"It's childish," I note, then check the time. "I should go—"

"Wait, ma petite," my father says gently.

I remain seated and fold my hands on the table. He urges me to speak my mind, so with a deep breath, I admit, "I wish I'd spoken more about the man I'm dating, is all, but then I don't because if I really talked more about Guy tonight—I would've been antagonistic toward my brothers, and that is…childish." I wince. "But is being mature really this boring?"

"It can be *quite* fucking boring," my mother agrees, tossing her hair off her shoulder and reaching for her wine. "You don't always have to be on your best behavior. You're eighteen. Be diabolical. Crack open chests and rip out hearts."

"Your mother is being hyperbolic."

"Is my tongue in your mouth, Richard? Don't speak for me." She's set down her goblet to clean off a steak knife with a napkin.

I smile as my father grins.

He checks her out, very clearly. "If my tongue were in your mouth, Rose, you would know it."

"I would bite it off."

"You would enjoy it too much to try."

My mother swings the knife toward him, then loosely at me. "In front of your youngest daughter?"

"*Our* daughter."

Her smile appears, tight but happy. "Our daughter," she agrees.

I marvel at their back-and-forth. I remind them though, "I'm old enough that you can flirt openly and crudely. I would never gag in disgust. I never have." I go for my goblet of wine, but it's empty. I only had one glass.

I glance between my parents again. Their love is just so one-of-a-kind, isn't it? But I believe mine is out there, and possibly, I've found him this year.

Guy even went to Faust Boarding School for Young Boys in upstate New York. Just like my father. So I mention to him, "You have much in

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common with Guy. Boarding school. Raised by one parent. Being an only child."

"Oversized ego?" my mother asks.

"Very. In a good way."

I can't read their exchanged look—beyond it appearing serious.

But I add, "In the *most* attractive way, really. We have excellent banter." I am laying this on far too thick. "You'll see." I leave it at that.

"He's treating you well?" my mother asks me. "Because if he's not, your father will butcher him into tiny little pieces."

"Hyperbolic?" I ask my father.

"No. Just inaccurate. That will be your mother. I'll be the one ensuring she doesn't go to jail."

"Well, no knives are needed," I say. "He's been nothing but gentlemanly." They express a desire to meet him, and I assure them they will.

Typically, I'd be a little concerned someone like Guy was dating me solely for connections, but his dad being tied to Cobalt Inc. lessens the chance. He wouldn't need me for a career boost up the corporate ladder. Of course, dating me *does* help his ambitions, but I've felt he's had more interest in *me* than just my last name.

I rise from my chair. "And as I said at dinner, quiz bowl is my first priority. Dating, second. I have a tutoring session with Birdie in the morning, so I shouldn't dawdle." I confessed to my mother that I am, in fact, a liar. I lied about knowing music, so she's very aware I've needed supplemental help.

At least she's proud I haven't given up so easily. It makes me want to try even harder.

"How are things with him?" my father asks.

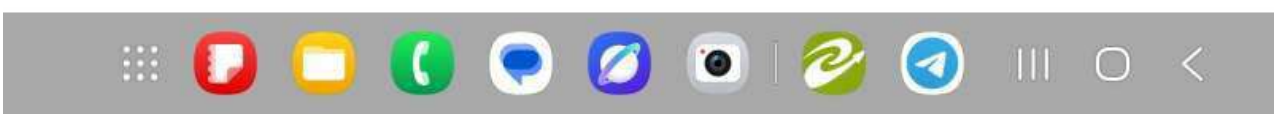
"Who?" I spin around, my cheeks heating a little.

He tips his head. "Your tutor. Phoenix's brother."

"Birdie," my mother finishes.

"Oh, right, he's..." I scoff, picturing him. "*Horrible.*" I can't help but remember how he drew an invisible line between us with his cello bow this morning.

He said, "Let's redefine this boundary, Virginia. What do you think it says?"



CamScanner

"It says, *Audrey likes redrawing imaginary lines into circles.* What do you think it says?"

"It says, *Girls like you should not cross this line to reach guys like me.*" He stared hard at me. "Understand?"

"No, you will have to elaborate. Girls like me? Guys like you?"

"You're very smart. You can fill in the blanks," he said.

"I cannot!" I shouted, aghast. "You must. Say what you mean, Birdie. Is it because I'm rich and you are…you are…" My cheeks heated.

He let out a rough laugh and stared even harder at me. "Middleclass isn't a dirty word, princess."

I gasped. "I did not mean—" I growled out in frustration, then collected my books, pressing them to my chest, breathing like I'd been chased around the room. "As if I'd even desire to redraw imaginary lines around you. I'd rather shoot an arrow between your eyes."

"Just don't miss."

The air strained between us as I realized I stepped on the imaginary line he'd drawn with his cello bow. "Same time tomorrow?" I asked.

He had trouble breaking my enflamed gaze. "Yep."

In my family's dining room, I inhale sharply recalling the exchange again. "Truly…horrible." I don't have the courage to meet my parents' eyes. I make a quick exit and even quicker goodbyes.



The car ride home, I expect more dullness. Tom sleeps stretched out on the limo-style seating of the SUV with headphones on.

Charlie and Ben are side-by-side—a rather strange but hopeful sight, seeing my two polar opposite brothers get along enough to share a seat across from me.

It's just the four of us since Eliot and Beckett had been unable to make the dinner due to work, and Phoenix and Harriet aren't invited to these clandestine Wednesday family affairs. I'm not so sure they care to attend—at least, Phoenix has said he doesn't "give a shit," and Harriet spends her Wednesday nights with him, so perhaps they don't mind after all.

Still, it seems rather cruel to bar them, but it's tradition.

CamScanner

As far as significant others go, only Jane's husband is allowed to attend.

Ben checks out the window as the scenery whizzes by. He looks happy. Is he happy? I've shared more with Ben than most everyone in my family. The love I have for him is a bit different from the love I have for my other siblings.

For some, Ben is like the sun, but for me, he's the earth. He's dug up weeds around me, always making sure no one picked on me at school, especially after my other brothers had all left. Gone to New York except for him. As the sixth-born, Ben was the last boy to leave.

I think I'd be floating in fantasy if it weren't for Ben grounding me to the world. Reminding me to get out of my head. He'd grab my hand and pull me outside where we'd go swimming in our backyard pool. I hated getting my hair wet, but he'd slide a raft over to me.

We'd chat for hours about everything and anything under the warm Philadelphia sun. Ben always asks about my life.

Always.

So it's very peculiar he has *yet* to ask me about Guy Abernathy. I know we've grown a little distant since the frat party his sophomore year, but I didn't think...I hoped not *that* distant.

Ben grins down at his phone. He's texting Harriet. I smile seeing his smile spread and his fingers move.

And then I think out loud, "Will you tell me if you plan to propose?"

Ben looks up at me. "Propose to Harriet?"

Charlie is already rolling his eyes at our conversation. He's digging in his pockets for AirPods, I think.

"Of course, Harriet," I say. "Have you thought about it at all?"

Ben seesaws his hand. "We're not really in a hurry, but you'd know if I were thinking of getting a ring." He must see my doubt because he emphasizes, "*You would.* I trust you wouldn't tell Harriet—"

"Never," I say quickly. "I can keep that secret. Rest assured."

Charlie has dug out *cigarettes.*

I cringe. "Charlie, can you not smoke? I don't want to have to wash my hair when I get home."

He aims an irritated glare at me, then shoves the cigarettes back into his pocket. "Can you hurry this unbearable conversation then? It's moving at a fucking snail's pace."

CamScanner

Ben blinks away a glare of his own, then tells me, "I'm ignoring Charlie."

"Me too. Ignored."

Charlie withholds a wisecrack, which just goes to show how *tame* tonight has been. But maybe that's a good thing.

Thankfully he doesn't retrieve his cigarettes.

Ben takes off his backward baseball cap, just to brush his fingers through his wavy hair. "You'd tell me how things are going with Guy? You really like him?"

"I really do." I nod quickly, perking up at Ben's sudden interest. "I've been waiting for you to ask me about him, actually."

"Sorry I haven't…" He trails off, staring at our feet, and then lifts his eyes to mine. "It hasn't been because I haven't wanted to know. Because I *really* want to know how things are with you and him."

Charlie has tensed, his eyes pinging from me to Ben.

"You haven't asked Guy anything?" I wonder.

"No, I'm not friends with Guy. I've texted him before, but I'm not going to ask him about my sister. That's a Pandora's box I'm *not* opening."

In high school, I had zero romantic interest in any of Ben's friends, so it's good this streak is continuing. I think it'll make it easier for him.

"You know what else?" I say to Ben, more hopeful. "This gives you greater reason to invite me to meet your friends, like Dylan Dorsey." I fan my hands out. "Follow my logic."

Ben laughs, smiling brightly, then nods. "Following."

Charlie looks like he wants to stick his head in an oven. So I tell him, "It is *sound* logic, Charlie."

"Unlikely."

I will show him. "So now that I'm dating Guy—"

"For six days," Charlie cuts in.

"Thank you for the time frame," I snap, then swat my hair off my shoulder. "Now that I've been *steadily* dating Guy, there is no chance one of your hockey teammates will try to hit on me for whatever reason. Whether it's to piss you off or for the challenge or…" I trail off as Ben processes this with furrowing brows.

Am I confusing him?

CamScanner

"I mean, I assumed you haven't wanted to introduce me to your college friends because of the frat. Maybe also because of high school. Lance Bailey."

Ben's jaw muscle tics at the mention of him.

He knew I very much disliked his hockey teammate in high school. It was the first time when I rejected a boy, the boy seemed to take the rejection as a challenge.

The whole situation frustrated me and my brother, and we'd commiserate together after school over vegan pizza bites and cookies. I would plot a fanciful retaliation in my spiral notebook, to which he would always entertain. Then he'd end with, "I'll take care of him."

Ben ended up fighting Lance on a soccer field.

To be clear, that was not a part of my plan.

I know Ben would blame himself if one of his MVU teammates hit on me and history were to repeat itself.

But now that I'm dating Guy...

Ben shakes his head, still processing. "No, I..." He sighs out a strained breath. "Okay, maybe I have been worried about it, honestly."

I knew it.

"It's not fair to you, Audrey, I know that," he adds, squeezing the brim of his ballcap between two hands. "But if you're around some of these guys, I'm scared I'll start visualizing the worst fucking things imaginable happening to you like the frat party...then I'd blame myself if anything went wrong again."

The frat party was a series of unfortunate events. None are Ben's fault.

Some are mine.

No matter how much I tell him this, he'll still blame himself. I've felt as though if I emotionally moved on—which I have, I *really* have—then there'd be no reason for Ben to emotionally cling to the past either. I'm fine.

I came out with no wounds, none that'd need healing, none that'd scar.

Ben keeps curving the brim of his hat. "I'd rather have you around my college friends when I know I can handle it, and I won't backslide. I'm not sure that's right now."

I know he's referring to his OCD. It won't tear us apart. *It won't.*

CamScanner

I tell him, "But again, why would anyone make a move on me when I'm dating someone? Logic."

Ben smiles. "Yeah, I don't think all that logically. Mostly irrationally, I've been told." He tries to make light of it.

I try to smile back, but I'm frowning, my brain moving at rapid speed to try to puzzle my way closer to my favorite brother. "We could give it a try?" I suggest. "A double date? Then meet your friends afterward?"

Ben slides his hands down his jaw. "You're not...you're not dating Guy just because you think it'll help me?"

"No, *no*." I sit straighter. "It's just an added benefit. I'd date him regardless." Since this is the first time he's brought up Guy, I stress, "It's serious between us. He could very well be the one."

Ben looks uneasy. He blows backward and scrapes both his hands through his hair.

I'm confused. "You've met him before. Don't you think he'd be perfect for me?"

He shakes his head. Then after what feels like eternity, he finally says, "No."

My shoulders sink. "Why not?"

"He's a grad student, the captain of quiz bowl, and he asked out his *freshman* teammate the first fucking chance he got—"

"It was the second chance."

Ben glares at the roof of the car and shakes his head at a thought—or maybe several thoughts. He lets one out. "He's way too old for you."

"You're the only one who thinks that." I spin to Charlie who is eviscerating Ben with a ruthless glare. Is Charlie on my side? Is that really possible?

Ben edges near me. "Of what I know about Guy, you are not even close to the first girl he's dated."

"I didn't expect to be, nor is that some sort of prerequisite. So how is that a problem?"

"You've barely been kissed, Audrey."

I breathe magma. "I've been kissed *plenty.* Just not well. Not until *Guy.* And you would deny me what could be the greatest experience of my life? The greatest love of my life?"

Ben crashes back into the seat. "You *just* met him."

CamScanner

"And? You all need to accept that little sisters have boyfriends!"

Tom startles out of sleep. "What the hell?" He tugs his headphones to his neck.

"I will have a boyfriend one day," I tell Tom emphatically.

"Audrey Virginia," he groans. "Why am I being woken up with nightmare fuel?" He looks over at our brothers. "Ben Pirrip?"

Ben is rubbing his face. "Sorry. No, I have to fucking say it—"

"Do not," Charlie warns.

"What's wrong with dating another freshman?" Ben asks me.

"Oh fuck," Tom mutters, then sits up fully to watch the fireworks explode out of my ears.

"I don't want to date another freshman. Things fell into place *this way*. With Guy. It feels..." I search for the word. "It feels *right*." I nod strongly. "Why isn't that enough?" I wait for his rebuttal, but he has none. So I add, "Guy checkmarks all the boxes, and you should be glad he treats me so well, Ben. Just give him a chance. You'll see he's perfect for me."

Ben tries to nod, but his neck is too stiff. He finally turns to Charlie.

"Six days," Charlie says to him. "You lost in six days."

"Shut up, Charlie."

"Tell Harriet to start setting her alarm for three a.m."

I'm utterly baffled. Until they come clean about their game that Ben just lost. It turns out Ben isn't the only one who thinks I shouldn't be with Guy.

All my brothers disapprove to varying degrees, it seems, and they swore to withhold their opinions. I've known they wouldn't welcome any man I'm dating so easily. Most especially someone around Eliot's age.

But I'm certain I'm meant to be with Guy.

We're supposed to be together. It just fits, him and me.

CamScanner

20

BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

My face contorts as I stare at a tissue-paper lined box of cookies. "What are these?" I ask Audrey.

She's settling into the black metal chair like she's done for the past two weeks. It's 5:30 a.m.

What started out as us being ten minutes early became fifteen minutes early and has quickly turned into thirty minutes before six.

I'm selectively competitive. Like middle school advanced orchestra, when I was ranked first chair after placement auditions—then out of nowhere, I got demoted because some affluent parent complained about little Liam not being number one. I fought so hard to reclaim that seat. Practiced Bach's *Cello Suite No. 6 in D Major* every day for hours and hours. My fingers felt like they'd fall off. I did it, though, and that was the first time I heard someone use the word "savant"—which did not make sense to me at the time.

I toiled. I tried. How could I be *gifted* when gifts are handed? It was only later I understood that no middle schooler can play *Cello Suite No. 6*.

At least not perfectly like I did.

So I'm starting to feel myself turn into that middle schooler with the fire beneath his ass. I don't want to show up a minute behind her, especially not after the one time I was sixteen minutes late.

Every morning, the clock inches backward, so it's clear she's just as competitive as me.

Her ankles crossed, a Prada bookbag instead of her tote is at her side. "They're sugar cookies with buttercream frosting." She splays her glossy orange hair over one shoulder, then retrieves her laptop.

CamScanner

I glance down at the cookie. Does she not find this...inappropriate? "I'm not talking about the flavor profile, Virginia." I pluck out a *heart-shaped* cookie, perfectly coated with light green frosting and piped with a tiny pink heart in the center.

"Have you never seen a Valentine's cookie before?" she wonders.

"No, never. I just escaped from a prehistoric cave where I was rubbing two sticks together and scratching at the walls."

"To file your nails or because you went mad?"

"Mad, mad, mad," I say, eyeing her, how she's hardly faltering—the confidence of this girl is going to be my undoing. "Why green frosting?"

"Two reasons." She opens the laptop. "One, they represent your Grinch-like shrunken heart."

"As if you've ever been within range of my fucking heart to know its size."

"And *two*." Her voice is all fire. "Green is your favorite color."

A soft laugh escapes me. "What?"

Her lips upturn, way too victorious over something so minuscule. "I'm sure of it."

My body feels strange. Heady, floaty. My tongue wets my dry lips. I swallow, shaking my head slowly. "How?"

"The backpack you always carry is olive-green. You have three highlighters, but you've used the green more than the yellow and blue. And while your phone case is black—yesterday, when you popped it off to clean the scone crumbs from its creases, I saw your actual phone is green. Therefore, you love green."

I release a breath. "You got me. You know my favorite color." I raise the cookie. "Forget I hate pink?" She dotted the center with a pink heart.

"That is your tiny heart, which needs to enlarge to love the color pink."

"That will never happen. You know what's associated with pink?"

"Me," she notes.

I laugh harder. "À part toi, espèce de gamine arrogante." *Besides you, you arrogant brat.*

"What could be more important than me?" she challenges. "Dis-moi, espèce de barbare." *Tell me, you barbarian.*

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I can't look away from her. "Éternellement exigeante." *Eternally demanding.*

"Éternellement." Her voice is softer, gentle. *Eternally.*

Repeat that, I think.

I need to hear her say *éternellement* in that breathy tone again, but I can't figure out how to prod her to repeat it without flat-out asking, and I'm not—I can't.

Not with her.

So I tell her, "Pepto-Bismol. The thing you suck down to stop from barfing is a disgusting *pink*."

Her pointed glare falters at the edges. Her smile crests into a laugh. "I could make Pepto look cute."

"*Or* pink is just fucking ugly."

Her glare has returned. "That's not a good defense."

"Neither is *I'm associated with pink, therefore it's the prettiest color.*"

"I disagree. That is rather factual."

I want to debate her for another five minutes to prove my point, but we shouldn't cut too hard-core into her study time. The Princeton Invitational is only two weeks from today. I stick the cookie between my teeth, freeing my hands to unzip my cello case.

My eyes flick up just once, and I catch her staring at my movements. I'm used to being watched as a performer, but I can't say I've ever held on to the feeling. Cello between my legs, I think about shooing her, but I don't let go of her inquisitive blue eyes that roam and caress and nudge and dig against all of me.

She's both soft and sharp, hushed and raucous. All at once. All together.

It makes no sense.

She makes no sense.

I don't want her to make sense. Some people shouldn't be unfolded into a singular note. Some people should sound as complex as a thousand-piece symphony.

When did she become some people?

I reach for my bow, chewing the big bite of Grinch cookie slowly.

"And?" she asks.

I swallow, the back of my neck hot. "And what?"

Her eyes drip down me. "Too soft?"

CamScanner

My chest falls and rises behind my instrument. For the first time ever, I understand the real feeling of the word *tongue-tied.* I try to open my mouth.

She gasps, which jolts me. "Was it underbaked? No, it couldn't have been." She looks momentarily horrified. "I haven't underbaked a cookie in ages. What's wrong with it?"

It's exactly how it should be.

It's perfect for me.

I shake the asinine thoughts away. "It's great, Virginia. No notes."

"You have to have some notes."

"No pink frosting next time."

She begins to smile. "You still ate it, Haydn."

"I was starving."

"So you always say." She makes a triumphant little noise, so haughty, and I force my eyes to roll to ignore the red-hot heat pouring through my body.

While Audrey buries her nose in the laptop, I wash down the cookie with my water. I've lost track of my tutoring hours, but my bank account has benefited considerably.

I still haven't told her *why* I need the money.

I'm not sure I'm ever going to until I have enough. It's not even that I don't trust her to keep it to herself. It's that I'm more afraid of letting her in that deep.

"A flute is generally monophonic?" she suddenly asks, bringing me back to focus.

"Correct. Whereas the cello can be monophonic and polyphonic." I demonstrate by playing one note. "Mono." Then I play two notes at the same time. "Poly."

"I see." She fixes the gold heart clip in her hair while eyeing the laptop screen. Her ivory sweater and red skirt scream *Valentine's*, but not more than the tiny black hearts stitched in her tights. Is that what she's wearing on her date with Guy? Does she have a date with him tonight? It'd be more shocking if they didn't have something planned.

"Do you know Hildegard of Bingen?" she asks.

I blink. *Breathe.* "She's a legend," I tell Audrey with a tight nod. "She's one of the earliest known composers. Which is pretty badass

CamScanner

since traditionally there haven't been many women in the field, most especially that early in history."

"How early?"

"Aren't you looking at her bio?"

Her cheeks go rosy beyond the soft pink blush. "It's sparse."

I let out a laugh. "I did not take you for a bad liar."

"I'm very decent at lying," she says with the raise of her chin. "Just not up to par with some of my siblings." Her eyes settle more tenderly on me. "I like quizzing you as much as being quizzed. The back-and-forth helps me retain more."

I nod a few times. "Twelfth century," I answer her question. "Medieval. That's all I know. What's the actual year?"

She checks the computer. "As early as 1151." Her finger taps the keyboard, and a song plays off the laptop. Hildegard was a nun, and her music was predominantly composed as plainchant, usually monophonic, so I can see the rabbit hole Audrey just dove down to reach this ethereal, haunting melody.

I'm seated, and yet the music sweeps me toward her. Inches close. Too close.

I watch her absorb the notes. Powerful breath elevates her carriage. Her gaze is faraway, as if she's being transported to a medieval monastery, as if she'd like to live there for this moment, this second, this hour.

"It's beautiful," she murmurs. "Don't you think?" Her gaze lifts to mine expectantly.

Like my opinion is the only one that matters in this moment, this second, this hour.

Yes. "Turn it off," I choke out, then clear my throat. "*Audrey*."

She stops the music. "Are you all right?"

I take a harsh swig of water. Then another. "Yeah. Fine."

"You're not a great liar yourself."

I grit my teeth, staring at the ground and trying to snap out of this feeling. I don't know what it is—other than I know it's bad that I'm feeling it.

"Birdie? Did I do something—?"

"You're fine, Virginia," I cut in fast. "All good." My gaze lands on the Grinch cookies I set beside my backpack. I exhale, then place my water

CamScanner

bottle on the floor and return to my cello. “So what’d you make your boyfriend?”

“Pardon?” She straightens like I electrocuted her.

I raise my brows. “What’d you *bake* Guy? For Valentine’s?”

“Firstly, he’s not a boyfriend yet. We haven’t been dating long enough. The official titles will come closer to the three-month mark.” She says it like she’s experienced this all before, and she would easily fool me here—if I didn’t know she’s *never* had a boyfriend before.

“Secondly,” she says. “I made him red velvet cookies. He said red velvet is his favorite.”

My laugh sounds sharper. “Didn’t even have to form a hypothesis and test your theories to figure that out, huh? He just gave it to you?”

“Some men are easy that way,” she says, defiant and hot. *Too fucking hot.* “Others more difficult, incorrigible, heart-shrunken.”

“I’m sorry my heart isn’t on a silver platter for you to consume, princess.”

“I’m sorry you think I want it on a silver platter when I’d be perfectly fine crushing it in my hand.”

I grind my molars, but this feeling will not go away. I rip my gaze off hers to cool off. *Do not keep going with her. I can’t keep going in this direction.* “Let’s talk Strauss.” I nod to her laptop. “What do you want to know?”

She shuts her computer. “What are your Valentine’s plans?”

“Talking about Strauss with you.”

“After that. Tonight.”

“Are we doing this?” I ask her. “You have how many minutes left?” And I should be practicing for the International Stravinsky Competition, but I really don’t want to do that more than I just want to be here…with her.

“There are more than enough minutes for this,” she says with certainty. “What are your plans, Haydn?”

I move my head back and forth, staring off because I can’t remember the last time I didn’t have Valentine’s Day plans. If I wasn’t on tour with Nothing Personal, I’d have a gig with the Symphony or a chamber orchestra. Valentine’s is a big day at the ballet and opera. I’m never *free.*

CamScanner

And yet...somehow, some weird way, I've found myself available this February 14.

I hate it.

Because I've never been unoccupied on *this* day to think about how I'm relationship-avoidant and alone. What makes it worse: The Carraways World Tour just kicked off. Every weekend, Phoenix will be flying to a new city thousands of miles away. Tonight, my brother is in London making sweet love and Grammy-winning rock music with his boyfriend.

A Valentine's hookup would be on the menu for me, but I can't even think about getting laid after the meltdown I had in Bushwick earlier this week.

Do not want a repeat of that.

I look back at Audrey and just say, "I have a date."

She goes very still. "With whom?"

"My book and my bed."

Her brows spring. "What book?"

No. I shake my head at her. "Time is running out, Virginia."

"I'll just make more time so it never will."

I don't ask how that's possible. She's already been putting more sand in the hourglass, arriving earlier and earlier to be tutored. I swallow down this rising lump in my throat. "What's your Valentine's plans tonight?"

"They're quite big."

I bet.

Still haven't met him, but I'm sure Guy has the money to go all-out in every way she's dreamed. "How big are we talking?" I ask. "Like private-jet big? Fly you to Paris? Buy chaussons aux pommes from a boulangerie and have a picnic in the Bois de Vincennes?"

"That's awfully specific." She assesses me. "Is that your ideal date? Stroll through the lush gardens of the Bois de Vincennes before sharing apple turnovers?"

"No, I'm a *barbarian*—I want to stick my feet in the mud and howl."

She humphs, arms threading. "Not to pop your dream date, but it's a bit too cold for a picnic."

"Not my dream. I've stopped making ones that I know can't come true." I catch the fall of her lips—and before she has time to feel pity, I

CamScanner

add, “Take you to a five-course dinner big?”

“Lose my virginity big.”

I can’t breathe. It’s the last thing I expected to hear. “What?”

“I’m losing my virginity tonight.” She doesn’t meet my eyes when she says it the second time. She’s reopened her laptop. “I’ve always imagined it’d be on a significant day that I’d always remember, never forget, and nothing is as romantic as Valentine’s. The rose petals. The candles.” She smiles to herself, and why are my insides crushing like I’m under a trash compactor?

Why the fuck am I comparing myself to garbage?

I fight past this agonized sensation to say something. “You’re *planning* how you’re losing your virginity?”

“So it goes perfectly to plan, yes.”

I widen my eyes. “And you think *that’s* romantic?”

She glares. “Was your *unplanned* first time romantic?”

I laugh to myself now and rub the inside of my eye. “First time with a girl or guy?”

Audrey appears more curious. So I elaborate, “I’m not bi.”

“Pan?”

“No, I just am. I’m Birdie,” I say more quietly. “My sexuality isn’t defined with a word. It never has been. Probably never will be.”

Her lips inch in the start of a bright smile. It’s too bright. I look away and try to exhale. “Audrey—”

“I like this about you.”

Fuck. “*I can tell*,” I emphasize. “Do not compliment me. I don’t want to be complimented by you.”

“Fine,” she snaps, then rolls her eyes. “Be insulted then. Your *unplanned* deflowerments couldn’t have been enjoyable because you’ve yet to express that they were, so therefore, you have no right to judge the *planned* loss of mine.”

I follow her cadence and logic so quickly.

I’m afraid at how well I can keep up with her.

I’m gripping my fretboard so tightly, the strings dig painfully into my fingertips. I don’t let up. I can’t loosen my joints.

She deserves to have every romantic fantasy come true, and I’m not the man who can make it happen.

I never will be.

CamScanner

It's one of the countless reasons why I can never be with this girl.

"Go get your world rocked, Virginia. I sincerely hope he's everything you ever wanted."

CamScanner

21

AUDREY COBALT

Rain drizzles against the windowpanes of Guy's study. Moody and romantic, this night has the makings to be the best Valentine's I've ever had. Starting with the bouquet of pink roses he hands me when I first arrive. Then the intimate dinner: a table for two in my favorite room of his apartment. The white tablecloth and several lit candlesticks. The effort he's taken to make this special for us.

My request fulfilled: sushi takeout. We're already done sharing nigiri and sashimi and have moved on to dessert.

I'm more interested in my company than the cheesecake, and not just because it's the driest, densest cheesecake I've ever had—but that certainly doesn't help.

Guy speaks about his time in Manhattan, being raised by a hard-working single father. He had independence at such an early age, he can't remember a point when he wasn't let loose around the city.

I force myself not to blurt out Beckett's name—I'd want to introduce Guy to him first before bringing up my most private brother. But talk of being in the city, free to do as you please, reminds me of my two oldest brothers.

Charlie and Beckett moved here when they were sixteen.

Sometimes I wonder if that's partially why joining them in New York earlier than I intended had a greater appeal. I want to know that I can do everything they did when they were my age. That no city is too perilous or too big for me—just like it wasn't for them.

"If you could, would you want a sibling?" I ask him. "Being an only child sounds awfully lonesome, but I don't know any different than having five brothers and an older sister."

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"I wouldn't change a thing," Guy says, cupping his glass of Chardonnay. "If you could, which sibling would you want to get rid of?"

"None."

His smile hooks the corner of his mouth. "Not *literally,* Audrey. I just figure one of them must've gotten on your nerves as a child."

"Even so," I say, "I would rather be burned on a funeral pyre than lose a single one."

"Rather than survive?"

"Survival doesn't carry the same meaning if all my siblings aren't surviving too. It'd be more like existing painfully."

Guy furrows his brows. "Surviving is a painful existence."

"On the contrary—"

"Semantics," he interjects casually after a sip of wine. "It's not important to argue over." He asks if I need more wine. I tell him I'm content. He's always thoughtful, ensuring I'm warm and sated. I've also liked how he has a big ego and takes charge but will yield to me when I voice my opinion.

It's exactly the kind of man I knew I'd fall for.

We share a smile across the table. Then he says, "Speaking of your siblings, I'm surprised I haven't run into Ben on campus yet."

The fact that none of my brothers have reached out to Guy and given him the third-degree—even after the minor blowup on the car ride—is a welcome surprise to me. My brothers are respecting my decisions instead of overturning them.

It feels as if they'll come around to Guy after all. At the very least, they'll give him a chance.

He places his wine down and adds, "I've been preparing for the full-court press from your brothers now that they know we're dating."

"You might be able to hold your own, but it's not something you should actively wish for."

"I'm not scared." He radiates confidence, even in his relaxed posture: his hands now in the pockets of his navy-blue slacks, his white button-down molding his fit build.

I flush a little, especially the longer his unbashful eyes voyage along my chest. He drinks in the teardrop diamond dripping between my breasts. From the second he took off my pink trench coat, Guy has con-

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sumed the curves of my body—all displayed in a silhouette-clinging silk black slip dress, the straps thin and crisscrossing against my back.

It's much sultrier and sexier than anything I've ever worn out before, but if there was ever a time for this silk slip dress, it'd be *this* Valentine's date.

I study his brazen, lingering glances, and my breath shallows.

"You're doing well, freshman." He hasn't lifted his eyes off my perked nipples pressing against the silk. Not until he says, "Wilcox is slowly coming around to you after the last practice."

"He'll believe in me more when I lead us to victory at Princeton." I sink my fork into the thick cheesecake.

"Did you play an instrument when you were younger?"

"Hmm?" *Do not startle.*

This is the first time Guy has pried into the origins of my music comprehension. I'm *not* confessing to lying at the tryouts. Not now. Not tonight.

"You have a vast knowledge of the cello. So I wondered if you played or maybe one of your brothers—"

"No," I cut in, trying not to flush. "Just an interest of mine. But I'm also knowledgeable about the violin, flute, lyre, harp."

He smooths a hand through his styled hair. "I'm not trying to quiz you at dinner, Audrey."

"But you can," I challenge, setting down my fork with the chunk of cheesecake still attached. "Give me your hardest, Guy Abernathy."

His slanted smile widens. "I will, but it won't be over music." He drinks in my feminine shape. "You ready for me?"

I nod on impulse. "Je suis prête." *I'm ready.*

"Open your legs."

Breath traps in my throat, and I spread my legs under the table, my dress riding higher on my thighs. He doesn't look below the table. His eyes remain fixed on mine, and mine combat his—I am not a mouse.

I am a man-eating cat.

"Take your panties off," Guy says without shifting from his casual posture. It's a hot command.

I reach beneath my dress, but as I finger the lace of my panties—for one solitary, treacherous second, I picture Birdie. I see him behind his

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cello, the bob of his throat as he glances over at me. The incredulous laughs and pointed raise of his brows and shakes of his head.

I hear him asking me, "You think this is romantic?"

Yes, I want to shout. *Yes, it is.* I'm falling for Guy. I've been falling for him, and Birdie—*Birdie doesn't want me.* He made that so clear this morning.

And I have too much pride to chase after someone who doesn't desire every single inch of who I am.

I place my panties on my chair, then I stand before Guy instructs me to. Unclasping a gold clip in my hair, I shake out the fiery strands. My heart pounds out of my chest. He meets me in the middle of the study with a dark look of desire.

The next moments dizzy me. Guy's forceful, ravenous kisses lead me into the bedroom. He fists my hair and drives his tongue deeper in my mouth. His hand skates up my hip, and I cling to his shoulders.

In his room, he orders, "Get on the bed." He's unbuttoning his shirt.

"You first," I tease against his lips.

Then he picks me up at the waist and throws me. Oxygen jettisons from my lungs the minute I bounce on his periwinkle-blue comforter. *I liked that.* Right? I'm sure I did.

I've imagined being manhandled a thousand and one times. It's just more shocking, I suppose. To feel a man's strength in this moment.

Good shocking.

Good shocking.

I prop up on the flats of my hands, red rose petals scattering his bed. I smile, my eyes grazing the wax-dripping candles he lit around his clean bedroom. The furniture modern and sleek. It smells of cinnamon and orange.

I love it. I love *this.*

My pulse hasn't slowed. Anticipation mounts. Naked and hard, Guy climbs on the bed, but he gives me such little time to really take him in—and I could ask for a pause, but I just think, *I want this.* It's what I've wanted. A relentless, untamed fucking. I will like it, surely, because I really like him.

He pins my wrists to the point of pain above my head. I wrestle against him a little, but he just holds tighter, able to restrain my two

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hands with only one of his. I'll like it more in the heat of the moment. We're just beginning.

He whispers against my ear, "I'm going to fucking ruin you."

"Not if I ruin you first," I contest.

He kisses me, and my breath feels perpetually lodged in my lungs. Unable to flow out of my throat. Then his cock is inside me—it happens like a hammer banging a nail. Just like that. No warning, too hard, too deep. I shelter a pained response, but I'm stiff as a board. I don't say much other than, "Go slower."

He goes slower for me. Possibly it'll get better.

Possibly this is not the most terrible sex I'll ever have.

Possibly...possibly...possibly.

He folds his hand over my mouth, his fingertips digging into my cheek. I don't shove him off me. It'll get better.

And what's the point?

It can't get any worse now.



My thoughts clog my brain, leaving me petrified with indecision when I'm usually so decisive. I never imagined I'd wish for my first time to end—that I'd hope it'd be over in seconds and not last long excruciating minutes.

How romantic.

I'm numb, afraid to confront any thought other than, *I would like to leave. How do I leave?*

Beneath his sheets, I listen to the rain pattering, letting the gentle noise calm my pulse. Guy relaxes against the headboard, lighting a cigarette between his lips.

I frown. "You smoke?"

Guy blows a gray cloud up at the ceiling. Then he tips a smile at me, the little secretive ones I found flirty and charming. Now, it roils my stomach. "Recreationally." He extends the cigarette out to me. "I prefer pot, but I get drug tested at my internship."

I reject the offer to share his cigarette, detesting the stench.

After another drag, Guy tells me, "Why don't you go to the bathroom? Clean yourself up."

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Clean…myself…up.

Such a sterile response. It drives a brutal pain in my heart, but it also sharpens my feelings into greater clarity.

I gather my dress off the foot of the bed. I slip the silk fabric over my tenderized body. Just as I begin to scoot away, he seizes my forearm, and my pulse jackknives until he simply places a kiss on my cheek.

Stop overreacting, Audrey.

I force a smile, then I dart away as quickly as I can. Which…isn't nearly as quickly as I'd like. The pain in my limbs and between my legs is nothing I've ever experienced before.

Back in his study, I snatch my panties off the chair. I silently wince as I slip them on. *You can handle this. You can handle anything.*

What I find in the kitchen is a harsh smack to the face. The red velvet cookies—the dozen I baked him after I disliked the consistency of the first two failed batches—lie untouched on the plate I brought over. He said he ate *two* and loved them.

My chin tries to quiver.

Do not fucking cry.

My eyes flame. I fit my arms through my coat, and I knot the strap tightly at my waist. With my pearl-detailed clutch purse and phone in hand, I dial my best friend.

It's midnight, and she answers on the second ring. "Hey—"

"Girl Squad Assemble," I whisper.

"Put me on speaker." She understands our childhood code, most especially since she reminded me to use it tonight if things "got fucked" and I needed a quick escape. I hushed her cynicism, saying there was such a slim probability anything would go that awry.

Now I'm switching to speakerphone and raising my voice. "No, no, I'm coming." I rush toward Guy's bedroom, stalling at the doorframe. "I'm not leaving you alone, Kin."

Guy snuffs out his cigarette on a marble ashtray, seeing I'm dressed, but he freezes as Kinney blubbers over the phone, "I'm so fucking sorry, Audrey. I didn't want to ruin your Valentine's—but it's…I can't… it's awful…so fucking awful, and I really need you. I need my best friend." Her voice cracks.

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"Shhh, shh, it's okay, I'm coming." I mouth to Guy, *I'm so sorry.* "Send me your location, Kinney. I'll come find you."

I take her off speaker. "I have to go," I tell Guy, already prepared to rebut him if he says, *I can go with you.*

He doesn't offer to join me on a midnight rescue mission. Instead, he lights another cigarette, leisurely smoking. His definition of *power couple* differs greatly from mine.

"I'll call my driver for you," he says, then glances out at the dark, rainy landscape. "Traffic shouldn't be too bad."

"I have my driver," I remind him, pulling my hair out of my collar.

Guy comes over with his cigarette burning between two fingers. I try not to stiffen, but my eyes are on the floor so they don't betray me. He places a kiss to the top of my head, then my temple. "I'll call you tomorrow, baby."

I almost shrivel at *baby*, but I'm not loitering around just to reject it.

I get what I want now. I leave.

Victorious, I tell myself to stop from crying. *I am fucking victorious.*

Kinney is noticeably worried on the phone, but I tell her I'll be fine. "It's a hiccup is all," I say on the elevator to the lobby. "I'll explain tomorrow, I promise." My most dire usage of *Girl Squad Assemble* was when I needed a tampon at a Cobalt Inc. investment gala, and Winona came to the rescue.

So I'm sure this fact reassures her. "Text me when you're home safe."

"I will."

And I fully planned to return to my apartment in Hell's Kitchen, but I find myself wanting no traces of this night attached to me. I don't want my brothers to know at this second. I can't go home to Eliot. I don't call Hans, my driver, in case he tells Beckett. I dismiss my bodyguard, who'd been in the lobby of Guy's apartment playing Tetris on his phone.

Destiny—it's in my control.

I have this under control. Running to my parents isn't even an option I place on the table. It's not even that they're in Philly. It's that I'm a grown woman. I don't need my mother and father to dry my tears.

I don't let them fall anyway.

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Standing outside, I call a rideshare in the rain, and I put in the only address my brain comprehends. He said he would be home tonight.

Hopefully his Valentine's plans haven't changed.

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

It's a noisy night in Chelsea. The four walls of my bedroom shake from commotion outside. Commotion being the drunken chatter and laughter from bar-hopping Valentine's crowds at midnight. I haven't reached for my headphones, but I'm about fucking there.

I dig my shoulders into my pillow and fold my paperback in half to read the next page.

Then I tense. Was that a...?

I hear it again—what sounded like a *knock*.

I drop my book on my lap and sit up, holding my bent knees. It can't be one of my roommates. After hiring a new drummer, who I've heard is pretty good "but no St. Pierre," Nothing Personal has hit the road for their North American tour. Then they have a few shows in Europe after that. Scally, Steffi, and Neil won't be back until April.

With Phoenix in Europe this weekend, I'm the lone resident of this four-bedroom, one-bath.

My chest tightens at the two possibilities. It's either Freddie, my building manager, who could be inebriated and crashing out over our ancient hookup. Or it's Amara from 2B, pissed that I've blown off all her texts and calls—not that we ever got together. We made out in the stairwell *once* while our friends were taking smoke breaks.

I try to exhale the tension in my body.

The entrance door has a peep hole. I can at least check to see who I'm ignoring.

Quick, urgent knocks propel me to my feet. Already wearing gray cotton sweatpants, I just pull on a long-sleeved black Evanescence tee while I slip into the stretch of hallway. All the rooms—including the

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bath, kitchen, and living area—branch off this basic hall. It takes no time to reach the door.

I peer through the brass hole.

Hurriedly, I whip the chain off, turn the deadbolt, unlatch the secondary lock—I can't ever remember opening the door this fast.

I intake a sharp breath at the sight of Audrey, who stands unsure, expectant, relieved. All at once. Something raw plunges in my chest. She's sopping wet—the couple mornings on campus when it's rained, she found creative ways to protect her hair. I've seen her unfurl a Cosmo magazine over her head.

She didn't fucking care tonight? On Valentine's?

I know who she was with.

I'm unable to speak. My widened gaze is trapped on her bloodshot eyes. She opens her mouth to talk, but her voice is gone.

It wedges an agonizing barb in my ribs. I don't even care if it hurts to breathe, I motion her inside, careful not to touch her.

Audrey steps through the threshold, and I quickly lock the door behind her, sliding the chain back through. She eyes the long hallway. I can't recall if Phoenix ever invited her over, but he must've given her the address.

She twists back to me.

Speak, Bird. "What do you need?" I whisper, as if raising my voice any louder will hurt her. I don't know what happened, but I just know it wasn't good.

She sniffs the pink collar of her ankle-length coat, then sniffs a fistful of her soaked orange hair. "Do I stink?" she asks just as quietly.

"All I can smell is your perfume, Virginia." I watch her take another whiff. I've never seen her grimace like this. It's a step past revulsion. I wet my dry lips to say, "I have a shower. Hot water is working. I can get you dry clothes." I drop my voice to a softer register. "Ça te paraît bien…dis-moi?" *Does that sound okay to you…tell me?*

Her eyes try to meet mine, but they're too shy. "Oui… j'aimerais bien." *Yes…I'd like that.*

"You want me to take your coat? I'll hang it up to dry." The puddle of water at her high heels wets my bare feet. I would tread an open body of water for her right now—I don't fucking care about anything else. Just her. Only her.

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She nods stiffly, then hands me her purse. Pearls line the large envelope-shaped edges. Slowly, she unknots her trench coat at her hips—I'm about to look away, but her blue eyes have begun to anchor to mine, as if needing the connection to keep above water.

So I hold her gaze as it mortars and fractures and rebuilds itself over and over. Like a stone wall taking heavy artillery. This is so fucking far from what I wanted for her tonight.

Audrey tugs herself out of the sleeves. It's only when I drape her soaked coat over my arm that my eyes flicker down. My nose flares, jaw tics, because this fucker didn't deserve her. He didn't deserve to lay his two fucking eyeballs on her in this dress. The wet black fabric suctions to her hourglass frame, leaving nearly nothing to the imagination.

I confine my breath and force my gaze on hers.

She's unclipping her left diamond earring. So I open her purse. Audrey drops it inside, then the right earring. She struggles with the delicate gold chain of her necklace. Her frustration crinkles her brows and sharpens the air between her lips.

Quickly, I tuck her purse under my armpit. "Here. You want me…" My voice deadens. The abrupt emotion pooling in her eyes is a fist gripping my heart. She's not crying, but this restrained pain cuts deeper. My eyes start burning. I manage to move my lips. "You want me…" *Fuck.* She opens her mouth, nothing escapes. We're both fighting to articulate something we cannot reach. "You want me to—" *Come on, Bird.* I clear the knot in my scalding throat. "Turn around, Virginia. I've got you."

She nods quickly, repeatedly, tightly, constricted.

There is something about that movement I understand all too well.

Audrey rotates, audibly exhaling. *Good.* Spaghetti straps crisscross along her slender shoulder blades—her back, mostly bare skin.

She shifts her beautiful hair to one shoulder, then bunches the strands off her neck. I'm six-two. I think she's about five-seven. She's shorter than me even in heels, and it's easy to do this, despite the dainty chain's even daintier clasp.

Freckles dust her fair neck and the tops of her shoulders like fading paint splatter. I try not to get caught on the little details of her I haven't seen before. I blink through the hot burn in my eyes, still trying to be

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careful not to touch her, but my knuckles brush against her velvet-soft skin.

Hairs rise at her neck. I stiffen at the sound of her breath hitching.

I swallow hard. "Sorry," I murmur.

"It wasn't...you aren't...thank you," she says as the chain falls forward. I reach across her shoulder and drop the rest of the diamond necklace into her palm. She peeks over at me, more inquisitive, less hurt.

It almost eases me. "Bathroom is close. Second door on the right."

She points to the door only five feet away.

I nod. "That's it." I glance downward for a brief second, only to freeze on the droplets of blood splashing into the puddle at our feet. My widened eyes flash back up at her, seeing her horror, anger, and pain flare as she glances from the blood to me. As though she's only just now registering she's been bleeding.

"You're on your period?" I ask in one breath. *Hoping.*

She shakes her head, tight and fast. I can't watch her fight for breath.

So I ditch her coat and purse—and with one swift movement, I pick Audrey up, sliding my arms against her back and under her legs. I cradle her to my chest and carry her to the bathroom. No reluctance or regret. Not when she tucks closer to my body in quiet, fragile gratitude.

Using my foot, I shut the door. It's a tiny bathroom with too much pickle décor, thanks to Steffi. It's organized, thanks to Phoenix. Clean, thanks to everyone but Neil's fifteen inches of hair.

Audrey isn't studying the space. Her eyes are squeezed shut before they open into a wince. It shatters walls I've constructed around myself.

I take a staggered breath before asking, "You want on your feet or—"

"Yes," she inhales.

I set Audrey on the cold tile. Then I fling the shower curtain to one side and crouch, switching on the hot water. It gushes from the spigot. "I can run you a bath."

"I'd rather stand." Her voice steels, but it's also very, *very* hushed. I'm surprised I can hear her over the running water, the bar hoppers,

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and the restaurant chatter from Pasquale's downstairs, which is open until three a.m. tonight. *Fucking great.*

I rise.

Audrey hasn't moved.

So I take a knee at her feet and unbuckle her red high heel.

"You don't have to," she whispers, voice unsteady.

I look up at her. "I know. With you, I've had free will from the moment I agreed to be your tutor. Everything I'm doing is because I want to. Not because I have to."

Her reddened eyes start to well. I hear her deep breath. She wobbles as I remove her left high heel.

"You can hold on to me," I murmur.

Her hand instantly flies to my shoulder, her fingers clenching. "It's not what you think," she says tightly. "He didn't…he didn't rape me."

I unclasp her left heel. Relief teeters. Blood is trickling down her leg. "I can drive you to the hospital—"

"Did you not hear me?" Her voice pitches unnaturally. "And-and you can drive? You have a car?" Her eyes dart around me.

"Scally has a car. He left his keys in case I need it. And of course I have a license and can drive." *Why would she think…?* It hits me. "I'm not from New York," I remind her, since a lot of New Yorkers rely on trains and drivers, never needing a license. "I'm from Quincy, Mass. Transplant just like you, Philly girl."

Audrey opens her mouth, but her voice catches again.

I swallow another rock. More fucking worried about how much blood she's lost. I don't want to ask this—I don't want to lead her into thinking about it, but I'm too concerned not to say something. "Was there a lot on the bed?"

She startles. "A lot of…?"

"Blood. I think you've been bleeding consistently since you got here."

Her brows hike upward. "It's normal, Birdie." Her tone is mechanical, factual. "I'd never been penetrated before. My hymen was clearly intact. There's probably less on my…" She shifts her hands under her dress.

I'm knelt at her feet, and she's only wearing one high heel. Her balance is skilled as she seamlessly slips off lacy blush-pink panties. What

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should be closer to white is soaked crimson.

"It's fine." Her voice is stilted, and she's a statue. I pry the lacy strap from her immobile fingers. Staying on my knees, I toss the should-not-be-red panties in the trash bin by the toilet.

That much blood? I know every human body is different. Biology. But…

I try not to lose myself in a tortured thought pattern. If this was consensual sex—which I will believe her that it was—then it was rough enough to do some damage. Did he even get her off beforehand? Was she aroused at all? He just fucked her dry? A virgin, never been penetrated—has she even taken a finger? Two? Has she taken anything before his cock?

"Birdie?"

I'm staring unblinking at the floor. I shake out of it, my blistering eyes back on her.

She softens her grip on my shoulder. "I can't…I can't be certain about the bed. I didn't look."

She never looked at the bed?

The girl who absorbs her surroundings like she's putting together a two-thousand-piece puzzle for fun—that girl never looked at the bed to immortalize all the little details from the moment she'd planned for?

So many more questions blare in my head, an amp I can't turn down, but I struggle to ask a single one.

These questions feel like napalm, forcing her to verbally respond through noxious air, and I can't bear hurting her.

Carefully, I take off her other shoe. She balances, using my shoulder as support. Vapor steams the mirror and hovers above the ceiling, the shower still running behind us.

Her eyes track my movements as I stand up, her chin tilting to meet my gaze head-on. "So you see," she says in a too-tiny voice, "there's no reason for you to be so…" She touches her bare neck, then the spot close to her heart.

It hurts. "You think I would've only done all of this if you were raped? That I wouldn't offer you the same care if you came to me in this much distress? I might be a barbarian, but I hope to fucking God you don't think I'm a monster."

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Her eyes seem to travel to my core. “You wouldn’t be the one I ran to if I thought you were.”

I get choked up, because until now, I hadn’t considered that she has plenty of options—a battle-tested big family, best friends within it. She didn’t *have* to come here, but she wanted to…for whatever reason.

I sound hoarse as I say, “You need anything else before I get you some clothes?”

“You live with a girl?” she asks hopefully.

“Yeah, Steffi. Guitarist for Nothing Personal. Dating Neil, the bassist, for five years and counting.”

“Does she wear pads?”

Living on a tour bus with Steffani for months at a time, I do know this answer before I even squat down and open the cupboard. “She has some left.” I put them beside the sink.

“Thank you,” she says so deeply.

I nod. “That it?” I hear the strain in my voice as I near her, resisting every uncorked urge to touch her, draw her closer, burrow her into my chest. *That can’t happen.*

She nods quickly. “That’s enough for now.”

For now.

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23
BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

Audrey drags my rectangular brush through her hair for what might be the hundredth stroke. Every time I come back into the bathroom, she's combing her hair. I can't tell if this is something she always does or if this is out of the ordinary.

I've rubbed some fog off the mirror for her, but she faces me more than the sink. No makeup, her waterproof mascara scrubbed off, she looks eighteen. Delicate features, simultaneously fragile and fierce.

"Where's your cologne?" she asks after pulling the brush through her damp hair *again*.

I'm untwisting a bottle of Advil. "I'm shocked you think I wear cologne."

She peers down at the clean, dry clothes on her body. Out of the options I set out for her, she chose my long-sleeved Flyleaf shirt, boxer-briefs, black sweatpants, and socks. The tee hangs baggy and engulfs her frame. She triple knotted the sweatpants so they'd stop falling down her waist.

Bets I would've *never* made: Audrey Cobalt wearing my underwear. I hate the reason why she's in my clothes. But I don't exactly hate them on her.

"I smell more than just fabric softener." She abandons the hairbrush and bunches the too-big sleeves in her hands, pressing the fabric to her nose. "Tom Ford?"

I shake my head.

"Versace?"

"No," I almost laugh, doling out a couple pills in my palm. "I'm not spritzing my clean clothes with cologne, Virginia."

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"It has a subtle *you* scent," she counters. Her normal haughty spunk —that I can cop to missing tonight—rejuvenates a little here. *Glad to see it.* She narrows her eyes at mine. "And *you* wear cologne. I've smelled it on you." She is so certain that it catches me off guard.

"You've smelled my cologne?"

"From afar." She wraps herself up in my sleeves like it's a plush sweater. "It's strong and intense. The kind of overpowering that's not cloying, not sickening. It's the kind you'd want to smother yourself in." She has a small, content smile at the thought. "Like warm hazelnut. Nutmeg, maybe. And something lived in, clean, cedary." Flush stains her cheeks when she looks up at my expression. "You're shocked that I love your off-brand cologne, but I'm not as much of a snob as you think me to be."

My throat tries to close. I'm about to speak but she says, "Can I see the bottle?" She brings her hair up to her nose now, grimacing. "I still stink of cigarettes."

"You don't," I assure her. "You never did."

She holds out a fistful of damp hair for me to smell. "Please, can you?"

I'm already bridging the two feet separating us. Her blue eyes travel down all of me, then back up—the sudden rare closeness, that's become a lot less rare tonight, draws detonating tension in my muscles and her shoulders.

I keep my hands to myself, and I dip my head slowly, gradually, to Audrey. The breath she draws in is a molten rush through my body. My lips whisper against hair, my eyes threatening to close. Inhaling her scent is an instinct.

I do it without thinking. I feel my fingers curling into my palms, and I release the tension in my hands, spreading my fingers back out before I lean away.

"Not cigarettes," I say, voice too husky.

"You're sure?"

"*Positive*," I emphasize. "You smell like vanilla. And I smell the cherry blossom shampoo you used."

She sniffs her hair again, then cringes. "But beneath those scents, it's putrid. Like cigarettes and…" Her eyes enlarge on me.

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I'm unblinking. We're both staring at each other with the answer compressed between us.

Like *him.*

She still smells that fucking bastard on her.

My stomach would drop if I wasn't so tensed. I'm pretty sure no organ in my body can move anywhere. I'm made of concrete.

Audrey nods strongly to herself, drawing her shoulders back. "Your cologne will mask the scent. Problem solved. Where is it…?" she trails off, seeing my momentary gutted expression. "Are you out?"

I rake my fingers through my hair, then smack a hand to my side. "I don't wear cologne, Virginia."

She falters. "Pardon?"

"I haven't worn cologne since I was like thirteen." I walk past her stunned state to scavenge the cabinets. "I wear deodorant. You want this?" I hoist the stick.

She snatches it, her cheeks bright red. "You could've told me that *earlier.* Before I described your natural musk as…as…"

"Something you want to smother yourself in?"

She glares, but her lips tic up just a little. "As it turns out, the barbarian doesn't smell foul."

"The princess is still prissy."

"Thank you," she says with the prettiest smile. It's proud and pleased. I don't want it to go away, but inevitably, it fades. Especially when she moves and winces.

I place the Advil on the sink beside a water bottle I brought her. "If you want to spend the night, you can sleep in my bed. I'll crash in Phoenix's room."

She nods. "I just need to call one of my brothers." I learn she told them she'd be back late from her date. Late as in 1 a.m.—not when the sun rises in the morning. I doubt they knew the full extent of her plans with her quiz bowl captain.

Audrey isn't really in a state for an inquisition from her brothers, which might be a reason she came here in the first place. So we concoct a white lie.

She's here studying. She's worried about the Princeton Invitational. She sounds stressed enough on the call that Beckett isn't questioning

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the legitimacy of her story, and I assure him I'll get her back safe in the morning.

With that covered, she takes a fuller breath, then nods to herself. She puts on my deodorant and washes down the medicine quickly. Her footsteps out of the bathroom are teeny-tiny as she avoids breaking her legs apart.

My nose flares again, and I try not to ask myself, *how rough?*

I focus on her. My room is all the way down the fucking hall. So it's not even a question of what I'm going to do. I carry Audrey again, cradling her in my arms.

Her breath comes deep, then short. Just like before, she's not protesting. She curves her arm around my back, her fingers gripping my shirt tighter.

Only when I reach the door do I place her gently on her feet.

"This is your room?" she asks.

"Yeah." I grab the knob, then realize she's transfixed by the vintage poster taped to the outside of the door. It's the 1986 film *Aliens.* A gun-wielding Sigourney Weaver is protecting a child. The tagline reads: *This time it's war.*

Audrey's eyes brush me, then the poster. I'm not sure how long we're out here, how long she's cataloging the details.

I've never had someone stare at a poster I chose like it was a drawer into my soul. She's intense. This whole thing tonight is *intense.* And yet, I'm glad she's choosing to stay. I'm strangely okay with turning the knob and letting her inside.

Audrey sweeps her eyes around with a thoughtful slowness, as if being as careful with my room as I was with her.

Pressing my back to the closed door, I watch her examine the instruments propped against the wall, some hidden in their cases.

I point them out to her. "Violin, viola." She follows my finger as I draw a line toward each instrument. "Banjo, mandolin, concert flute, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, bass guitar, piccolo, oboe, clarinet, bongos." I point to my nightstand. "Irish flute, pan flute."

Her eyes flash to me. "You can play more instruments than you have here, so these are your favorites?"

"And what I can fit in my apartment. I store my cello in the living room." I study her. "Piano isn't too bad. It's not something I want to

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play late at night though."

"Why is that?" She drifts deeper inside.

I stay at the door. "Hard to explain."

She casts a single encouraging yet demanding look to try. I almost smile. And then I say, "It's not the sound I like falling asleep to, and it'll be in my head when I shut my eyes if it's the last thing I play."

Her lips rise so softly and slowly.

My lungs expand. Why does she appreciate this insignificant crumb of myself like it's a five-tiered cake?

I keep watching her. How she skims the backstage passes I nailed to the plain white wall, all from The Carraways tour last year. How she lingers on the album artwork from Nothing Personal's *Draconian*: a tunnel crumbling on a shattered, bleeding heart. How she takes in the various film posters: *Gladiator, The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, Hamnet, Interstellar, Jaws—*

"You like *Pride & Prejudice*?" She whirls back to me in surprise.

"I like the score."

She smiles all the same. The room isn't big enough for a dresser or bookcase. I attached some shelves to the wall, which currently house my beat-up collection of novels I've had since high school. She squints at the damaged spines, the titles indistinguishable.

"How many times have you read these?"

"I don't keep track, Virginia." I skim her. "You can take them out."

She tugs out *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, then *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin, *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, and she pauses on *To the Lighthouse.*

By Virginia Woolf.

Her glassy eyes lift to mine with questions.

I wet my lips to speak, but I struggle.

She inhales sharply, then says, "This one's your favorite of hers?"

I nod.

"So you've read more than just this one?"

"Not all her works, but yeah." I swallow. "I didn't know your parents named you Virginia after Virginia Woolf. Not until a few days ago. Phoenix told me."

She delicately slides the book back in its spot. I almost miss her whisper, "It's my favorite of hers too." Then her focus wanders over to

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my bed.

Just a mattress on the floor. Sure, the fern-green comforter isn't rumpled, sheets aren't balled up like I never make the bed, a checkered blanket is even folded at the end—but it's still a mattress on the floor with pillows mashed up against the wall. I've never cared how much shit I've gotten for it, but I'm rigid now. Because it's not good enough for her, not for tonight.

She needs a heaven-soft mattress set in the clouds.

Then I remember, "Phoenix has a Tempur-Pedic. If you'd rather sleep on it—"

"I'd rather stay here." Audrey eases herself on my bed and eagerly finds the book I'd abandoned when she arrived. "Your Valentine's date?" As soon as she opens it, the old pages break apart and fall out of the broken spine.

I laugh at her dropped jaw.

"This is hardly funny," she notes. "How were you holding this before?" Horror enlarges her eyes. "Don't tell me you fold your novels in half while you read."

"I fold my novels—"

She squeaks.

My brain is working overtime to figure out how to get her to make that noise again.

She's scrambling for the pages on my comforter. "I murdered it."

"The book is not a person. It will survive with a hot glue gun."

"You should really be using PVA glue for bookbinding. It's much better." She slips each page, one by one, back in their spot, and I watch her smile as she realizes, "You're reading *Little Women*." She gives me a knowing look. "Why?"

Maybe I missed Amy March.

Her eyes glint with uncertainty the longer I hold her gaze.

Maybe I'm torturing myself then and now.

I don't want her to like me, even if everything about Audrey is starting to feel like discovering an unheard rapturous sound.

"Yeah, you caught me, Virginia." I push off the door. "I'm obsessed with you."

She picks up my sarcasm. "Fine, but I am an *influence*, seeing as how we talked *Little Women*. It must've been on your mind." She pats

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the book shut like it's a good boy....or girl, then goes to place it on my nightstand. She freezes, then retracts her arms slowly.

Okay, it's not exactly a nightstand. It's an antique trunk from France, a family heirloom passed down to me. I'm only a foot from the bed when I realize she's not stalled out on the trunk.

Fuck. "Just because I only ate half of the Grinch cookie doesn't mean something's wrong with it. I just ate a big dinner. Shepherd's pie. Your cookie recipe is perfect. Don't freak."

She hasn't torn her eyes off the bitten cookie, my teeth marks in the green frosting. It rests on a napkin near my water bottle, phone, and pan flute.

My ribs suddenly clench. "Audrey?" Her name is a whisper off my lips.

She's balling the oversized sleeves in her hands. Her face contorts and recoils, finalizing on a sickened wince. "I just smell...I smell—"

I climb on the bed, lowering onto my knees, pulling her into my arms—she claws at my shirt, fisting the fabric. She's burying her face in me, closer and closer. I smother her in my chest, and with my arms snug around her, I'm shifting us on our sides, lying down. My leg hooks over her body, drawing her tighter to my chest, my limbs, my warmth, my smell.

I hear the *do not let go* in her severed breath.

It'd take more of a Herculean effort to rip her away from me right now. My arms are welded around her fossilized frame. Tension is calcifying her, not allowing her to move more than her fingers.

It's a breakdown that's trying to eliminate the word *down* and *break.*

My eyes burn again.

I don't know what to say. *You're okay* is a lie. *Shhh* isn't a comfort to me, so I don't know if it'd be to her.

I pray the physical act of being here is enough.

In this moment, all I want is to be enough for Audrey.



I FEEL HER PULSE SLOW AS THE MINUTES PASS, LYING TOGETHER, HOLDING HER against my body. She inhales deep through her nose again, again,

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again.

My muscles remain flexed. I'm afraid to adjust out of this position she likes. I just watch her. My brain backflips in relief when I hear more than just her breath.

"I was so prepared." She speaks hushed to my chest. Right against my heart. "I went in prepared for it. I knew it'd hurt." Her voice is so taut. "I wasn't…I wasn't naïve to the fact that it would hurt."

I can't blink.

But I put a gentle hand to the back of her head. My fingers slip into her orange hair with a featherlight touch.

Her glassy eyes draw slowly up to mine.

I whisper, "There are some things you can't prepare for, Virginia. Take it from someone who's prepared for many orchestral solos and rock shows, you can't prepare for who's in the audience or the other people onstage."

Her chin tries to tremble. We never look away from each other. Not as she says, "I believed I'd like it. I truly believed…I wanted to like it. So I didn't stop him." Her sharp breath pushes against my chest like a blade.

I swallow an acidic ball in my throat. "He should have stopped himself."

"I'm sure he thought I liked it…"

I stare deeper into her confused yet certain eyes. She's conflicted, trying to be so fucking sure of herself. Like the doubt creeping in will be fatal if endured.

She takes a breath to say, "He didn't know I was a virgin, Birdie. I didn't…I didn't want him to know. You might not understand, but I didn't want to be treated differently than if it'd been my millionth time. I wanted it how he…I wanted it…I believed I would."

My body is a cage, and I don't know if she should be inside steel bars in this second. But I can't loosen my hold of her.

She's scraping toward my expression, trying to understand me now. "What is it?"

"He knew, Audrey," I whisper. "The minute he looked down, it would've been a murder scene on his…" I clench my jaw. *He knew.* And he still fucked her like an animal.

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"He didn't mention it or ask if it'd been my first time, so I think... you must be wrong. He has to be unaware, and frankly, I don't ever want him to know he took my virginity." Her eyes are watery, tumultuous swells. "*I don't want him to know*."

I can't get past something that's nailing my lungs. What kind of guy fucks a girl and doesn't stop to question the blood on his dick if he thinks she's experienced? Why the hell would he keep going if he sees he might've hurt her?

Like she's processing the same thing, she reasons, "He likely thought it was menstrual blood."

"He's a fucking idiot," I mutter.

"I suppose I'd rather have slept with an idiot than a monster." She blinks, her lashes wet, and she presses her face into my chest. I hug her closer, listening as she steadies her tremoring breaths.

"You should try to sleep," I whisper. "I'll stay as long as you need me to."

She eases against me. The longer we're bound together, our breaths begin to sync. The rise and fall is a lullaby measured in a soft 3/4. It's the perfect sound to close your eyes to.

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AUDREY COBALT

I wake in the middle of the night to construction noise. Metal clanging metal. The sensation of knowing I'm in an odd, unfamiliar place—that this bed and pillow certainly aren't my own—never reaches me. I rouse so gently, so comfortably, as though I've slept here a thousand times before.

I draw in an overwhelmed breath at my first sight.

And my first sight is him.

He stayed.

I was hoping he wouldn't sneak away. He could've—I wouldn't have blamed him if he'd had enough of me. Gratitude surges quickly. I blink away the hazy film in my eyes.

Neither of us have moved much since we drifted off. His strong arm is still draped over my hips, his other bicep underneath his pillow as he sleeps toward me. Our noses a mere breath away.

Tonight is the closest I've ever been to Birdie St. Pierre.

My gaze wanders over him. Over the little pieces of his unruly hair that've fallen over his eyelids. Over the red birthmark on his neck that looks like gentle rolling clouds. Over the light stubble along his hard-cut jaw. Over his pierced pink bottom lip, pressed shut against his upper lip as he breathes soft, small breaths through his nose.

His stillness is tranquil.

Eye-wateringly beautiful.

So is it any wonder that feeling him with me through the night tugs me back into a heavy, nearly bewitched slumber? I dream.

I dream of a mystical woodland inside my family's ornate dining room, of Eliot playing Puck as our feet rumble the floor and our fists pound the table, of the enchanting words of *A Midsummer Night's*

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Dream whispering around me, of a love spell overturned—and when I wake in the morning, I hope it's true.

That my choices were that of an impish fairy and a spell-gone-wrong, the chaos of mismatched false love.

That as I wake all will be mended...and last night's misadventures will hold no power over me.

"And this weak and idle theme,

No more yielding but a dream."

I open my eyes to a morning-sunlit bedroom, lying on a fern-green comforter, a blanket pulled to my shoulders.

Birdie isn't on the mattress with me.

I frown deeply and roll over. *Too quickly.* I stifle a wince, feeling a hundred little papercuts inside a place where papercuts should *never* exist.

The pain dulls when I see him.

Birdie is at his closet. Standing with his back to me, he peels off his black shirt over his head, then pulls his arms from the long sleeves.

Delicate, wispy feathers, tattooed on his right shoulder blade, flutter down the muscled lines of his back. I can't stop my eyes from roaming or my heart from rising toward my throat.

The contrasting softness and hardness in him entrances me.

I trace each little inked feather from afar before I reach the two dimples above his low-riding gray sweatpants. My smile flushes my cheeks.

Birdie rotates slightly toward me, catching me awake. Our gazes fasten before I'm swept up in the tattoo on his chest—of a masculine angel drawing a bow, the tip of the arrow aimed at his heart.

He hikes his brows at me. "No one ever told you staring is rude?"

"If you'd like me to stop, all you have to do is say so." I stare challengingly at him.

He doesn't say so. But he does avert his gaze, to breathe, then tips his head back to me with a question in his eyes.

I suppose he's wondering what I'm thinking. "Dimples of Apollo." I sit up, keeping my thighs locked together. "You have them, two little dimples on your lower back like thumb prints, which is most interesting since you also have Apollo's belt. Ever heard of it?"

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"You're studying my muscles," he says like I'm a strange little creature on his bed.

Typically, this would rile me—and it does, but the fire in my core is one I beckon to grow stronger. *I like this.* How long have I truly liked this back-and-forth with him?

I raise my chin. "Yes, I am studying your *muscles*. Would you like to show and I will tell?"

He lets out a hard laugh, eyeing me more deeply. "Who are we teaching?"

"You."

"I know what Apollo's belt is." To humor me, maybe, he turns fully to face me. He's never allowed me this unobstructed view of him. Never given me such blatant permission to stare. I glide my eyes over his lean build, along the ridges of his abs.

Lower.

He points at his hips, and I try not to take an overt, sharp breath at the two tattoos I hadn't seen from this angle. Symmetrical thorny vines curve along his muscled hips, pointing toward his cock—the size of said cock more apparent through his sweats.

My body blazes.

"Eyes up higher," he says. "My dick isn't Apollo's belt."

I glare at his face.

He smiles a little. "It's the V-line, Virginia," he says straightforwardly, watching me. He tattooed his Apollo's belt—the V-cut of muscles running from his hip bones to his pubic bone.

"Correct." I nod. "A-minus."

"A-plus," he counters. "I got nothing wrong."

"I deducted for the snark."

He rolls his eyes, then scrunches his brows. "Who's the teacher here?"

"I'd like to think we're both the teacher and the student, as there's an awful lot in life to learn. One can't simply learn it all and teach it all. Knowledge is a fun give-and-take." With this, I gather the courage to stand up. *Ow, ow, ow*. I push down the sting and soreness between my legs while I approach Birdie.

His face has hardened to stony lines of seriousness. His steel-gray eyes unafraid to look directly into mine.

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It reminds me of how he'd been all last night. He never made me feel ashamed or like I'd been putting too much on him at one time. I…I genuinely believed he cared.

I still do.

He rakes a hand through his disheveled hair, then sets his palm on his waist. "From one to ten, Virginia," he says when I'm at the closet. "Where's your pain at?"

"Whatever number a couple Advil can cure." I watch him chuck his shirt in a laundry basket sitting below his hung clothes. "Do you know trochaic tetrameter?" I ask him.

"Isn't that a metrical pattern in poetry?" He motions to his closet before I can answer. "Pick out whatever you want to wear. You can take the first shower. I'll drive you back to your place."

He must catch my apprehension. He adds, "If you're ready."

I inhale a prepared breath. "Yes." *I am not a coward.* I peruse his closet, sliding aside his graphic tees. "You're right about trochaic tetrameter. It's sometimes used in Shakespeare instead of iambic pentameter. I was thinking about it this morning. The rhythm of the words."

Birdie contemplates with a faraway look. "Iambic, the stress is put on the last syllable. Like a rising speech. Pah-PUM, pah-PUM, pah-PUM. For trochaic, stress is on the first syllable. So the meter is a falling rhythm. PUM-pah, PUM-pah, PUM-pah."

"'By the pricking of my thumbs. Something wicked this way comes.'"

His lips inch up, hearing the rhythm of *Macbeth.*

I tell him, "Shakespeare used this pattern for the witches in *Macbeth* so they sounded eerie, unnatural, in comparison to the rest of the play. He also used trochaic for the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* For Puck's final speech."

"I haven't read or seen that one."

"Really?"

"You're really surprised by that?"

"You have the words 'play on' from *Twelfth Night* tattooed on your wrist. And your brother—"

"Yeah, Phoenix loves Shakespeare. Has read it all. I've read various sonnets and plays, seen some too, but not an expert, Virginia." He runs

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his fingers through his hair, but a faraway look takes root again. His eyes angle toward the ceiling.

I begin to smile. “Do you still hear it in your head?”

He releases a light breath, enough of a confirmation for me.

I’m radiating. “Did I teach you something new then?”

He has trouble not smiling back. I see how the corners of his lips twitch, then rise and rise against the strain. “I never claimed to know everything.” He shakes his head at me. “What are you doing?”

“Breathing in this triumphant feeling like it’s fresh morning grass.” I inhale deeply again, eyes shut. “I don’t think you know how much I needed this.” When I open my gaze on him, he says the words I’ve been chasing to reach.

“You aren’t a fool, Audrey.” It overwhelms me, but Birdie doesn’t let me linger on him. Not even as my eyes begin to well.

He goes to the door. “I’m going to grab us coffees across the street. How do you take yours?”

“Guess.”

I swear he smiles as he leaves.

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AUDREY COBALT

There is a lot going unsaid.

We're already in Birdie's friend's black Nissan, Birdie one-handing the wheel, and as he drives me to Hell's Kitchen, he hasn't asked any serious questions about what I plan to do next. With each glimpse over at me, I can feel him gauging the temperature of the water, so as not to boil me to death.

It's more considerate than I would've pegged him to be.

But I've gotten so much wrong about Birdie. If I threw a hundred darts at his picture, I believe only a handful landed.

Like his closet—even knowing he plays in a *professional* orchestra and he's worn button-downs with plaid shirts tied around his waist to our tutoring sessions, it didn't cross my mind that his closet would be crammed full of formalwear. Tailored slacks, suit jackets, tuxes.

I'm sporting one of his white button-downs, a black waistcoat (cinched tight), slacks, and a belt so my pants remain at my waist. I'm feeling more put-together, more myself.

And that's what I want. *Guy Abernathy took nothing from me.* Not my poise, not my courage, not my wit, not my...

I inhale a strained breath and stomp on the pink trench coat in the footwell. My black slip dress is rolled inside it.

Birdie casts a quick glance at me. "I can pull over and trash it in one of the *thousand* garbage cans we're passing." I've already rejected his offer back at his apartment.

"It needs to be incinerated."

"How?"

"I will find a way." I toss my hair off my shoulder.

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Birdie shakes his head to himself, then digs in a box of Cheerios wedged between the middle console and his thigh. After he *stuffs* a handful of cereal in his mouth, he picks fallen Cheerios off his lap and tosses them back like pills.

I don't know why I find this more endearing than disgusting.

He thumbs the corner of his mouth, peers over at a pedestrian—waits for them, even though they should *not* be crossing without a signal—and he speeds up again.

Without looking over at me, he asks, "My caveman tendencies making you nauseous?" He's been focused on this busy intersection. "Because I can pull over so you can puke."

"My hero," I murmur. It comes out with too much emotion, too choked. Flush warms my cheeks for the umpteenth time. I take a dainty sip of caramel macchiato and meet his eyes in the brief silence.

He swallows hard, then exhales roughly through his nose. "I'm not—"

"I know. You'd rather be insulted than complimented by me. But I am grateful." Birdie also bought me a toothbrush, citing he did not think I'd want to use his (correct), and a flaky almond croissant. "I can't hide that I am."

He wets his pierced bottom lip with his tongue, his muscles so constricted, and I think he mutters a husky, "Fuck," but he doesn't say much else.

The car is tense. I can't tell if it's of a sexual nature or not. *Likely not.* I seem to be the last person on Earth he'd want in that way. That hasn't changed. Nor should I want it to.

We're not even friends, really.

I take a tighter sip of macchiato.

My regular order is a classic vanilla latte, but the almond croissant *is* my go-to with a cup of coffee. As I dust crumbs off my squeezed-together thighs, it reminds me—"How much for all of this? I can pay for my share."

"You supply me with baked goods every morning. Consider us even."

"But you need the…" *Money.*

More tension spills into the car, especially as his fingers squeeze the wheel. He still hasn't confessed *why* he needs it, and if I thought after

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tonight, he'd tell me, I'm very wrong about Birdie. *Again.*

"I'm not hard-up for ten bucks," he says, rotating the wheel, then braking at the stop-and-go commuter traffic. "You don't need to pay me back."

"Fine." I watch him drive left-handed and swig his black iced coffee with his right. "You know who else drinks iced coffee in the cold?"

"My brother."

"Is that a St. Pierre trait?"

"I think it's more like a Boston trait." He hits the gas as cars move. "But I probably first tried it because of him." He glances over at me, contemplating something, then adds, "It's also why I hooked up with a guy for the first time. When Phoenix told me he was gay, I hadn't even considered *if* I could be attracted to more than just girls. So it made me curious. Then I fooled around with some dudes and liked it." He tries to peer over at me, but he's torn back to the traffic. "I'm still very attracted to girls, though—that has been *very* clear."

"Are you attracted to me?" I wonder.

Birdie's brows shoot upward, and he stares at the windshield, unblinking. "Ask me another question."

It wasn't a *no.* I subdue a soft smile. He even shifts the air vent toward him and lowers the A/C to a chilly 63.

"You look up to Phoenix?" I ask after a nibble of croissant.

"I do, and I don't. Phoenix is...he's just not someone to emulate in everything. He's so reckless, impatient, with zero filter—he's gotten into so many fights with our dad. He's made our mom cry about a hundred times, thinking he's going to end up in jail—which happened—or at the bottom of a ditch. He is the quote-unquote 'problem child' of the family."

My lips part while my mind reels.

Birdie glances over at me, the road, then me. "You thought that was me, didn't you?"

I swivel more toward him. "I just...well, I mean...yes? Yes, I did." I nod. "I'm sorry, but you exude bad boy energy."

A laugh escapes from his chest. "At least you admitted it." He doesn't sound too offended. "Ready for this reality check, Virginia?"

"Please, give it to me." I fully face him now.

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His Adam's apple bobs. He draws in a long breath through his nose. My body responds, tingling, warming.

He won't look at me as he says, "I am the second-born quote-unquote 'golden child' of the family. Never really fucked up in my life, except when I decided to join a rock band."

I frown. "How is that a fuck-up?"

"It's a fuck-up in my parents' eyes. They hated it."

"Is that why you quit the band?" I wonder. "To please them?"

"Going against what they want for me is like pushing against something immovable. It's easier to just let go and listen to them, so yeah, that's what I did. That's pretty much what I always do." He flicks the blinker at a red light.

I don't interject, not when I crave to know him, and it seems he has more to say.

He stares off at the traffic. "They're not bad people—my parents. They've always just wanted me and Phoenix to succeed and not have to hustle for a buck like they did to reach the orchestra."

I remember his parents play in the Boston Symphony Orchestra. His mom, viola. His dad, cello.

"They put us in the *best* music schools when we were kids, which gave us such a leg up at a young age. They refinanced their house to do it. Took out loans. They will *die* in Quincy, in that house they've leveraged up to their necks. They're trapped—they trapped themselves for us, so we could make something of ourselves. So when my dad sees me playing drums in a rock band someone else created—he takes it like a slap in the face. And there's a part of me that gets it."

"How so?"

"I was playing *drums* for Nothing Personal. It's Phoenix's specialization, and even if I were the guitarist in a band, I'm a professionally trained *cellist* who's mastered some of the most difficult concertos, sonatas, solo works. Yet I'm onstage playing the equivalent of Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'—which most anyone can master in their bedroom with YouTube and a couple hours. So the phrase 'wasted talent' is two wrong moves away from permanently attaching itself to me, and on top of that, my parents did everything so I wouldn't waste it. Again, *slap in the face.*"

CamScanner

I reach the bottom of my coffee, the caramel going down thickly at a thought. “Was Phoenix not afraid to make your parents angry when he joined my brother’s band?”

“He didn’t care. I wish I could have that level of ‘fuck off’ that he has. But I can’t.” Birdie shakes his head more roughly. “Really, they’re just happy he’s not eating ramen every night—and I’m not talking about from a restaurant. The standards for him were always lower. He’ll say it’s because he’s not as talented as me, but he’s an amazing percussionist. Better than me at timpani. I think he just pushed and pushed and pushed against them so much, they got tired and turned toward me.” Birdie glances in my direction. “He’s pushed for me too.”

“Phoenix?”

“Yeah.” Birdie puts a hand back on the wheel, traffic beginning to move again. “So while I will not emulate my brother, there is no one I love more than Phoenix. He’s my best friend. And I love giving him shit for just about everything. Including ending up with a *Cobalt*.”

I squeeze my eyes at him. “What do you have against my family?”

“I have something against the social elite.”

“Fair.” I lower my coffee into the cup holder. “And I’m not going to convince you that I’m not all the things you associate with high society, because I’m sure I fall into at least one or two.”

“Try ten or twelve.”

I humph.

His eyes dart over at me and linger.

“What is it?” I frown, confused.

“Your cadence—”

“Oh, now my huffs and puffs are too prissy?” I swat my hair at him. “I am what I am, Birdie.” I pick apart my breakfast. “Thank you for the croissant. It’s not half bad.” I savor a morsel of roasted almond and sweet frangipane filling. “Want a bite?” I extend the croissant, the bottom wrapped in paper.

With his eyes trained on the street, he reaches for the food—and he ends up grabbing my hand. He lets go like I’m a Venus flytrap.

“I don’t have *cooties*.” I glare.

He brakes harder at the next light. “If I thought that, do you think I’d eat a croissant you’ve already bitten into?”

“Prove it. Touch my hand.”

CamScanner

"You are—" he growls, then faces me more fully at the red light, and without hesitation, he wraps his large hand around my hand and lifts the croissant to his mouth. In a slow-moving beat, his eyes flit to mine before he sinks his teeth into the flaky outside.

He takes a regular-size bite but moves my hand away as he tears the bread with his teeth. I watch him use his tongue to pull it all into his mouth.

Oh, wow.

He thumbs the bit of cream at the corner of his mouth, then lifts his brows at me while he chews and swallows. "You going to say something or just gawk?"

I narrow my eyes. "And?"

"*And* it's not bad. What'd you think?"

"Not overly sticky or sugary, which I like."

"Same. They're pretty consistent too. I've had it before."

"You have?" I perk up. "Where from?"

"Café Noisette."

I pull out my phone. "Where is that?" He gives me the address, and I zoom in on the map. "I thought you said you were going across the street. This is *several* streets away from your apartment."

"Decided to go to the better place, and I wanted to get in a run anyway."

"You like to run?" I remember how he ran to the practice room the one time he was late, but I didn't think that'd been enjoyable.

"Outside, yeah. Treadmill, no."

I hate running. Signs of incompatibility. I will never be his 5K morning-running partner.

But all signs have led me to Guy—a terrible match in hindsight—so what can I take stock in anymore? How does someone truly know who they're meant to be with? Will I need to go through twenty more Abernathys to find true love?

The thought nearly makes me shudder.

I frown and check my phone. I click into a video Harriet texted at 3 a.m. to the NYC group chat—which consists of my five brothers, Phoenix, her, and me.

Harriet is edgy, blonde, and very short. So Ben's hockey sweatshirt hangs low on her body. It took her only one day to memorize the "Full

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Fathom Five" song, so each time she sends the group these videos, she's never needed to read from anything.

Their hotel room for Valentine's is a little dark, but I make out her scowl and slight laugh as she says, "Ben, don't mess me up."

He wolf-whistles.

She glares at the camera, but her pinched smile fights through as she recites, "'Full fathom five thy father lies; Of his bones are coral made; Those are pearls that were his eyes; Nothing of him that doth fade…'" It's adorable. They're adorable, and I'm so happy someone I love had a good Valentine's. Maybe I can absorb it through the airwaves.

Let it come find me.

I turn off the video, then snap a photo of the half-eaten croissant in front of the windshield, careful not to get my fingers in the shot. I type out a quick caption for Beckett's Instagram: *morning after #nybc*

Posted. Done.

It's not my best effort as my brother's social media manager, but given everything that's going on, at least I didn't skip today. Not that Beckett would care. He's told me repeatedly I can do the bare minimum, but that is just…not me.

I tuck my hair behind my ears.

"What the fuck," Birdie says, quiet, nearly breathless—like he's caging air.

I swing my head to him, expecting his interest to be ahead and not on *me*. But he's fighting to keep his eyes on my face first, traffic second.

Oh no. "Do I have frangipane on my face?" I feel at my lips for cream or crumbs, then search for a napkin.

"Pull down the visor." His demand sounds caught in his throat. He's waiting for me. "Audrey, stop looking at me and look at your face."

"Okay, okay." I quickly tug down the visor and swipe the mirror open.

"What is that on your cheek?" he asks.

I rub at the yellowish smudge, the skin tender. Tilting my head, I find more than one blemish…the start of bruising. I go very still, then peer over at Birdie.

His eyes grow wider on me. "Those are four fingerprints. Is his thumbprint on your other cheek?"

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I shut the mirror and shove up the visor. “It seems that way.”

Birdie is gripping the wheel with two hands for the first time this entire drive. “He covered your mouth while he fucked you,” he states.

“It was meant to be rough.” I ignore the pit in my stomach. “Have you never had post-sex bruises before? Knocking passionately into walls and desks and doors?”

“That’s a lot different than being held down. Which I don’t do to anyone I’m hooking up with for the first fucking time. Especially, I mean, *fuck*. He has how much on you?”

“I’m fairly certain my trust fund is larger than his.”

Birdie blinks. “I meant *weight*, Virginia. Not how much real estate you can purchase.”

“Oh,” I let out a laugh, then brighter laughter releases from my body. It makes Birdie smile, a less acidic one. Soft at the corners of his lips.

The noise fades gently between both of us.

All I hear is the *click, click, click* of his blinker at another stop. His thumb taps the wheel at each *click*, almost unconsciously. Finally, he asks, “What are you going to tell your brothers?”

I stare out at New York. My high-rise in the distance.

Birdie adds, “I can keep whatever you want from Phoenix. We don’t tell each other everything. And your brothers—I’ll just brush them off.”

“They’re not easy to brush off.”

“I’ll be fine, Virginia.”

No, he won’t be. My brothers will grill Birdie beyond a third-degree just to pry information out of him. He doesn’t know how my family operates, and they don’t do well when people in our inner circle are being cagey. Phoenix sowed trust because he was so open with his feelings. He’s a book in French that we all can read.

Birdie is more like hieroglyphics that take a key to decipher. I feel as though he’s slowly passing me the key.

My lungs blaze even imagining my brothers’ energy and wrath aimed at *him*. The man who helped me through this awful night.

He doesn’t deserve that. And I’m not so sure I want to hide anything from my brothers anyway. I’ll crumble trying to keep this contained.

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My eyes burn and prick. “I came to this city hoping to grow closer to my brothers, not build a wall for them to knock down.”

He lets go of the wheel just to rake his fingers through his hair. “What are you saying?”

I stare ahead and hoist my chin, resolute. “I’m going to tell them everything.”

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26

BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

I thought we'd say our goodbyes in the lobby, then the elevator. Now that I'm physically standing in her apartment—which, by the way, is nothing like Tom's place next door, seeing as how I've suddenly been transported to *Shakespeare in Love*: drapery on the walls, two chaises, a claw-foot velvet sofa among candles and so many books—I've decided nothing about this is normal.

She is so not fucking normal.

And still, I'm not sure I want to change a single thing about Audrey. I'm hypnotized by her and her place.

I catch her gazing longer at an oil painting. Two thick maroon curtains spill down either side, fastened back with tassels as if the artwork is a window.

It would be a very depressing one.

"Gruesome," I say, sidling beside her. I look more at her than the painting of an ancient city being ransacked and engulfed in flames.

"It's called *Destruction*," she says. "One of five in a series depicting the natural course of an empire, all painted by Thomas Cole. My parents gave each of us one. This is Eliot's." The hollow of her throat tightens. "It's what occurs after *The Consummation*, the height of an empire, when arrogance and pride are in excess. This is the result. The fall."

I linger on her, at how she tries to tilt her chin up and draw air into her lungs.

And I lick my lips to ask, "Which one is yours? The one your parents gave you?"

"I share the same one as Ben. *The Arcadian*. It's what comes before *The Consummation*."

"Where is it?"

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"I left it at my childhood home. I didn't want to bring all of my old things to New York." Her blue eyes sweep the moody oils with acceptance. "I suppose this one fits me more. Perhaps it always did."

I'm about to respond, but she spins abruptly toward me. "Birdie."

"Audrey," I state just as formally.

"It's best if you stay for this," she says factually, then emphasizes, "I would like you to stay, Birdie, if it's not too much to ask of you."

"I'm not even sure what's too much anymore," I mutter, holding her brazen gaze for an extended beat. "So yeah, I'll stick around longer for you, Virginia."

I hear her sudden sharp breath of relief. It originates from the bottom of her lungs. Deep and full, and I can't recall ever drawing that sound out of a living soul before Audrey.

I restrain an emotion that slams at me, my fingers digging into my palms. And then my eyes betray my mind as they drift to her soft pink lips.

I'm so fucked.

I force my eyes back up to hers.

Her chest rises with a breathless sound this time, and she asks, "Do you want to kiss me?"

Yes. I start to shake my head. My nose flares. "Don't ask me that again."

"Why not?" Her disobedience is enviable. Her questioning, *alluring*. "Because you're my brother's boyfriend's brother? Or because you're my tutor? Or is there another reason—?"

"There are countless reasons."

"Count them."

"No." I watch her lips tic up. She's not hating being told *no* from me anymore. Okay, okay, *leave her, Bird.* I physically cannot fucking leave this girl, so I just move aside a stack of hardbacks on the sofa cushion and take a seat.

She shifts her focus to her trench coat. Balling up the fabric, she stuffs it in the gas fireplace but doesn't ignite it.

"You texting your brothers to come over?" I ask, just as my phone buzzes in my jeans.

"Some of them. I'm not disturbing Ben and Harriet. They spent the night at a hotel for Valentine's, and Tom and Phoenix are in another

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time zone. So we'll just be dealing with Charlie, Beckett, and Eliot." Her three oldest brothers.

I would've rather Tom been here.

While I pull out my phone, she says, "Make yourself at home. I'm going to freshen up a little. I might be a half hour."

"Take however long, Virginia. I don't need constant observation. Not a sourdough loaf or your houseplant."

"Shame. I would've fed you to the rabbits."

I catch myself smiling when she's gone. *Fuck.* Scraping my hands through my hair, I crash backward into the stiffest sofa that money *can* buy.

I assume she's left to cover the bruises on her face before her brothers arrive.

My muscles contract. How could she have told him to stop if he was covering her mouth? It's a question I never asked. It's one I can't broach without feeling like castration is a justifiable penalty. My brain tries to light on fire just remembering his fucking fingerprints on her cheeks.

Rough sex.

I feel around for my phone, trying to take my mind off *that.*

The incoming text does the trick. My body goes cold. My stomach lurches. My head heavies like a thousand bricks piling too high.

DO NOT ANSWER

You have the money yet? Do I need to put you on a payment plan to make sure you pay up on time?

Fucking asshole.

I clench my jaw and type out a fast message.

BIRDIE

I'm getting you the 30k in full. Don't do anything drastic.

Stress compacts in my chest. How am I going to get the rest of the money? I brace a taut hand against my mouth, thinking my tutoring days are over. There's no way Audrey will want to be on the quiz bowl team when the *smell* of the captain makes her physically recoil.

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I'd never want her to suffer through that experience. Not even for a million fucking dollars.

I'll just sell my guitars.

So I'm on eBay for close to an hour, seeing how much I can potentially make, when Eliot appears.

He does not like that I'm in his apartment. It's very fucking clear without him saying a thing. He moves around his kitchen in a tailored navy-blue suit, opening drawers. Then he removes a knife from a butcher block.

Really?

I eye the hallway Audrey disappeared down.

When I turn back to Eliot, he's slicing a red apple and approaching me. "Late night *studying* with my little sister?"

Yeah.

Fuck.

That lie is obviously not holding up. I'm starting to realize it's a great thing Audrey wants to come clean. Even if I could handle whatever overprotective posturing this is, Phoenix will stick up for me, and it'll cause so much unnecessary friction between him and his boyfriend's rich family.

He deserves to be loved by the Cobalt Empire, not shunned.

"You can talk to her, man," I say plainly.

Eliot eats an apple slice off the edge of his blade. Saying *nothing*. Just staring me down as if he's deciding whether I'm lunch.

I shift backward but maintain eye contact with growing annoyance. "Late night for you?" I motion to his creased and wrinkled slacks and button-down—what I'm guessing he wore on Valentine's.

Before he can answer, Beckett shows up. Also in last night's clothes: white undershirt and black slacks. His button-down is neatly folded over his arm.

He lives next door. He could make a pit stop to change. But he did not pass Go and collect $200—just came straight to the property his sister owns.

When she texts, they come running.

At nine a.m.

The morning after their Valentine's dates. Which, I realize, is exactly why she didn't want to disturb Ben and ruin his date with his

CamScanner

girlfriend.

There is so much about the Cobalts I don't relate to. Except for this. Dropping everything for your family. That resonates with me.

I'm starting to see why Phoenix likes them.

"Leave, Birdie," Beckett says, casual yet commanding. "You aren't needed here." *Yeah, they still don't like me.*

I push a hand through my hair, then motion to him. "Your sister asked me to stay. So take it up with her."

Beckett's yellow-green eyes are so translucent in the light, it looks like he's staring through my soul. "You were with her all last night and into the morning."

Yep. "Is there a question there?"

"Did you sleep in the same bed?"

Now would be a *great* time for Virginia to appear.

Eliot is five feet from me, towering with an eight-inch knife.

"It's not what you think," I snap back, defensive because how can I not be?

"You're how old?" Beckett asks in a leveled tone that does more damage than yelling. "Twenty-three in March?"

"Yeah." The fact that he knows my birthday reminds me he's friends with Phoenix. "Look, you don't have to fucking do this. I know your sister is eighteen, but you realize she wasn't on a date with me last night? She was with that—" I cut myself off as Charlie joins this *super fun* party.

His hair a complete fucking mess, his button-down hangs open, no shirt underneath. Hickies scatter up his chest to his neck like he got mauled by a suckerfish.

His eyes slice to me, then over to Beckett. "Elle lui a demandé de rester pour ça?" *She asked him to stay for this?*

Beckett replies, "Apparemment." *Apparently.*

I glare. "*Je peux t'entendre*," I sneer. *I can hear you.*

Charlie and Beckett don't respond, not when a mechanical squeaking noise echoes toward us.

Audrey rolls out a TV on a wheeled stand. "If everyone could please take a seat for the presentation that would be lovely."

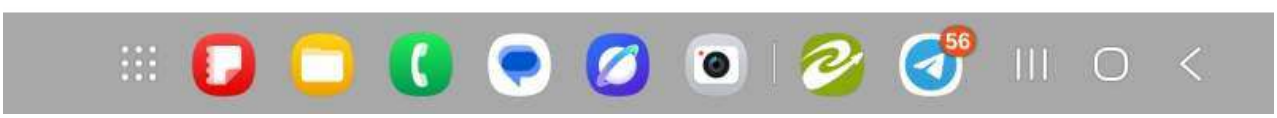
Presentation?

CamScanner

I was so wrong about her. She wasn't spending time changing and putting on makeup. She was doing something else. Because she's still wearing my button-down, waistcoat, and slacks.

Eliot clocks her men's attire in a second flat and daggers me with a look. "Your clothes?"

He wants me to cop to fucking her, but that's not the truth...and strangely, I wish to God it were. Because what actually happened is so much worse, and they don't even know it yet.



CamScanner

27
AUDREY COBALT

"Do not interrupt my presentation," I warn everyone after plugging in the TV and connecting my laptop. "I considered everything you might ask, so there is likely a slide that'll answer your question."

They've gathered on various pieces of furniture. Thankfully seated. Birdie has moved over to the chaise like Charlie and Beckett might murder him for sharing the sofa. Or maybe he likes his space.

I can't tell if my brothers are hungover, but Beckett unscrews green juice Eliot had made and portioned in reusable glass bottles for the week. Charlie is so dry-eyed, he's tilting his head back and squirting drops in each one. Then he blinks and whispers to Beckett.

Something must be bothering him because Beckett blows at Charlie's eye like there's a lash stuck, then takes the bottle and squirts drops into Charlie's eye for him.

We've all had eventful nights, it seems. It's a calming fact.

I am not the only one who's messy. And I'm just as capable of rising out of a mess unscathed.

"I will wait." I cup my hands in front of me with the remote. Careful not to shift my hair out of my face. The orange strands hide my cheeks.

Eliot bows forward on a buttoned ottoman, slicing an apple. "Before we start, sister, he has to be here?" He points the knife at Birdie.

"*Yes*, and unless you'd like egg on your face by the end of this, you should be kind toward him."

Eliot frowns, then sits straighter. He sweeps his gaze over Birdie, then looks to Charlie. I'm scaring Eliot, I think. Then again, I've never really seen Eliot afraid of anything.

CamScanner

"Start," Charlie says, squeezing his eyes as solution drips down his face.

"Until you can see—"

"I can *see*, little sister." His eyes are very bloodshot and ill-humored. "Start."

I raise my chin. "I will begin." I peek once over at Birdie. He has a fist to his mouth, staring intensely at the TV screen before he looks at me like I'm both nuts and riveting. Maybe it's why he doesn't leave.

Courage floods my lungs. "Let me remind you all that this is me." I click the remote, and the PowerPoint begins with a fifteen-second video of a lioness roaring. "I am her."

I increase the volume, pushing the button so the entire apartment is nothing but a fierce, saliva-dripping *snarl.*

Eliot speaks over the noise. "Same breed!" He grins, one that lifts me sky-high. "We all see the similarities!"

Charlie cringes like I'm bludgeoning his eardrums.

Beckett talks, but I can't hear him. So I lower the volume, to which he says gently, "Turn it down."

I've successfully made my point. Another click of the remote. The dissolve effect takes us to the next slide with a heavenly blue background and fluffy clouds.

"You added animated transitions?" Birdie says.

"No questions," Eliot retorts.

Birdie glowers. "It was rhetorical."

"The slide is blank," Beckett says to me, refocusing everyone to the PowerPoint.

I click the remote and two words sparkle onto the clouds: *I lied.*

Their heads immediately swing to Birdie.

"Eyes on me," I demand. Only Eliot and Beckett listen. "I lied about needing to study last night. I did not go to Birdie's apartment to cram for quiz bowl." Another click. More words sparkle: *Birdie and I are not together.*

Another click.

Nor were we intimate.

I aim a red laser pointer at the word *intimate*. "This includes all things your little brains might be considering. It was very chaste. Now that brings us to…"

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The slide wipes clean, and new words emerge over the clouds: *Please share how your Valentine's date went before I share mine.*

"Who'd like to begin?" I ask my brothers.

Birdie has a smile behind his fist.

The corners of my lips tug upward. Until I see Charlie and Beckett speaking through their eyes to each other.

"That would be me." Eliot spreads his arms like he's an open book. Apple in one hand, knife in the other. "I went to a dessert bar with Arabella, penthouse suite at the Four Seasons afterward where I made all her sexual fantasies come true. Multiple orgasms. Satisfying on every account."

Good for her. At least another woman had a successful Valentine's. "I assume Arabella won't be making another appearance because I've never heard of her, nor do I expect to ever meet her," I say to Eliot.

"One and done," he confirms.

I direct the laser pointer at Charlie's chest. "Your turn."

Charlie regards his twin. Beckett is rubbing the bridge of his nose with steepled fingers. These two are much more private when it comes to their sex lives, but I'd rather be on equal footing with all of them.

"The best one went," Eliot counters. "We can move forward."

"Full participation is required," I say firmly. "Or I can end the presentation here."

"*Brothers*," Eliot forces through clenched teeth.

Charlie wipes eye drop solution off his cheek. "I met a girl at a club," he bites out. "Pink Noir after Beckett's performance last night. We were both there." He moves a finger between himself and Beckett. "I ended up at her place on the Upper East Side. We fucked. It was *okay.*"

With the laser pointer, I circle the hickies on his chest. "Did you not enjoy these then?"

Charlie glances down, then up with an unamused expression. "We can't question you, but you can question us. That's *hardly* fair, little sister." I take note of his mocking tone.

"There is a slide at the end where I will open the floor to you."

Charlie kicks his feet up on the coffee table and tugs at his hair. He's examining Birdie.

CamScanner

"Don't look at him," I warn, my pulse bouncing. "This isn't about Birdie. I know what he did last night. I was with him."

Wheels are most certainly turning in Charlie's overcalculating brain. He studies Birdie's constricted posture for too long, then cocks his head back to me. "I enjoyed it enough." His usual corrosive voice sounds softer. "I would've told her to *stop* if I didn't like it, and we both came." He quirks a brow. "You want more?"

Strangely, this might be the only time I haven't wanted Charlie to share more. "No need," I tell him. "Thank you for your participation. Beckett?"

"Skip Beckett," Charlie tells me.

I ignore Charlie. "Beckett?"

He's taking a large swig of green juice. I wiggle the red laser over his white undershirt and point out the sparkly pink stain. "You have lip gloss on your collar, so you must've had a date after the club."

"It wasn't a date." He sets the juice down, just to pull off the stained shirt. "It was just sex." He folds the shirt into fourths. "After Pink Noir, I went to Anya's place on the Upper West Side with several acquaintances."

"Not friends?"

"Not all of them, no." He glances cautiously at Birdie, then looks to me. "I had a threesome."

I restrain a gasp. I've known Beckett is promiscuous, but he's never outright confirmed anything of this nature to *me* before.

Eliot grins. "Brother, burying the lede."

"I'm not bragging about it," Beckett says quietly, more to me. He cups the bottle of juice again. "It was consensual, but not typically how I end things."

"How so?"

"I rushed out when I was in the middle of going down on her this morning."

"Oh my God," I gasp. "Call her back right now. Apologize." I feel terrible for her, and it's all my fault. "You must send her flowers. Pink peonies." I grab my phone. "Maybe we can gift her shoes. How is her shoe collection? Is she a high-heel girl?"

"I'm not sending her gifts, Audrey," Beckett says gently.

I gape. "*Beckett.* You must. She deserves to feel loved."

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Beckett winces. “Before we slept together, we had a long conversation about expectations, and we agreed it was *just sex*. Gifting her Louboutins sends the wrong message.”

“Then include a note saying, *This is just sex. I am the most unromantic man on Earth.*”

The room deadens.

My pulse rings in my ears. “I’m sorry…I didn’t mean to be so…” Why is my heart thrashing out of my body?

Eliot flips the knife in his hand, the blade pointed downward. “Is this about Beckett or about you?”

I try to shake my head, but it won’t move.

Charlie takes in a long, long breath after he eyes Birdie again, then he leans backward, dropping his feet to the floor.

Beckett wears dark concern. “What happened on your date, Audrey?”

I steady my breath and hoist my gaze to theirs. *I am in control. I’m a Cobalt.* “If you could turn your attention back to the PowerPoint.” I click the remote, and the slide tumbles into a new one. The heavenly sky has been replaced with a crackling inferno.

Birdie isn’t smiling anymore.

“Charlie, the PowerPoint,” I say, since he’s still observing Birdie.

He pushes his harsh eyes up to the screen.

“Thank you.” Another click, and words explode like fireworks: *I had sex for the very first time. On my Valentine’s date with Guy Abernathy.*

I underline the word *sex* with my laser pointer, my pulse still racing despite the fact they shared first. I didn’t expect to be this nervous. “I am no longer a virgin.”

Beckett is leaning into Charlie and whispering.

Eliot swings a finger over at Birdie while asking me, “But you ended up at another boy’s apartment?”

“All will be answered, I promise.”

“Promets en français,” Beckett says with severity. *Promise in French.*

“Je le promets.” It’s a promise that I would rather die than break. Another click, the next words detonate over the fire: *I am okay.* I draw a red laser circle around the words.

“Let this be a focus,” I continue. “The overall theme of the presentation, if you will. As a reminder.” I press a button and a lion roar re-

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sounds. “Does she sound timid or cowardly? I think not. She is powerful and vicious. She is me.”

Everyone appears on edge, so I click again.

New words crackle beneath the others: *It was consensual.*

“Did he use protection?” Eliot asks.

I knew he’d pose this, so I click.

They read the bursting words: *He wore a condom.*

“As you know I’m not on birth control, but I would only have safe sex. I even brought condoms in case he didn’t have any.”

“So this was planned?” Beckett asks.

“Oui, oui.” I nod. “I planned this.” My chest feels tight, but I focus on the TV and point my laser at the screen as new words join the others.

It would be classified as rough.

Eliot’s eyes slowly begin to flame.

I underline the word *consensual.* “Consensually rough, if you will.”

“What do you mean by rough?” Beckett asks.

I click, and they read new exploding words: *I have some post-sex bruises.*

Eliot stabs the half-bitten apple. “I’m going to kill him.”

“Please refer to the line above.” I zig-zag my laser beneath *consensual.*

“Where are the bruises?” Charlie asks me. “Besides the ones you’ve been trying to hide on your face.”

I suck in a breath. Charlie 1 vs. Audrey 1.

He’s too perceptive to trick. I can’t even go fifteen minutes without failing.

Beckett squints and leans toward me. “Move your hair.”

I tuck my hair behind each ear, then show off the fingerprint marks on each cheek.

Eliot cuts a scathing look to Charlie. “You’re going to need to lock me in this apartment.”

“*Eliot, do not*,” I order.

“Do not what? Bash his skull into the fucking floor or remove his shriveled cock from his body? Those are your only two options, sister.”

I twist to Birdie.

He’s glued to the PowerPoint.

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My pulse won't slow, especially as Charlie asks again, "What other bruises?"

I want to lie, but I already promised... *It's fine. Eliot is being hyperbolic.* He threatens to mutilate his enemies all the time.

"They're very faint," I say and roll up the sleeves of Birdie's white button-down I'm wearing. I show off my wrists, the *faintest* yellowed marks beginning to form. "They don't hurt at all. I'm *not* hurt."

I motion my laser underneath *I'm okay.*

Eliot grits his teeth so hard, I can see the vein pulsing in his temple.

Beckett hoists his hands in a calming manner. I have no idea why they're aimed at me. I am exceedingly calm right now. "Did he handcuff you to the bed?" he asks.

"No." I can't catch my breath.

"Rope?"

"*No*," I stress. "It was not that kinky. He simply held my wrists."

"Simply?" Eliot has murder in his eye. "Simply is not forceful enough to leave a fucking *bruise*."

"You've likely done similar—"

"*Never*," Eliot grinds out, his jaw clenching.

I brave a glance at Birdie. He stares deeply into my eyes, and the intrusion isn't unsettling. Like last night, I seize the steel in his expression. He steadies me.

"Did you lead into rough sex?" Beckett asks. My pulse skips when I make eye contact with him.

"There was some lead-up," I note.

"What is some?"

I gauge how best to answer.

Off my silence, Beckett asks, "Foreplay?"

"I'd rather not say."

Charlie lets out a dry, sharp laugh that hurts more than anything else this morning.

"Stop it, man," Birdie interjects. "She's been through enough."

Charlie detects my hurt. His face clears of bitterness, and he arches his brows at me. "You can handle anything. Right?"

I hate that he believes I can't. Out of all my brothers, I've wanted him to see me as capable. Is my desire for Charlie's validation the most foolish thing of all? Because it's starting to feel like it might be.

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"I would prefer not to handle your cruelty," I note diplomatically. "*Thank you.*" I wave the red laser at *consensual* again. "I knew what I was getting into."

Beckett's calming hands are in the air once more. "You didn't want to work up to it?"

"Not if passion overcame us." It's what I always believed. We'd want each other so terribly, we couldn't wait a single moment longer.

"So no foreplay," Beckett says. "He held down your wrists and covered your mouth—at the same time?"

My pulse skips again. "Yes. It was—"

"*Consensual*, we heard," Charlie says. "What we haven't heard is whether you liked it."

"Oh." I draw back my shoulders and hold the remote behind me. "Well, I have learned that maybe I do not enjoy it quite *that* rough, but a lesson I could only learn through experience. Possibly."

Eliot launches to his feet.

"Sit down." My voice pitches weirdly. "You must sit down! I haven't finished my presentation. I have more slides."

"Apologies," Eliot says sweetly, lowering slowly like he's on a grenade. "Continue on, sister."

"Merci beaucoup." I nod. *Thank you very much.*

Through a strange haze in my eyes, I click the remote. Words sizzle on screen: *I decided to end the date early, as it was not to my satisfaction.*

"I left and went to Birdie's," I explain, then click.

They read: *He was a true gentleman.*

The room is too strained, but I'm unable to eliminate the tension. I'm doing my best to just breathe. I click again, and the slide morphs into a deep purple background.

I announce, "Kinney has a message for all of you."

Of course I had my best friend help me with my presentation.

I press a button, and Kinney fills the frame with her dyed black hair, dark lipstick, and death glare. "Hey, losers. If I hear that one of you called Audrey an idiot for losing her virginity the way she did, I will send the plague upon your household. I don't even care if we're cousins. You will wake up with warts and pustules. She doesn't need your judgment—and I'm looking at you, *Wretch.*" She points outward,

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and it just so happens Charlie is directly across from her aim, her intended target. The power of my best friend.

I smile.

"Signing out, Kinney Hale." She snaps her fingers, and I end the video on cue and twirl back around to my brothers.

I thought it'd add some levity, but their expressions are far graver than I predicted they'd be at this point. "Any responses?" I ask the audience.

"Is that the last slide?" Beckett wonders.

Tension has not receded. Okay then. "No, there is one more." I click again.

The slide blinks into a grassy woodland. Words glitter onscreen: *The floor is open for further questions.*

Beckett is on the edge of the sofa. "Were you able to express to him that you didn't like it that rough?"

I brush my hair off my shoulder. "It happened so fast. You know how it can be. Don't you, Eliot?"

Eliot has trained his gaze on Beckett, maybe purposely.

I add, "And if you must know, I did not tell him to stop. I wanted to see it through."

Beckett drags two fingers down the side of his jaw. "Okay. Consent, Audrey—"

"I know what consent is. *I consented.*" I glare. "Not all sex begins with a long-winded, mood-killing conversation. You can't honestly tell me you've talked out what you're about to do before you do it?"

"We're all *experienced,*" Charlie emphasizes. "You have no experience, but congratulations, you've just found out what happens when you pretend you do."

A chill bites my arms. I cross them.

"Charlie," Beckett warns softly, then places his concern back on me. "Let me just get the facts straight. You didn't explicitly talk beforehand about whether you'd want rough sex, and he didn't know you were a virgin?"

"Correct, but there was really a...silent understanding of how rough it'd be, I believe."

"A *silent* understanding," Eliot repeats to Beckett.

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Beckett looks to Charlie. "Je vais le buter, putain." *I'm going to fucking kill him.*

My eyes pop out. "*Beckett.*" His threat sounds brutal because they're more infrequent than Eliot's. "You cannot…no one is…"

"Take a breath, Virginia," Birdie says, and I inhale a deep one through my nose, blow out through my lips. *I'm fine.*

Perfectly fine.

They're overreacting. I knew they would. Beckett overreacting is a little startling, but still, it's an overreaction.

Charlie whispers against Beckett's ear, then asks me, "What about afterward? You glossed over that part."

I click the remote, backtracking to the fiery slide and using the laser to underline: *I decided to end the date early.* "I left of my own volition. My own choice. I chose to go rather than stay, so we did not talk about my experience or his. I have no regrets about that either, as I would rather burn my tongue on several hundred candles than speak to him about his lackluster performance."

"Why is that?" Charlie asks like he already knows why.

I tell him anyway. "I did not imagine my first time to be so disappointing…" I release a tight breath. "But oh well. I must move forward. I'm sure you've all had inadequate sex before."

"Inadequate, yes. If that's what we want to call what you had."

"Oh, because you were there? Because you felt everything that I did? You know *exactly* what occurred?"

Charlie keeps his mouth shut. Audrey 2 vs. Charlie 1.

I'm feeling rather good now. I power off the TV. In the black screen, my narrow-eyed reflection stares back at me. Determined. *Commanding.*

I whirl back to them. "I'm handling it," I breathe out, then in. "I'm seeing Dr. Sylvie Keene tomorrow to ensure all is well. I would prefer that no one tell our mother and father any of this. I do not want them to think I shouldn't be in New York, and I hope you don't believe it either."

"On ne le leur dira pas," Beckett murmurs. *We won't tell them.* "Are you okay?"

"That is theme of the PowerPoint," I remind him.

"And the lion roaring," Eliot says, easing a smile on me.

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I smile back. "Yes, they're intertwined."

Beckett locks eyes with me. "If you're seeing a gynecologist—"

"It should be nothing," I cut in. "I'm just spotting now, but a professional opinion never hurts."

"She's bleeding?" Eliot glares. "You're *bleeding*?" He surges to his feet again.

"You *cannot* hurt him," I stress, my pulse pounding.

"Because he did nothing wrong?" Charlie asks pointedly. "Or because he's your quiz bowl captain?"

My mouth feels dry. Lionesses do not have dry tongues! I lick my lips. "Both. It's both." *I want it to be both.*

"Wait. Virginia." Birdie blinks hard, then shakes out the confusion. "You're staying on the quiz bowl team?"

"Guy Abernathy is *not* taking quiz bowl from me." I spin toward my brothers. "I will become an invaluable member of the team. The word *probie* will be erased from the dictionary, and Guy will realize I'm needed for Nationals. He must remain on the team to see me triumph, so don't you dare try to get him removed from quiz bowl."

Beckett looks to Charlie.

Eliot is shaking his head and white-knuckling the hilt of the knife.

Birdie nods slowly, processing. "So I take it he's not angry that you ditched him on Valentine's?"

I open my mouth, but my voice catches.

Charlie tugs at his hair again and asks, "Did you have trouble leaving his apartment?"

"No. It was rather simple. He's unaware that I didn't enjoy last night. He's still under the impression it was quite good. I'll be letting him down gently soon." I'm unafraid. I'm courageous. I'm a Cobalt, for fuck's sake. My mother would *devour* him. Nerves of Cobalt steel—I've inherited them, surely. But I can admit...this is hardly a comfortable situation.

So I lead with honesty. "Will I be uncomfortable on the team with Guy? *Of course.* Would I prefer one of you also join quiz bowl while I become the world's best music specialist? *Yes*. Would that be possible? *No*."

"Actually," Charlie says, "it is."

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"No, I'm not asking Birdie to join quiz bowl—he has enough on his plate, and he's already sparing so much time to tutor me." He'd been my first option too. One I immediately shot down in my head.

"I can walk you to practice at least," Birdie offers. "I'm already on campus. I can be there when your practice finishes so you're not alone with him if you're scared."

I bristle. "I'm not…" I begin to say, *I'm not afraid.* But the longer I hold Birdie's steady gaze, the more the fortress inside me rattles. How can someone make me feel both so strong and so vulnerable at once? I turn toward my brothers. "I'm not frightened of Guy," I tell them more definitively. "Just uncomfortable. That's it."

Charlie cocks his head to Birdie. "You'll walk her to practice. *Cute*." He flashes a tight smile. "And unnecessary." Charlie stands and digs in his pocket. "I wasn't saying Phoenix's brother can join MVU's team." He unearths his wallet and pries out a card. Coming closer, he hands it over.

It's a student ID.

"I was referring to *me*."

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

I don't stay long after Charlie confesses to being enrolled at Manhattan Valley University. Apparently, he enrolled the same time as Audrey. Not with the desire to earn a degree—because I learn he bailed on his acceptance to Harvard when he was *sixteen.*

He's had eight years to go to college, and he's just now chosen to attend. That says all I need to know about her brothers—they are going to go to *extreme* measures to look after their little sister, even when she's completely unaware.

I also thought Audrey would be pissed Charlie was practically waiting in the wings for her to fuck up and need help, but she was just so… grateful.

She set aside her ego and seemed relieved Charlie was even willing to join the quiz bowl team with her. I don't know the logistics. I'm not there to hear them.

The rest of this weird Sunday, I'm on campus in Delaney Music Hall, trying to bury myself in my composition project. I wonder if she burned her coat in the fireplace. She never flicked on the switch when I was there.

Stop, Bird. Oh, but I don't stop thinking about Audrey. Every five minutes, I'm on a mental turntable spinning back to her.

I jog home. I shower. I nuke a leftover, half-eaten Reuben that's too soggy to enjoy. Probably because I'm wondering if she would've made a comment about it. Why the fuck do I wish she were in my kitchen pestering the fuck out of me? Chances are, I'd tell her to go away.

Because I know better.

I know I am *not* the dreamy white knight she's searching for.

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So when it's nearing 11 p.m. and I'm in bed, I should just try to sleep. I should not text her. I should not be thinking so constantly, so *consistently*, about this fucking girl. But are we meeting tomorrow? Does she still want to be tutored?

That's good enough reason to throw out a text. I'm typing a message to her when my phone suddenly rings with a video call.

From Audrey.

I answer it.

She's sitting up against her ornate white headboard. In bed like me. She searches my features so quickly, I try to keep up with the speed of her exploratory gaze. And then she says, "Bonsoir, barbare." *Good evening, barbarian.*

"Arrogante fille." *Arrogant girl.* I almost smile seeing her smile emerge.

Hers, soft with tired edges.

Which begs the question. "Not asleep yet?" I ask. "Don't princesses need eight hours of uninterrupted beauty rest?"

She humphs. The haughty noise of my waking dreams, apparently —because I still can't let go of this sound. "Restful or restless," she says, "my beauty does not diminish. I am always beautiful."

Isn't that the truth. "Éternellement." *Eternally.*

"You agree?" Her stare pierces into my soul like she's about to carve her name there. "Did Birdie St. Pierre just call me beautiful?"

"I meant, *toujours aussi arrogante.*" I almost smile seeing her eyes roll. I told her she's still as arrogant as ever. "And you don't need me to call you beautiful."

The next unsure look she gives me, I know I am so fucking wrong. "If I'm a bother to you—" she starts.

"I was about to text you," I cut in and shift higher up the wall.

"To give me high marks on my PowerPoint?"

"Fishing for an A-plus, Virginia?"

"No, because I already know it was A-plus material. Anything else, I'll contest." Her eyes heat in challenge, daring me to try.

"B-plus—"

She gasps.

I smile. "Transitions were very basic. Pulling from the early 2000s there."

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"They complemented the backgrounds and provided much needed levity."

I didn't realize that's what she was trying to achieve. "No sparkle or glitter effect was going to make your brothers laugh in that scenario—but it was a decent try."

"Thank you," she says softly. "Tomorrow..."

"That's what I was going to text you about. You still want to be tuto—"

"Yes," she interjects. "Even more so now. I can't get anything wrong. Not if I want to shove my greatness in Guy's face." She clings to my gaze as tension strains at the mention of that fucker. I feel her holding on to me through the phone.

"You're going to do that," I assure her. "Even if we have to cram all semester. I'll even give you a discount."

Her lips try to lift. "I can afford your going rate. Your services have been priceless to me anyway."

It crashes too hard into me. I look up at the ceiling.

"Sorry, no compliments. You're absolutely *horrid*, and I will gouge you for all you're worth." Before I can reply, she quickly asks, "Same time as usual tomorrow?"

"Same time," I confirm. "Which means you need to sleep. *I* need to sleep."

"Bonne nuit, barbare." *Goodnight, barbarian.* Her words sound sweeter than harsh, and that messes me up.

My mouth dries—and I abruptly hang up on her without exchanging any parting words. It makes me feel like instant shit. I press my phone to my forehead and expel a hot breath. She can't get the wrong idea. *I* can't get the wrong idea. We're not a couple.

We're not friends.

I helped her during a painful night—that's it.

I'm woken up by a 1 a.m. call with Tom Cobalt asking way too many fucking questions.

"Phoenix," I complain to my brother in a groggy half sleep over the phone, sliding up against the wall behind my bed. "Tell your boyfriend

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to slow down, it's not six a.m. here. I'm in New York, not *London*." They're en route to the airport for their flight home.

"We leave for *one weekend*, dude," Tom goes on, obviously not handing the phone over to my brother. "One fucking weekend and there's a nuclear meltdown involving my sister."

"You sure the meltdown isn't happening over there with you?"

"*Dude.* This is serious." He's already said Audrey sent him, Ben, and their older sister Jane the PowerPoint. Leaving no sibling out of the loop, and they've had to swear not to share this with their parents.

"Tom, man, she's *fine*." She's not that fine, but what is he going to do about it in London or on his cushy private jet? "Please don't repeat your million-question assault about her asshole date—because I don't know anything about Guy." I squeeze my sore eyes with my fingers.

Phoenix comes on the phone. "She ended up with you that night?" he asks.

Yeah. I can't speak.

"Bird?"

"I have a question for Tom," I say with a sudden thought. "For all this energy directed at *me*, why did none of you cockblock her fucking date? Where was the shakedown? The death threats? Or is that only reserved for those of us without trust funds?"

"No, it's not like that," Tom says. "Audrey being *eighteen* is new for us, and he passed all background checks. So we agreed we wouldn't break her trust and go seek out this dude without her knowing. We'd wait for her to introduce him to us—because that's what we've done for each other, and we wanted to give her the same respect. Had we met him earlier…" He sounds choked up. "Is she really okay? Because-because Audrey puts on a big front. She might not be okay. Hey, maybe you can talk to her. Maybe she'll talk to you since she sought you out that night. You could report back to me and Eliot—"

"Fuck no, I'm not *spying* on your little sister for you." I can't believe this conversation. At 1 fucking a.m. when I need to be awake *for his sister* at the ass-crack of dawn. "Why don't you go call the fucker who hurt her? Let him lose sleep over this."

Tom lets out a tight, frustrated noise. "He's the *captain* of her quiz bowl team. He could kick her off if we open fire. We have a very narrow lane of revenge here, dude. Our options are limited, and Eliot and

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I are just trying to ensure he's not connected to anyone who hates our guts."

I wince. "What are you saying?"

"We have enemies—"

"I fucking get that. People hate your family. I am one of them."

"*Was,*" Tom corrects.

"Head in the clouds. Keep dreaming." The phone is on speaker in my fist, but I push my other hand through my hair. "I'm confused on why your family having enemies would even matter." Realization hits me like an asteroid. I feel crushed and furious all at once. "Are you saying this motherfucker used her to get back at you?"

"Yeah. That is literally Eliot's biggest fear, dude. Or one of them. I don't know. I mean, I didn't think…" Tom goes weirdly quiet. He rarely shuts up.

I frown.

Phoenix speaks again. "This asshole's dad is also on the board of Cobalt Inc., so I keep telling Tom it's probably unlikely he'd take shots at their sister."

I'm slowly processing. "If it is true, that's fucking *sick*, Phoenix." The fact that Eliot has *feared* his sister being used means that I am wading in foreign waters—the depth of which, I don't know. It's too dark. Can't see the bottom. This is for people who don't make bets with money because they have too much to feel any sting when they lose.

So they make bets with what really matters to them.

"You don't need to get involved," Phoenix cautions me. "Only Eliot and Tom are leaning toward this being some sort of payback. The rest of her brothers think he's a typical douchebag social climber who saw status in her name—which, from what they said, Audrey *knew* and liked."

I try not to let that claw its way inside me. I knew she wanted to be with someone *like him.* I find myself defending her. "She knew he was ambitious, not that he's a fucking monster."

"So he's a monster? Confirmed?" Tom asks, sounding panicked.

"I don't fucking know."

Phoenix speaks again. "Ben thinks Guy *genuinely* likes her, nepo baby, calm down," he says to his boyfriend. I hear Tom's heavy breath

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before my brother tells me again, "Don't get involved, Birdie. You have enough shit going on."

"Your boyfriend is the one trying to make me a spy—"

"Which is still on the table," Tom interjects.

"Don't put that on him, Tom," Phoenix warns.

"It's my *sister*, Phoenix."

I cut in, "Hey, if you two fight over *this*, I will be spamming you with negative Carraways reviews."

"Those don't exist," Tom says like he got me.

Boy, did he not even scratch the skin. "Yeah, they do. Don't test me, because I will find them. I'm fine. She's fine. Everyone is *fine.* Just chill and come home. You'll feel better when you're not an ocean away, and I'll feel better when I can go back to sleep." I end the call with one more sentiment. "And I think you all need to give Virginia more credit. She's a lot of things, but she is smart and perceptive and pretty fucking shrewd."

I think it'd kill her self-esteem to know she got played. But I'm more inclined to believe she'd be able to sniff out manipulative bullshit.

I'm going to believe in Audrey until proven otherwise.

She deserves to have someone believe in her.



When I meet Audrey at 5:30 a.m. on campus under what she calls a "moonlit morning," she's yawning into her elbow and struggling to keep her eyes open. I wish I brought my cello today—the music might have at least kept her attention for longer than a second.

Thirty minutes into our session, I shut the textbook I'm holding with a loud *thunk*.

She jolts out of a half-sleep. "Amy Beach," she blurts out.

Maybe I'd find that cute if she didn't look like a walking zombie. Her orange hair is frizzed by her face, and she's wearing a pair of sweatpants. Sure, they're pink. But it's also the first time I've ever seen this girl in sweats (that weren't mine). "*No*," I tell her. "And we're done for the day."

She frowns and checks her phone. "No, it's only six."

"Go home," I tell her. "Go back to bed."

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Her eyes are fire. “I’m perfectly capable—”

“You’re falling asleep, Virginia. You’re not capable of anything except snoring—”

“I do not snore.” She glares.

“Go. Home.” I’m grabbing my bag from the ground.

“You said you’d help me be the best,” Audrey counters.

“I can’t do that when you’re this tired.” I exhale an annoyed breath and hook my backpack on my shoulder. “Take a nap. Or three of them. And I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Except the next morning, it’s even worse.

She’s in the *same* pair of sweats, and dark half-moons shadow her eyes. I don’t let her get three steps into the practice room before I hold up my hands and block her path. “Turn back around, Virginia.”

Her eyes steel in determination. “I’ll stay awake.” She slips past me and hurriedly takes a seat on the metal chair. “Let’s go over Haydn. He’s interesting enough that I won’t drift. I promise.”

Her promise lasts exactly twenty-two minutes, and her eyes flutter shut while I’m talking about the *Farewell Symphony*.

I’m mad that she’s wasting my time. Because there’s a thousand other things I could be doing. That I probably *should* be doing.

But I’m also incredibly concerned. This sudden sleeplessness didn’t happen in a vacuum—and it reminds me too much of my brother, who’s a diagnosed insomniac. I can’t go through this. Not with her.

I don’t wake her this time.

I let her sleep until she gently opens her eyes fifteen minutes later. Her blue gaze fastens on mine immediately.

“What the fuck is going on?” I ask her.

She inhales deeply. “I can’t sleep.”

“You just slept—”

“I mean at home. In my bed.”

My muscles are stiff. “Because of him?”

“No,” she says. “Yes?”

Holy fuck. “Is that a no or yes, Virginia?” I’m going out of my mind. My hands grip my thighs.

“Both? Possibly that night contributed but not in the way you might think.”

“I’m thinking that fucker gave you nightmares.”

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"He didn't," she says quickly. "I'm not able to fall asleep long enough to even have nightmares or dreams at all. But that's not entirely because of him. I've always had trouble falling asleep, and my go-to solution is not available at the moment."

Her go-to solution. I can't even conjure a guess because my brain immediately jumps to melatonin, which she can buy a bottle of at any drugstore down the street. "Your go-to solution?" I ask.

"I touch myself." She doesn't break eye contact.

My brows catapult.

She glares. "Do not make fun—"

"I'm not. Just…" *Trying not to imagine what you sound like when you orgasm.* I clear a rasp in my throat. "I just don't know how touching yourself is suddenly *not* available."

"My doctor said there was no severe tearing, but I should still refrain from sexual activity for three days." Today is day three.

Fuck.

"So you're going without sleep tonight *again*?"

"Eliot bought me sleep vitamin gummies. I'm going to try them tonight."

I hold up my hands. "Wait—your brothers know you can't masturbate yourself to sleep?"

"*No.*" Her cheeks flush. "They…they think I'm having nightmares."

So she only told me the truth. We share a silent beat, and I don't know how to break it until she urges me to continue the tutoring session. It lasts about a half hour before Audrey dozes off again in her chair. I let her take intermittent naps, and while she sleeps, I work on a paper for History of Chamber Music.

Tutoring ends, and we split apart physically. Mentally, I can't shake her.

After my last class of the day, the sun begins to set. I head back to my apartment, and I've barely finished microwaving a frozen burrito when I get a text.

DOLORES

Vic came down with the flu. He's trying to push through, but he's running a fever. Can you be at the ballet tonight? Call is 6:30. Romeo & Juliet.

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And just like that, there goes trying to work on my program for the Stravinsky Competition tonight. I can't bail on Dolores. The sweet eighty-one-year-old lady has been the ballet's orchestra personnel manager for like three decades. You don't say no to Dolores. The microwave beeps, and I'm stuffing a steaming burrito in my mouth as I type on my phone.

BIRDIE

Sure. Be there soon.

At the ballet, I've already taken out my piercings, made sure none of my tattoos are showing, and even smoothed the wilder strands of my hair down with product. I'm in all-black formal attire—a requirement for NYBC productions.

I don't look for Beckett Cobalt. It's the first time I'm playing at the Whitney Theater after having the displeasure of officially meeting him. I know he's performing tonight. I saw a glimpse of the program before I entered the orchestra pit. I know exactly which songs Romeo takes the stage, and I try not to get in my head about it.

I don't need to care about Beckett.

Don't need to care about *any* Cobalt.

Oh, but there is one…

Fuck.

When the curtain closes, I'm gathering my cello at lightning speed. I'm not the only musician ready to go home. Most exit the pit before dancers take final bows, and I think I'm going to be one of them.

Except Giulia Carabello, the ballet's highly respected conductor, waves me over to shake hands with an elderly couple in the first row. She introduces them as "big patrons of the ballet"—meaning, these people keep art alive and a lot of us paid.

So I don't hate sparing an extra minute shaking their hands. They immediately comment on how young I am, and Giulia introduces me as, "The most talented musician I've come across in the last decade. You're lucky to catch him playing tonight. He's not full-time here."

"Oh, why not?" the older lady asks. "Is there something else you do?"

I nod. "Grad school, right now."

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The confused, slightly disappointed response is like being face-to-face with my parents. Not what I wanted tonight.

Giulia tells them, "We're working on getting Birdie full-time."

"Wear him down a little more, Giulia," the old man chuckles.

I want to laugh—like a fucking lighthearted ha-ha laugh at a *harmless* joke—but my body is too caged to make any noise. I should not take that shit seriously, but my brain isn't sending that signal to my vocal cords.

Thankfully I get out of that interaction in about five minutes or less. Guests pour out of the theater, the seats emptying, and just when I grab my cello, I rock backward. What the hell...?

Beckett Cobalt is in the pit.

Ballet dancers do not drop into the pit. I look around, but no other musicians remain. Even the conductor has left. Ushers guide any lingering guests out of their chairs, so no one is watching my face contort in hard uncertainty.

This is the Cobalt who's acted like I'm not worthy of a *millisecond glance.* So the fact that I've gained his attention and he's blocking my exit is flaming my insides.

Beckett is still in royal-blue tights and Romeo's tunic, his sweaty hair pushed out of his face. He's even breathing a little deeper. "Wait a second," he says, maybe seeing I'm one foot edged out, ready to fucking *go*. "About what you did for my little sister—"

"We don't have to do this." I hike the straps of my cello case higher on my shoulders.

He's confused now. "I just wanted to thank you."

"For what?"

His brows knit. "For being there for Audrey when she needed a friend." His expression says *duh.* "What else would I thank you for?"

"Okay, let me make this clear. I'm not friends with your little sister. I'm also *not* her brother, so don't act like I'm Tom or Eliot. Because I'm *not* them."

Beckett stiffens, his gaze narrowing on mine. "Then what, Birdie?"

I shake my head, tensed, and a rough laugh scrapes out of my throat. I can't stand her. I can't stand everything about her. I hate how much I think about her. I hate how she's made me feel things I've never felt, and I can't tell him this—because I'm not a dumbass.

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Beckett seems like the brother who will toss cease-and-desists and restraining orders and lawsuits.

"Forget it. *Move.*" I'm a hot second from shoving him.

He shifts closer though, and my body responds by locking up. His penetrating yellow-green eyes have mine in a vise. "If I find out you're another piece of shit masquerading as someone who cares—just to fuck my sister—you will wish you'd never met me. Is that clear?"

I grind my jaw. "I'm not that piece of shit," I say coldly. "I care about her goals. But that's not enough for people like you. You want to know that I'd sacrifice myself on an altar for her—that there's nothing I wouldn't do in her name and honor."

"Yeah," Beckett says firmly. Admitting it at least.

I glare. "My world doesn't revolve around Audrey Cobalt." But it has, and I like when it *does*. Being around her is the one thing I'm certain I do like.

It's the one thing I don't want to stop.

I try to push past her brother, but Beckett puts a hand to my chest. "Delete Leo's number from your phone."

My brain ricochets against metal. It hurts to understand what the fuck he's saying. "What?"

"*Leo Valavanis*. You have his number in your phone. Delete it." His forceful command should piss me off, but I'm stalled out on the fact that he knows I have a guy named *Leo* in my phone.

"How—?"

"He's a principal dancer here. You've met him after a production of *Don Quixote*. You exchanged contacts to hook up. Which you haven't done yet. You want to be one degree from my family, from my sister? Then you don't fuck anyone in the ballet. Especially him. *Delete his number.*"

I laugh. "Now you're telling me who I can be in contact with? Man, do you hear yourself?"

"Welcome to my world." Beckett looks through me. "My world is my sister's world, and you can't bullshit me into thinking you're not wrapped up in hers. So delete his fucking number." He says all this in the calmest, most leveled tone.

I war between telling him to fuck off and giving in just to go home.

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"I'm not your fucking underling." I dig my phone out of my pocket and delete Leo's contact. "Boss me around like I serve you again, and you won't need to thank me for doing anything nice for your sister. Because that time will be the last."

It hurts just saying it.

I don't let Beckett respond. I finally push past him and make my way home, trying to rid the tension in my rib cage with each step.

By the time I'm back in Chelsea and walking into my apartment, it's nearing 11 p.m.

I haven't done *any* schoolwork.

No competition prep.

Behind is a word I fucking despise, and yet it's screaming at me. With Nothing Personal on tour until April, the apartment is too quiet. I check my brother's location—not totally shocked to see he's at his boyfriend's.

I'm alone.

Good. Yeah. I have the place to myself.

After I shower, I sink down on the edge of my mattress, my legs jostling as I scroll through my phone. Heat ramps up across my skin, pressure compounding on my chest. If I stop for a second to think about how far behind I am—*so far behind*—then I'm going to lose my shit. I just need to do something else. Do someone else.

I blow out a tight breath. Amara from 2B. She would probably be down to fuck tonight. There aren't hidden cameras in my room. Except...she has a phone.

My stomach tightens.

Would she be weirded out if I told her to leave it in the kitchen? *Yeah, Birdie, take away her one line of communication that makes her feel safe. That sounds great.* For Christ's sake—why does this have to be so complicated? It's just sex. The most uncomplicated thing in the world. At least for me. I run a frustrated hand through my hair, and then my phone pings with a text.

AUDREY

How long do sleep gummies take to work?

What in the fuck? I immediately send her a video call request.

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

When Audrey accepts the video call, she fills the screen. Neither of us says a word.

Her wet hair dries against her collarbones, and her low-cut cotton top scoops over her breasts. I can keep my eyes off her tits—that's not the problem.

The problem is the shallow sound of her breathing. The problem is I'm imagining skimming my hands along her bare shoulders so very, very slowly, and I'm picturing her reaction to my touch...of *her shoulders.*

Her fucking shoulders.

I need laid.

Not by her. I cannot fuck her after...she deserves...someone that's not me.

I'm acutely aware that she's painting a portrait of me in her head in the quiet. I'm shirtless, propped against a mound of pillows, and my phone is angled so she has a visual of the Cupid tattoo on my chest.

"Why are you asking me about sleep gummies?" I finally break the silence.

"I thought you would know the answer."

"That's a question for a search engine, Virginia."

"Well, I don't think they're working. Perhaps you have an alternative suggestion."

"Other than touching yourself," I say. *Regrettably*. My brain just went there. But I know better than to bring it up in the middle of the night while we're both in bed.

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

Her lips lift. "It's not on the table tonight. Tomorrow though..."

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Tomorrow.

"Good for you," I say, my voice tight.

She narrows her gaze. "You've never done it?"

I let out a dry laugh. "I've jerked off plenty."

"To fall asleep?" Her earnestness ropes me in. Her persistence. The never-ending line she casts out—it's like she's fishing in a bottomless sea that is me. I want to say I'm not hooked, but I keep watching her collarbones rise and fall in a steady pattern.

The way she breathes is turning me on.

The way she *fucking* breathes.

I shift uncomfortably on the mattress, my dick starting to harden. I am so far gone. Why the fuck did I video call her? Tonight is *not* the night. I was one second from getting Amara in my bed. The thought causes acid to burn the back of my throat.

"We shouldn't do this," I say, my voice too rasped.

"We're just talking, Haydn," Audrey says with a tilt of her head.

"Well, I'm too horny to talk tonight," I admit. "I haven't had sex in six thousand years. So…yeah."

She wears an amused smile. "Six thousand years is a very long time."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, okay. It's been *seven* days." I don't mention that was just a blow job.

"So one week is six thousand years under Birdie St. Pierre's law of time dilation."

What in the…

"That's what you gathered from that?" I ask her.

She curls a strand of hair around her finger. "That, and you must be used to having an awful lot of sex."

"You masturbate to fall asleep. I have sex when I'm stressed—and I'm always stressed. So…you're smart, you can do the math."

"So that's what you were about to go do tonight," she says. "Find someone to sleep with."

I swallow, my throat dry. "I was about to, yeah." I reach over for my water, take a long swig, trying to stop picturing myself with Audrey. Like in the same fucking bed. Like with my arms around her. "But I can't."

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"Why not?" Her eyes light up—and I wonder if she's thinking she's the reason. I don't want to give her the wrong impression, but telling her the truth is...complicated. It will take longer than a handful of minutes.

"How long before the sleep gummies hit?" I wonder.

"I took two of them two hours ago, and I'm still wired." Her gaze pins on me. "You can't find someone to sleep with, or you don't *want* to find someone to sleep with? Because those are two very distinct categories."

I laugh. "Believe me, I have no trouble finding someone to sleep with."

"Like who?" she asks.

"God, you are so pushy."

"I prefer the word persistent."

"I have used that one for you too."

"What about assiduous?"

I give her a look. "Are you trying to stump me?"

"Is it working?" She's smiling, a pretty smile that reaches her blue eyes.

"No, I *read*. I know what assiduous means." I list off, "Diligent. Hard-working. Your assiduous attention to detail is unnerving."

She quirks her brows. "I unnerve you?"

I try not to look at her lips. "Next question."

She rolls her eyes, then asks, "Why do you read so much? What made you start?"

"School—we were required to read all the classics, and I liked a lot of them." Off her confusion, I clarify, "The music conservatories I went to were private schools. There were English classes and non-music studies."

Audrey nods. "Back to who you're sleeping with."

"Currently, no one." I angle the phone at my green comforter, then it's back on me. I see her...blushing. "Why are you red?"

"I'm *not*." She hoists her chin. "You have very nice calves."

Oh fuck. I'm only wearing black boxer-briefs, and I must've aimed the phone at my legs. Glancing down, I tug the fabric lower over my thighs, my pulse racing an extra notch faster.

"That was not a compliment," she notes.

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"Sure, sure." I scrape my hand through my hair, trying to relax, but I'm aroused and uptight, and I just need…her.

No.

No.

No.

She bores her eyes into me. I don't let go of her gaze as she says, "I am curious who would come running to have sex at eleven p.m. on a Tuesday."

"A girl who lives in my building. A couple floors below me."

Audrey stills. "You've slept with her before?"

"No. But she wants to." I exhale a heavy breath. "It's not just her though. I've been in my head about sex in general. I'm starting to distrust anyone I hook up with. It's been messing with me for weeks."

She frowns. "Do you know why it started?"

"Yeah," I say into another hoarse laugh. "Yeah, I know exactly why. But if I tell you—you have to promise with your entire *soul*, Virginia, that you will never repeat this. Not to any brother, sister, parent, breathing, living human being."

It cannot get back to Phoenix.

I add, "Hell, don't even tell Ben and Harriet's pet cockatoo." Mister Feathers *talks.* I unfortunately know this when I slept on the pull-out and the thing hopped up on me and squawked, "Peek-a-boo!" in my face.

"Of course." Her eyes grow with intensity. "I won't tell anyone. I promise." She touches her chest, right above her heart. "And I'll even promise in French—Je promets."

"Does French make it more official or something?" I ask.

"In my family, it's a promise that can never be broken. Or else…"

"Ominous," I say. "What's 'or else'?"

"I don't know. No one dares to break it. No one would. It's a mark upon your soul."

Okay.

I nod a couple times, not in the mood to make fun of something that I can get down with. My ribs constrict before I say, "It has to do with the money I need."

Audrey pulls her phone closer to her face, surprise pinching her brows. "How so?"

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I keep my forearms on my knees, my phone tight in my grip. "There's a shitty guy who has nudes."

She takes in a pierced breath that parts her lips.

I'm caught on her close-up features and her overdramatized reaction—which is so fucking genuine. I skim her face again and again. "Did I scandalize you, princess?"

"I'm *appalled* for you." Her eyes are very empathetic. Which isn't really needed.

"It's not…" How the hell do I explain this? I rub a hand over my mouth, then just add, "He's demanding thirty grand, or else he'll go sell the nudes to someone else who will post them online."

"That's horrible and *illegal*." She straightens up like she's about to play detective.

"I don't exactly have much proof of extortion. The initial contact was a phone call." I skate a hand against my neck. "It's really made me second-guess who I'm sleeping with. I've been in a successful rock band. People drop into my DMs all the time—DMs that I do not respond to—because they want to fuck the drummer of Nothing Personal. Maybe make it known they did. So…" I shake my head slowly, my eyes far away at the thought. "Anyone I sleep with can take a photo or video without me knowing and post it online. It's made me reevaluate how much I trust people."

Audrey blinks a few times, piecing this together. "Who has pictures of you? Do you know them personally? Are they full-frontal? What exactly are the nudes?"

Of course she wants the details. I have to tell her the entire truth. My eyes burn, and I somehow let it out. "They're not pictures of me. It's just made me more paranoid because of how easily it happened to my brother."

Her voice goes hushed. "Phoenix."

I lift my brows. "Yeah." I swallow a knot. "My brother was photographed without his consent. He still has no idea."

"You know who did it?"

"Yeah, I do." I nod tensely. "Chase. His ex-boyfriend. That immoral sack of shit. He took nudes of Phoenix when they were dating, and Chase knows better than to ask my brother for the money. Phoenix would likely roll the dice and let his whole reputation and career go up

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in flames rather than give his ex a fucking dime." I stare out at my row of instruments lined up against the wall. "My brother has looked out for me my whole life. I need to do this for him."

Audrey presses her knuckles to her cheek, thinking hard. "Have you seen the photos? What if Chase is lying?"

"I've seen them, Virginia."

Her eyes bug. "On a scale from one to ten, how bad are they?"

Her earnestness causes my lips to twitch into a slight smile. "Eight point five. He's not in the act. But they are *bad*. Like bad, bad. Fully naked, full-frontal." I remember being so viscerally angry learning Chase took these, but I hadn't been surprised. So I tell Audrey, "Chase wouldn't know the word *morality* if it smacked him in the face, so I wasn't bowled over when he asked me for money."

"Threatened you for money," she corrects.

"Yeah, and I'm handling it."

Her neck cranes at a thought. "You realize thirty thousand isn't that much to me."

I blink hard. "You don't say?" I ignore her haughty puff of breath to add, "I don't want a handout. I don't need it. With the tutoring sessions, I'm almost at my goal. Phoenix doesn't need to know, especially with how bad Chase already messed him up. He doesn't need to go through this too. It will hit him extra hard now that he's with Tom. He *loves* your brother—like he's never loved anyone."

I thought this would make Audrey smile. Her lips are downturned. "But it's messing you up as well."

"I'm fine," I say in a tight voice.

"You're horny and unable to have sex for *six thousand years*," she says dramatically. "That feels unfine."

"Unfine is not a word."

She smiles. "I was hoping you'd call me out for it."

I roll my eyes and let out a laugh, realizing I'm strangely *smiling*. I run my tongue over my molars. Heat travels south the second I catch her studying my lips, my brows, my neck, my birthmark, my features. I let out a low, husky, "Fuck" that I hope she can't hear. My cock strains against my boxer-briefs.

Her blue eyes rise slowly to meet mine.

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She feels so close to me, and yet we're on the phone. She's not even physically here.

How is this possible?

Her eyes flutter a little, until she whispers, "You do realize we have a solution right in front of us." Her brows raise expectantly like she's waiting for me to connect the dots. But these dots must be on a different plane of existence. Because there's no way she's thinking what I'm thinking in my sex-starved brain.

"Spell it out for me," I tell her.

"You're having trust issues with sexual partners. But you trust *me*."

For Christ's sake. Yeah, she's thinking what I'm thinking. *Fuck.*

"Virginia."

"Haydn," she counters quickly. "It's not even just about you. This helps me too. I might not be well experienced, but my *one* experience was disastrous. And I wish to rewrite over it with something better. With you, feasibly."

My muscles are stiff unmovable boards. "Feasibly," I repeat, and I nod into the word, "No." I'm only breathing through my nose.

"Why not?" Audrey asks, not dejected yet.

"It's been seventy-two hours since you lost your virginity."

"Exactly. The longer I wait—the more I'll have to remember that one time as the *only* time."

I see her logic, but… "You deserve romance and flowers and a boyfriend. I am not that guy. I am not relationship material, Virginia. I have sex to relieve stress. Not out of love."

"You don't have to love me. You don't even have to be my boyfriend. Just make me feel good. Is that not at all possible?"

It is entirely possibly. That's what scares me. I'd love nothing more than to wipe that fucker's existence from her memory. I scrub a hand against the back of my neck. My skin hot to the touch.

I end up telling her, "You say that I don't have to love you or be your boyfriend. But girls like you want the commitment. They want someone to take them on dates and show off to their parents. You will never get that from me, Audrey. You need to really think about what you're asking. Because a week, a month down the line—it's not going to change. I literally am not made for a relationship. This will only be sex. Do you really, *truly* want that?"

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Her determined, unyielding gaze never breaks from me. "Yes." She narrows her eyes. "The better question is do you want to have sex with me?"

My brows arch in surprise. "That is not a *better* question. The answer is obvious, Virginia."

She smiles. "You want to sleep with me." Her voice is breathy and light, something I try to hold on to.

"Yeah, you're…" I lick my lips. "*Fuck*." I can't believe this is happening. But maybe I can. I shake my head and then look back down at her on my phone screen. Flush coats her cheeks, hiding her freckles. I run my fingers over my lip piercings.

"So you agree?" she wonders, hunting for the confirmation in my eyes. "We're to be sex partners?"

"*Virginia*." I groan, sliding a hot hand through my hair. "We're not calling each other that."

"Then what are we calling each other?" Audrey asks, her breath hitching. She's staring at my Adam's apple.

"Eyes up on mine," I tell her.

Her eyes rage upward, all fire. "Why do you hate being stared at so much? Is it being stared at by me or by everyone?"

"Just you."

Her carriage rises as she takes a shallow, panty breath. *That noise.* I'm trapped on Audrey as much as she's trapped on me.

I murmur, "Just you."

She releases a tiny high-pitched moan that catches at the end. Coaxing this out of her sends a molten shockwave down my fucking body and twitches my cock. *No, no, no*.

Not like this. We're not doing this tonight over the phone.

I want to be there to make sure she's okay. To *physically* hold her after she comes. To *physically* feel her pulse. I don't like this virtual shit, not with her.

"Audrey," I whisper. "*Audrey.* Stop arching your back."

"I'm not, Haydn." She glares.

I watch her squirm. My muscles are on fire. "We don't need to call each other anything," I tell her, trying to reroute this back to the details to cool off. "We're just going to be fooling around. There doesn't

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need to be a box you have to put this in. I'm helping you. You're helping me."

She nods repeatedly, blowing out a long breath. "I like this." She pushes her hair off her shoulders, situating herself back against her pillows. "No boxes. We're simply Audrey and Birdie."

"And we're not planning this out like your Valentine's date. There's not going to be sex booked on your calendar. Okay?"

She frowns. "Then when—"

"When it feels right," I interject. "And Virginia…"

"Yes?"

"I'm not putting my cock inside of you until I have you wet and begging. I will not fuck you dry."

Her lips part, and her eyes roam. "What if I don't beg?"

"I will have you begging for my cock. I can promise I will have you there. It means a lot of foreplay. Are you okay with that?"

Her cheeks are still rosy. She nods quickly. "I can be very okay with that, yes." She looks me over. "Are you okay if maybe I am not the most experienced in sex?"

"I'm very okay with that."

I'm out of my mind—but oddly, this feels less stressful than the alternative. Her with someone else. Who'd be her next experience? Would he treat her right? What if she goes through another harrowing night with a complete fucking asshole? A repeat that I could've helped her avoid?

I might be terrible with relationships, but I am the best person she could come to for an incredible sexual experience. That I know without a doubt.

CamScanner

30
AUDREY COBALT

Girl squad reunited, at last. Over video call, but still, *reunited.*

Winona and Vada are squished side by side in a retro booth at London's Superheroes & Scones—a hybrid coffee shop and comic book store. They're still in London after watching The Carraways perform at the sold-out Wembley Stadium on Valentine's.

There are two things Kinney and I can always count on with our best friends: Winona will never sit still, and Vada will always be crude.

Thankfully, they're using Vada's laptop so Winona isn't giving me motion sickness jumping around with her phone. She's just balling the sleeves of her cute green Fair Isle sweater in her hands and swinging her knees by her chest. She's our sun-kissed, brown-haired nature girl.

Vada is our BMX baddie. More alternative, she's repping my brother's band with a black *The Carraways World Tour* hoodie. Her loose fishtail braid is unraveling at her shoulder, but she only rebraids her dirty blonde hair when she's anxious.

On the East Coast, Kinney, our resident goth, is slouched halfway in bed this early a.m.

Then there's me, the hopeless romantic. The moniker must still fit… even if a little. I'm brushing my hair at my vanity and sharing more details about my Valentine's date.

"So it wasn't everything I'd imagined," I tell them. "Far from it, but it won't be the last date I ever have." I'm glad this call is coming after I made the sex pact with Birdie last night. My optimism is at a new high. Yes, he was *very* clear that there would be no romance, but I'm not seeking a fanciful romantic love story—I am seeking good experiences to rewrite over this bad one.

Quite simple.

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Achievable.

It has to be. Birdie is my greatest hope at not letting Guy fester on me like a blood-sucking *leech*—he will not leech *anything* from me.

I will not allow that to happen.

Vada unconsciously scratches at the scab on her chin—a motocross injury. "So this douchebag got his and he didn't make sure you got yours?"

"Another reason why we are not meant to be," I note, stroking my brush through my hair.

"What are the other reasons?" Winona asks, concern hot in her eyes. She's the oldest of us. She punched a boy right in the nose to defend Kinney before. I imagine she'd book a plane ticket just to protect me from this vile species of human too.

But I don't want her to come to New York because she thinks I'm in need of defending. I want her in the city with me because it's where she's happiest, and right now, I think she's happiest backpacking with Vada.

I don't need a full Girl Squad Assemble. Kinney is enough, and I am not struggling here. I'm *prevailing*. She needs to know I am.

"No other specific reasons, really," I tell Winona. "This could be a good thing actually."

"How?" Kinney asks with furrowed brows.

"I can cross him off as *my type*. Because I never want to sleep with anyone remotely like him again."

Winona's swinging legs take a pause. "We hate him, don't we?"

I'm caught between wanting to say *no* and *yes*.

Vada frowns. "I thought we hate the bitchy music tutor?"

I clap my hands together. "Birdie is not bitchy. Let that be known."

Kinney gives me a hard stare. "You said Tutor Boy wasn't a morning person, afternoon person, or night person."

My cheeks heat.

"That sounds pretty bitchy to me," Vada adds.

I don't know why I'm defending Birdie when his personality *is* equal measures inciting and maddening at *every* hour. But...he's also helping me. At every turn, he's continued to help me.

I shake out the thoughts. "Enough about me. How's London? Any whirlwind romances? One-night stands?" I gasp. "Did you meet any-

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one at the concert? Did you crowd-surf?" It would be such a Winona thing to do.

Vada would've followed. Kinney and I would've stayed behind to film them, and maybe that's why our split feels destined. We've always naturally paired off.

Winona winces. "The only thing we should be talking about is you, babe. Are you really okay? Did it hurt? The PowerPoint said you had post-sex bruises."

"They've already faded. I'm *very* well," I assure. "Vada, wasn't your first time rough?"

"Not that rough."

"What about the second and third times?"

"She's deflecting," Kinney says.

I huff at Kinney. "I am not."

"You are," they all say.

"I am fine. Perfectly fine." I rip out hair from the bristles of my brush. "Guy did not affect me. Other than spark a relentless determination to make him feel inadequate and small."

"In bed?" Vada asks, glancing worriedly at Winona.

Winona's eyes grow. "Is sleeping with him again a good idea?"

"It's a bad idea," Kinney says flatly.

"I meant *academically* inadequate. Hopefully proving how brilliant I am at quiz bowl will accomplish that feat. I would rather be stung by a thousand bees than be anywhere near his cock."

Winona's eyes have blown wide in concern. "Okay, fuck him. We *despise* him."

Vada nods strongly. "I can't believe we all thought that quiz bowl cunt was hot."

"I said he was butt ugly," Kinney reminds us.

"All men should be vetted through Kinney," I say. "That's obviously the litmus test we've missed."

Kinney almost smiles, but it's stolen by a yawn. We all yawn one after the other, which causes us to laugh. I've missed this. Us four.

Though, none of us make promises to stay in touch more, and I wonder if it's because we know it's a promise we might not be able to fulfill.

CamScanner

Once we've all left the video call, I think more and more about last night's conversation with Birdie. Heat bathes my cheeks, and I whip out a curling iron to properly do my hair. Then I buzz around my room, getting ready with mounting anticipation.

I finish buckling my three-inch heeled Mary Janes.

Ready.

I leave my room for the kitchen.

"Sister, you're awake…and wearing makeup and a skirt," Eliot says, his eyes big in shock. His spatula hovers over a frying pan where he babies a French omelet. Ever since the PowerPoint presentation, Eliot has risen far earlier than he ever has. Just to make me breakfast, pour me a cup of coffee, and see me off before my tutoring session.

I've expressed that I don't need the coddling. But he said he'd do it for Tom, for Ben, for any of our siblings.

It makes me feel a little less guilty, and I can't deny that I love the extra attention from Eliot. I fit a dangly pearl earring into my ear. "I had time this morning to turn myself back into Normal Audrey. I slept better last night."

He grins. "It was the sleep gummies, wasn't it?"

I nod. "I think so." After talking to Birdie and devising our sex pact, I laid my head on my pillow and conked out almost immediately. I'm not sure what else I can contribute that to.

"I hope to never see those sweatpants again," Eliot tells me.

"They're in the back of the closet for a rainier day."

"No rain allowed. I decree it." Eliot scoops the soft, wet eggs onto a plate.

As I slide onto the velvet barstool, I peek over at the gas fireplace. My pink trench coat lies partially charred on the faux logs. *Polyester.* The tag said one hundred percent cotton.

I expected it to burn to ash like the silk dress, but instead, a rush of toxic smoke plumed out at me and my three oldest brothers. Beckett shut off the fireplace before we were smoked out.

And I thought Tom and Eliot would be the most likely to set off the fire alarm.

It was me.

I stab my omelet.

CamScanner

Eliot watches me, his hands spread on the counter like he's about to push off and go grab a baseball bat to smash the windows of Guy's Bentley. Which Eliot threatened to do but did not execute after I told him, *you cannot. Do not. Absolutely not.* In every way imaginable.

Eliot asks, "Any word from the deplorable waste of human flesh?"

He almost pulls a smile out of me, until I remember, "He texted me again last night."

Guy even called me the night after Valentine's like he'd said he would. I never answered that call. I messaged with an excuse about being tired. The next couple of days he checked in by text, and I've been cordial but short.

I'm not trying to lead him on. But I'm going to be seeing him every week at quiz bowl, so I'd rather let him down in-person where he can see the sincerity in my expression. There's less chance he'll take it poorly then.

Eliot tosses the frying pan in the sink, a little too forcibly. It clangs against the basin. His expression flames with ire like it does every time we discuss Guy. "His text better have been an apology."

"He doesn't know he did anything wrong. And I'm not sure he did—"

"*Audrey*." He cuts me off, gripping the counter. His eyes snapped shut. "We talked about this."

Yes, I'm not supposed to say that Guy did nothing wrong. I'm also not supposed to blame myself. Not in Eliot's presence. He says it gives him Stage 5 rage.

"Well, you don't want to know what his text says then." I hold my coffee mug with two hands and take a sip.

Eliot's eyes open onto me with more intensity. "I do."

"It will fill you with Stage 7 rage."

"Good thing my rage maxes out at 5." He turns on the faucet to wash the frying pan and nods toward my phone.

I click into my text thread. My pulse does a quick skip every time I see Guy's messages. But I ignore that bodily abnormality. I am my usual self. I am capable. I take a breath before I read aloud. "He said, *I can't stop thinking about how good you looked on my bed. I want you there again.*"

Eliot's nose flares. He's staring off.

CamScanner

"Eliot?" I wave a hand. "Eliot?"

"Sorry." He refocuses on me. "Just imagining crushing his head into a wall."

"That is not sane."

"'I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw,'" he quotes from *Hamlet*, and I'm well-versed enough in Shakespeare to understand he's saying he's not truly insane—that his madness is strategic. He has total clarity of the situation.

Eliot dries his hands and asks, "You're seeing him at the quiz bowl practice tomorrow? I should be there—"

"*Charlie* is going to be there."

"Me *and* Charlie."

"Just Charlie," I counter.

"And me."

"Charlie."

"Me."

"*Eliot*."

"See, you understand—"

"Just Charlie," I say in finality. "And it's not because I don't want you there. It's because you are not on the quiz bowl team."

"I'll enroll in college—"

"And quit the theater?" I cut in, my heart already panging at the terrible idea. "You're the lead in *Amadeus.* A dream performance. No, I'm not destroying your job. Charlie is a student."

It's still such a strange concept. Even saying it out loud takes me aback.

Not only did Charlie think I'd find myself in trouble in New York—he thought he'd need to be in proximity of me to "clean my mess." It should've irked me. Given any other situation, maybe it would've.

But I want his help.

I'm appreciative he's lending it and not telling me to go home to Philly.

The day he'd donated blood at MVU, he also apparently took an exam in a professor's office for his Roman Art and Architecture course. His enrollment at MVU has been very hush, hush. The dean granted

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him special permission to take tests outside of class—so as not to disturb other students since he's…well, he's *Charlie.*

Out of all my brothers, he's the most publicly recognizable. Yet very few truly know him. Clearly he's even a mystery to me at times.

It wasn't shockingly difficult to get my genius brother on the quiz bowl team. All it took was a group text to Lia, Wilcox, and Guy, asking if they'd be interested in Charlie Keating Cobalt joining.

They unanimously agreed he could.

Guy said we'd discuss the logistics at our first practice tomorrow and determine who'd step down to be the alternate. Only four students can be starters.

On paper, I'm the easiest candidate for demotion. The newest team member *and* the youngest, and after I break up with Guy, I will be a triple threat to warm that alternate bench.

My only ace card is Charlie.

He assured me he won't start unless I do too.

Eliot grips his mug with one hand, his energy just as heated as the steam billowing off the coffee. Muscles stiff, jaw clenched, blue eyes ready to incinerate the world. I know it's killing him not to retaliate in any way.

I swallow a bite of egg.

As he refills my mug, he asks, "Are you wearing perfume?"

"I am."

"To tutoring?"

"Yes, am I not allowed to smell nice?" I scoop up more eggs. "These are quite good this morning. Did you change the recipe?"

He narrows his eyes. "I made them with gruyère today. And now I know something is going on. You're deflecting."

Being called out *twice* in one morning. I am off my game.

I sigh heavily. Maybe this is *good.*

Eliot needs to know that I'm moving on. That things are getting better. I hate that he's holding on to so much anger and animosity on my behalf. That type of hatred corrodes. I miss the jovial, lighthearted brother with harmless mischief in his veins and mirth in his eyes. "If you must know…I might be having sex again today with someone who is *not* Guy. A do-over, if you will."

Eliot looks like he might implode.

CamScanner

I was *very* wrong. This is not good.

My heart beats fast. "This is great news. I get to move on."

"With Birdie?" Eliot guesses correctly. "You're having sex with Birdie St. Pierre?"

My cheeks roast. Was this a secret sex pact? Maybe, possibly, the secrecy was implied. But Birdie didn't tell me to keep it to myself!

"Technically, we haven't done anything yet," I defend. "We've only recently agreed to sleep together, so that I can write over tragic history."

Eliot calms, his shoulders slackening, but he takes out his phone.

"What are you doing?" I ask with wide eyes.

"Texting your tutor."

"You have his number?"

"I went to the Grammys with him," he reminds me. "Where he made out with *three* different people at an afterparty." His brows rise at me. "Did you know that?"

I gasp. "Are you slut shaming him?"

"I do not shame sluts. I am simply calling him a slut, sister."

"You call yourself a whore."

I've stumped Eliot. His jaw tics.

I smile, triumphant. "I'm unsurprised about Birdie, if that's what you're asking. He's been *very* honest and upfront. He doesn't do relationships. This is purely just him helping me have a better experience. Don't you want that for me too? For my second time to be something I'm guaranteed to enjoy."

"Of course. But I don't like him, Audrey."

"Why?" I ask, confused. "He's Tom's boyfriend's brother. You *love* Tom."

"That doesn't mean I love every person within two degrees of Tom," Eliot contends hotly. He's not paying attention to his phone anymore. "Birdie only looks out for himself."

I open my mouth to contest. Because I know Birdie isn't only self-serving. He's been trying to earn thirty thousand dollars just to protect his brother, and Eliot has no clue.

But this is a secret I will not share. I cannot share. On my soul, I won't.

"This is really what you want?" Eliot asks me. "Not a boyfriend?"

CamScanner

Birdie questioned the same thing last night. But dating, romance, all the things I dreamed of will come later.

"Yes. Right now, all I want is sex. No relationships." I give him a look. "You out of everyone can at least relate to that."

He nods very slowly, and I can see his mind shifting like he's overthinking something. I don't need to stay here and wait for him to change his opinion. As far as I'm concerned, my brother has given approval of my sex pact with Birdie.

I take a large gulp of coffee before hopping off the stool. "See you later—"

"Wait." He wrenches open a kitchen drawer, then pulls out a handful of square-foiled packets.

"I already have some."

"Just take these in case he's a different size than what you have." Eliot puts the condoms on the counter for me. That is...a good idea.

I toss them into my tote, ready for my tutoring session.

Where I may or may not be having sex.

CamScanner

We haven't even kissed yet. Birdie greeted me in the practice room like any average day. Even though, clearly, it is *not* an average day.

We are five minutes into talking about Vivaldi, and he hasn't even uttered the word *sex*. Did I make last night up in my head? Did he silently regret it and hope I'd forget all about it? I cannot concentrate until we clear this up.

"He was a violin teacher at the Ospedale della Pietà, which was a Venetian orphanage for girls—"

"I'm sorry," I cut him off. "Are we really doing this?"

Birdie frowns. "Tutoring?"

"Ignoring. Evading. Neglecting. I have a hundred synonyms for it. I can keep going—"

"Please don't," he says dryly. "Just tell me what I'm neglecting. Enlighten me, Virginia."

"You haven't made a single move on me or brought up our sex pact."

His brows rise. "We're not calling it a sex pact."

"The name aside," I say briskly, "are we still on the same page? You would like to sleep with me?"

"*Yes*," he says in a heavy breath. "I still want to have sex with you. Would you like me to hop into a plane and spell it in the sky?"

My cheeks prickle with heat. "Frankly, no. That is too extravagant."

"Good because I don't own a plane." He looks me over—a full body look, which he rarely does toward me. My skin tingles. I watch his gaze lift to mine before he asks, "What gave you the impression I changed my mind?"

CamScanner

"You didn't bring it up." I wave a hand toward him. "You haven't even *kissed* me."

"Because I'm *tutoring* you. I know how much acing your specialty means to you, and kissing would be a fucking distraction. I'm trying not to distract you."

That is rather…kind of him.

"Anything else?" He's standing to grab his cello. "I want to play Vivaldi's *Winter* for you."

For me.

He doesn't mean it like *that,* Audrey. My heart beats quickly. "I have a confession."

He freezes and aims a skeptical look at me. "What? No confession cupcakes this time?" He nods toward the glass Tupperware, filled with pistachio-cranberry scones, beside his metal chair.

"I didn't have time. The offense was made this morning." He's still standing, which puts me more on edge. "It would be better if you sit."

"I'll stand."

Lovely.

I cup my hands together, and I say as diplomatically as I can, "Eliot knows that we're going to be sleeping together. I told him about it this morning."

Birdie's eyes go wide. "What? Why in the fuck would you do that? He's going to kill me—"

"He gave his blessing actually."

"Oh my *God, Virginia.*" Birdie sinks down onto the metal chair and puts his head in his hand.

"It's good," I assure. "Now we don't have to hide anything. Honesty…is the best policy?"

Birdie's face has paled. This is hitting him harder than I thought it would. He runs a hand through his brown hair, his eyes slipping to me in slight panic. "Can you actually keep a secret, Audrey?" His use of my first name thickens the gravity in his voice.

"*Yes,*" I say from the depths of my soul. "I would *never* tell anyone about why you need the money. Je le promets. I meant it. I mean it."

He exhales a deeper breath, then drops his hand and grips his thigh.

CamScanner

I tug at the pearl bracelet on my wrist. “Are you cross with me?” I ask softly.

He lets out a laugh under his breath. “Not when you say it like that, no. Am I annoyed? Yes, *very.* But that’s not new.” He locks eyes with me. “You are a fucking *torment* to my brain.”

I lift my chin. “Likewise.” I wave him on. “I’d like to continue with the lesson. Play on.”

He gives me a look like *shut up*. He must know I purposely quoted the *play on* tattoo on his wrist. I’m smiling so wide, but my expression softens as he begins playing the sharp, dramatic opening of Vivaldi’s *Winter*.

Per usual, Birdie only stares at the floor or far past me while he plays. Never once meeting my eyes. Still, I’m swept in the music for a moment.

I forget to dislike him.

I even forget how much I’ve liked to hate him.

I forget everything but the way this beautiful, furious, biting noise fills my mind and pricks my body. The melody captures my emotions of the past four days. Too perfectly. Too ferociously. My eyes sting, being surrounded with the sound of my feelings.

The music pushes at my chest, making it harder to breathe. “Stop,” I whisper, too softly. “Birdie, *stop*.”

He lifts his bow, the sound immediately ceasing. He stares right into me, unblinking, and I cling to his gaze because he’s not looking away. I like that he doesn’t look away while I try to sit straighter and calm my skidding heartbeat.

“Vivaldi?” I ask, swallowing a knot. “Why did you want to play that for me?”

“I thought maybe…” He gives me a tight headshake. “You okay, princess?”

“Never better. Why would you think otherwise?”

“Well, Virginia, you told me to *stop*. That’s the first time you’ve done that. And you look like you’re about to cry.”

“I do not.” I touch the corners of my eyes. “They are *dry*.”

He motions a hand at the mirror four feet from me. “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the saddest of them all?”

I nearly smile, but as I take a breath I say, “I am fi—”

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"If you say fine, I'll start playing this all over again."

I growl. "*Fine*. Play it, Haydn."

He accepts the challenge and plays the same concerto. His fingers crawl feverishly over the strings, his face expressing this chaotic, harsh feeling. Like slipping on the ice, crashing, standing, slipping again, trying desperately not to fall in the cold. He neither grimaces nor scowls. His expression carries the same emotion I hear, as if for this moment we're sharing a feeling—a feeling I haven't expressed clearly enough to be shared this well.

His eyes start to rise off the floor.

"Stop," I manage to rasp out as tears threaten to pool. He ends the music again.

"Virginia," he breathes.

"I don't want to cry," I say very sternly.

"Open your textbook."

I do as told, sniffing hard to stem my runny nose. I hear Birdie rise from his chair, but I don't peer up. Not until a tissue dangles in my face. He's bent forward, one hand braced on his thigh so he's not towering over me, and he wags the tissue again.

I snatch it. "Merci beaucoup."

Birdie lowers to a squat so we're eye level. "Forget your travel tissues?"

"I rarely cry unless I'm watching two people fall madly in love." I dab at my nose. "You pack tissues?"

"Yeah. I cry every time you walk away from me."

I huff. "I know you're joking, but..." I sniff a little, then ball up the tissue.

"But what?"

"You should cry every time I walk out of a room. My presence is both joy and—"

"Misery?"

I bow forward. "If I make you so miserable, what are you still doing here crouched at my feet?"

He doesn't move, doesn't rise. My pulse accelerates, my lungs burning at a new degree. Our lips are a breath apart...is he...? Is he about to...?

CamScanner

He pulls my chair legs. *Closer.* His knee roots to the edge of the seat, between my thighs. *Closer.* His hand grips the metal frame behind my head. *Closer.* He stares down into me as if his eyes are charting an intimate course inside my body. *Closer.*

I'm entranced.

As his fingertips begin to skate down my cheek—those same fingers I've seen work a cello are now slipping against the softness of my skin. His knuckles brush the line of my jaw. Then his fingers unfurl as his hand—his callused, masculine hand—cups my face with strong affection. The way someone holds something they own and cherish.

"Breathe," he murmurs.

I suck in a staggered, electrified breath that catches as he dips down and his lips melt against mine. The kiss is achingly soft, then more, more, *more.*

It is drawn-out pleasure, rapidly rousing all the nerves along my skin and inside my body. Then he edges back so very slowly, pulling with him…a high-pitched whimper out of me.

"*Virginia,*" he chastises into a hungered groan. His nose flares. I clench his shirt, not wanting him to leave. His fingers slide deeper to the back of my skull, lost in the strands of my hair. My head is tilting back over the metal frame.

"Haydn," I pant.

He has my face in his possession, and he comes back down on my lips. This time, he kisses me with hot, fervent passion. His tongue slips sensually against mine, his lips pulling me up into him. I'd think I were levitating off this chair if it weren't for the metal digging into my shoulders. His lips urge me to meet him in kind like we're dragging one another in a smoldering inferno.

I've never been French kissed with this much yearning or skill. His piercings add tingling friction. He nips my bottom lip before devouring me whole again and again.

The sweet taste of him intoxicates me. The strength of his hands against my cheeks delights me. The gravel in his throat unspools me. Every breath I take between our kisses is more moan than gasp of air. There comes a point where one noise I expel can only be classified as a…whine.

Birdie tears off me. "*Fuck.*"

CamScanner

I gasp into another whine, and I reach for his shirt. Only to grip nothing.

He steps fully back, sliding his fingers through his hair. Then he adjusts his very hard cock in his black pants. Birdie catches me staring at his hand on his length, and his eyes drop to my knees, still spread wide open. My ivory skirt is hiked up my thighs.

"Close your legs," he says.

"I will not."

"I'm not fucking you here. Close your legs, Virginia."

I grip the chair on either side of me, my lips stinging. My textbook has fallen to the floor. I release a tiny, frustrated growl. "But—"

"But *Vivaldi*," he states harshly, scolding me. "Anything else, I don't want to hear it."

I draw in an aching, scorching breath—gulping the second he turns his back to me. What is he doing to me? I press my knees together as the pulsing between my legs becomes an unbearable, desirous throb for…for…for him.

I need to stay on track. He's trying to put me back on track. Not kiss me more. Certainly not fuck me. His restraint is both to my benefit and to my anguish.

Birdie lowers back on his chair, settling his cello between his legs. I do my very best to concentrate, and the tutoring session ends with tension snaking through my body.

His muscles seem coiled, but he goes absolutely *rigid* the second he checks his phone. Panic flashes across his face.

It's an email from the TA in his Composing for Visual Media class. Apparently, he completely forgot to turn in an assignment that was due.

"I'm sure they won't dock many points for a late turn-in," I try to comfort.

"This is *grad* school. A late turn-in is a zero—I have to go." He's slinging his cello on his shoulder, not even bothering putting on his backpack. He seizes the strap and runs out of the practice room.

I don't hear from him all day, and being a Wednesday, I make the two-hour trek to my childhood home in Philly for dinner, then return late at night to New York. During the commute, all I can think about is how frantic he looked by the *zero*. I'm worried about him. But I also

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don't want to be a pain, so I try to focus on finishing a paper for my Shakespeare and Media course in the car.

By the time I'm in my bedroom, I am spent, and my nerves have sharpened into concern. I collapse on my pink comforter and touch my tingling lips, which seem to remember Birdie as vividly as my mind does.

I check my phone, and my stomach sinks.

Still no texts from him.

Though, there must be a savior because I don't have any from Guy either. I bite the inside of my cheek, and I don't overthink it—I send Birdie a text.

AUDREY

If you're stressed, I am available to help as a part of this sex pact (the one we're not calling a sex pact).

I'm about to toss my phone aside, not expecting a quick reply. But my cell beeps in my hand.

BIRDIE

I'm fine.

But I am looking forward to being able to have sex again.

With you.

My smile is irrepressible. It begins to hurt my face.

I run my fingers over my lips, then type out a new message, asking him about the late assignment. My stomach sinks as I read his reply.

The zero can't be overturned, but his professor is producing a short film and giving Birdie extra credit to play the cello on the score.

To me, it sounds exploitative. This professor gets to have Birdie, an *exceptionally* talented cellist, play for free, but I don't mention it.

Not over text.

He tells me to get some sleep. I tell him the same. Tomorrow...tomorrow is the first quiz bowl practice since Valentine's. The first time I'll be seeing Guy since the date I'd like to forget.

"You're a Cobalt," I mutter softly to myself. "He can't defeat you."

CamScanner

I reach over and shut off my light.

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AUDREY COBALT

I'm seated in the Delaney Music Hall for tutoring...and I am frazzled.

Sadly, it has nothing to do with Birdie. Because I'd love to be frazzled over another molten kiss. But with quiz bowl practice set for 7 p.m., I'm on a countdown to seeing Guy. I am ashamed to say it's poisoning my concentration.

But *not* my fortitude. I will not let it.

The sun has already risen. Casting blues outside and more natural light in the room. My gaze pins to the window, the stone fountain rendered more ornate in the morning sun. A pigeon pecks around the cement. Birdie is talking about Handel. I miss a couple of things, and I have to repeat them in my mind. He pauses to chug his water.

"You're distracted," Birdie suddenly says. He rubs his mouth with his wrist. "I'm calling it short."

"We still have an hour," I complain.

"You're barely paying attention." He slips his water bottle into his backpack and zips it shut. He didn't bring his cello today, so he's already on his feet.

My nerves ping-pong around. "It's not because you kissed me yesterday, if that's what you're thinking. Because I'd love for that kiss to plague my mind more than what is currently plaguing me, I assure you."

He listens intently.

So I add, "My quiz bowl practice tonight feels monumental. With Charlie joining and with...him...he's..."

"Okay, I get it. Don't lose breath over Captain Dickwad. He's not fucking worth the oxygen in your lungs."

CamScanner

"I agree," I note, gathering all my confidence into my posture. Why hasn't he sat back down? I hurry to tell him, "I'll do better."

"Let's do breakfast," he counters casually. "Your macarons tasted like air."

I learned today that Birdie St. Pierre does not like any macarons. Not even extremely well-made ones. "They did not." I stand quickly. "You just have the palate of a wildebeest."

He tugs his arms through his leather jacket. "And you know what a wildebeest eats, Virginia?"

I toss my hair over my shoulder. "Grass. Lots of grass." I don't admit that I know this fact from last night's Wednesday Night Dinner where my father easily answered the trivia question volleyed as a joke from Tom.

Birdie just shakes his head. The silver buckles of his leather jacket clink as he shifts to grab his backpack from the floor. Hurriedly, I put on a cream peacoat over my dusty-pink sweater, and I tug down my tweed skirt. He's out the door.

I rush after him into the stairwell, and he checks over his shoulder. I come bounding—elegantly—beside him.

"Don't worry, Haydn." I strut down the marble steps. "You don't need to wait for me. I will always catch you."

He readjusts his backpack strap. "Coyote never catches the Road Runner."

I'm about to refute. Because he's wrong. Coyote does catch the Road Runner.

Just once.

As Birdie skips two steps, I decide not to poke a hole in his belief. He pushes outside, thrusting the doors hard enough that they stay open for me as I trail behind him.

The chilly air stings today, with no signs of spring on the horizon. I twist my frilly pink scarf around my neck, and my Prada bookbag bounces against my back as I try to keep up with Birdie's long strides.

He doesn't look a teensy bit cold. His hair fluffs up in the wind. He combs his hand through the strands and aims toward...the courtyard?

"There isn't breakfast in the courtyard," I tell him. "Unless you *are* a wildebeest and would like to chomp on grass."

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"I agree," I note, gathering all my confidence into my posture. Why hasn't he sat back down? I hurry to tell him, "I'll do better."

"Let's do breakfast," he counters casually. "Your macarons tasted like air."

I learned today that Birdie St. Pierre does not like any macarons. Not even extremely well-made ones. "They did not." I stand quickly. "You just have the palate of a wildebeest."

He tugs his arms through his leather jacket. "And you know what a wildebeest eats, Virginia?"

I toss my hair over my shoulder. "Grass. Lots of grass." I don't admit that I know this fact from last night's Wednesday Night Dinner where my father easily answered the trivia question volleyed as a joke from Tom.

Birdie just shakes his head. The silver buckles of his leather jacket clink as he shifts to grab his backpack from the floor. Hurriedly, I put on a cream peacoat over my dusty-pink sweater, and I tug down my tweed skirt. He's out the door.

I rush after him into the stairwell, and he checks over his shoulder. I come bounding—elegantly—beside him.

"Don't worry, Haydn." I strut down the marble steps. "You don't need to wait for me. I will always catch you."

He readjusts his backpack strap. "Coyote never catches the Road Runner."

I'm about to refute. Because he's wrong. Coyote does catch the Road Runner.

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"I'm making a pit stop at the fountain so you can do your whole coin thing."

My heart outpaces my head. *My coin thing*. I press my lips together, subduing a smile. When we reach the drained fountain in the pocket courtyard, I fish a coin from a pouch in my bookbag. Pressing it between my hands, I shut my eyes and breathe deeply. *I will not cower when I break up with Guy Abernathy*, I silently wish. I'm about to toss the coin when I quickly think, *and Birdie St. Pierre will continue kissing me*.

I let go of the coin, and it plunks against the stone basin.

Birdie's staring at me as I open my eyes. "You do realize someone is stealing your wishes? In all currencies."

I smile. "Let them have my euros."

"Was that a euro?" He peers into the fountain.

"No, it was a krone."

He makes a face like I am really bizarre.

I zip up my bookbag. "Anyway, that's not how wishes work. They can't be stolen out of the fountain once they're made."

He shakes his head like he doesn't get it, but he made the pit stop knowing it means something to me. I hold on to that as he strides out of the courtyard. I follow.

This time he is clearly on the path toward the student center. "The Blonde Bean has really good bacon, egg, and cheese burritos," he tells me. "Ever had them? Or is that not refined enough for the princess's palate?"

"Excuse me, my palate is refined from years of baking, not from my pedigree. And no, I haven't. But I like their vanilla frap—*oh fuck*," I squeak out. Panic overcomes me. I tug Birdie by his jacket sleeve toward a large, robust oak tree just off the sidewalk. I press my shoulders into the trunk and fist Birdie's white button-down when he tries to leave the spot. "*Don't.* It's Guy." My eyes are not deceiving me. "He just came out of the library."

Birdie's jaw sets, and he angles his head away from the tree to try to spot the quiz bowl captain.

"*Birdie*," I force out.

"Okay. Okay." He returns his attention to me, stepping closer to the oak tree. His laced boots knock into my heeled Mary Janes, which are

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teetering on the tree roots.

Birdie's gray eyes descend on me in heavy concern. "You're scared—"

"I'm not," I interject. My heartbeat tries to betray me. It's climbing at a rapid pace.

"Then why are we hiding?"

"Because...I haven't prepared myself to see him before tonight. It's not supposed to happen yet. *That's it.*" I inhale deeper to regain my composure, using the tree to straighten my posture. As my bookbag digs into my lower back, I slip it off and hold it loosely at my side.

Birdie is watching my breath, his eyes on my breastbone that elevates and lowers like I'm in a sprint for my life. I'm *not* struggling to catch oxygen. I am breathing...just somewhat abnormally.

We have decent privacy near a long, manicured hedge, so we're hidden from more than just Guy. I stay rigid against the tree and arch my shoulders to tell Birdie, "You don't have to stand here if you don't want to. He doesn't know who you are."

He shakes his head. "I'm not going anywhere." As if to prove his point, he takes a step nearer. His legs gently nudging mine. "I'll hide you."

Heat travels to my core before my eyes blaze on his. "Again, I'm not hiding. I'm...standing."

He rolls his eyes. "Okay. How about this—you're *balancing*. Pretty fucking well, I might add." His gaze dips to my feet, where they slightly wobble on the largest root.

"Varsity cheer," I answer proudly.

"Of course, you were a cheerleader," he says into another eye roll. He raises his arm and plants a hand on the bark above my head. His chest presses against me, pinning me almost tenderly to the tree. His body this flush with mine ignites a fire at my feet, flames crawling up my skin toward my neck and lips and eyes.

My head buzzes in the quiet, his roasted hazelnut scent dizzying me, and I just say the first thing that comes to mind. "I was also a straight-A student."

His lips dip down to my ear, the heat of his breath hitting my skin. "I didn't ask," he whispers huskily.

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I huff and try to ignore the warmth coiling low in my belly. “Are all musical prodigies as infuriating as you?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never met another one.” His knee splits my legs. I hear my heart in my ears, but I feel his thumping against me. “Are all cheerleaders as insufferable as you?”

I hoist my chin. “You’ve found the only insufferable cheerleader on Earth. You should feel so lucky.”

He slowly shakes his head, his eyes drifting to my lips. “Arrogante fille.”

“Barbare,” I reply, far softer than I intend. Because his hand is skating up the curve of my neck, then reaches my cheek. My breathing shallows as his thumb brushes across my bottom lip, and I unconsciously part them for him.

He doesn’t slip his thumb in my mouth. Instead, he drives his hand higher up into my hair and bears his weight into me. He nears my lips —then stops an inch away from kissing me. I push forward to close the distance, but he teases backward.

An aching noise of frustration escapes me. His starved eyes are on my mouth, the source of the sound, as he says a husky, “*Fuck*,” and then he clasps my cheeks with two hands and kisses me.

I drop my bookbag, my arms flying around him as his tongue parts my lips into a sensual, fiery kiss, prickling every inch of me. I want his hands everywhere. I’ve never craved touch so terribly in my life.

He paints the languid, red-hot French kiss of my dreams against my tongue and lips. Sultry, unhurried, so utterly physical.

I’m eager to discover more and more. So I’m not a little bit surprised that I push forward for another kiss and another. I’m just woefully aggravated when he breaks away completely.

I scoff into a pout.

“Needy girl,” he says, scooping up his backpack off the ground. I didn’t even see it fall off his shoulder.

“As if I’m not meeting your needs too.” I smooth out my hair and fix my skirt. The chill of the air skirts across my lips. I already miss the warmth of his mouth against mine.

He comes closer. I stiffen.

“I’m not about to maul you, princess. Contain the excitement.”

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I glare, but my hostility extinguishes as he picks bark out of my hair. He turns me around and skates his fingers through more glossy strands. Without prompting, he even brushes off bits of tree trunk from my sweater and coat.

Appreciation wells up inside me, and just before I speak, he says forcefully, "Don't thank me."

Fine.

I fit my bookbag on my shoulders. "How would you rate my kiss?" I ask him.

His brows spike. "You want a rating?"

I nod. "I would like a comparison from yesterday to today. Have I improved? I can also grade you if you'd like."

He tilts his head at me with a laugh. "You want to grade my kissing skills, Virginia?"

I set my hands on my hips. "They are worth grading, are they not?"

He glances back at my lips. "I'll grade you later."

"Why?"

"Because." He curves around me.

I follow him, stepping off a gnarled root. "Is it because you don't want to fail me? I know I didn't fail. I passed or else you wouldn't have been groaning—"

He spins back around on me, and I bump into his chest as he whispers hotly, "Because I need to stop thinking about ripping off your tights and fucking you against the tree. *That's why*." He holds my gaze as if to nail this reasoning into me. His nose flares.

My breath shallows. "You don't need to stop—"

"Yes, I do. I have a thousand other things I should be thinking about that aren't you."

"*Should* is not a *want*." I skim his eyes. "Do you want to be thinking about me?"

Birdie tears away from me without answering. I trail after, but as soon as my feet plant on the hard sidewalk—I freeze.

Guy is still outside.

Birdie must feel me stop. "Audrey?" He falls back beside me, then follows my gaze. "Is that him?"

I nod, my neck constricted. Guy is texting on the quad in front of the library, then he pockets his phone in his khaki slacks. I have no

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time to react.

He swerves around and sees me. Not even a second later, he's walking right toward me and Birdie.

CamScanner

33
BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

Don't fuck this up for Audrey. Don't fuck this up. It's the mantra I'm absolutely screaming in my head. Might as well be a death metal concert in there. Because I know if I throw a punch at her quiz bowl captain, she might get kicked off the team. Her dreams will be crushed because of *me*. I can't live with that.

I never looked up a photo of Guy Abernathy. Didn't even want a mental picture to throw axes at in my head, but his appearance is unsurprising. He's a carbon copy of every other rich college student. Perfectly pressed pants, an oxford shirt, the collar sticking out of the navy-blue crew-neck sweater. And if I thought I couldn't hate him more...

He comes over and never even acknowledges me. Just sweeps his gaze over Audrey like he's indexing her body in his mental library. My blood is too scalding hot, and I grind my molars to keep from saying something I shouldn't.

"Audrey," Guy greets with a wide smile, his gaze *finally* landing on her eyes. "What class are you coming from?"

Her cheeks turn a shade of red because she's not coming from class. She's coming from a tutoring session with *me*—or better yet—a make out session against a tree (also with *me*).

"*Going* to a class, actually," Audrey says hurriedly and twists to me. In a split-second, I'm trying to deduce if she needs me to take over here because she does that thing where she clings to my eyes for more stability. But then she's quick to say, "Guy, this is Birdie. He's my... brother's boyfriend's brother."

It's still ridiculous, but it's also the first time she's sounded this apprehensive while saying it. Her chest rises and falls heavily, stress visi-

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bly building. It doesn't help that Guy still doesn't relocate his attention to me. He barely gives me a nod. Audrey adds more brightly, "Birdie is a grad student at MVU." Her enthusiasm must rub this fucker wrong because Guy looks at me.

I can't say I have a nice expression on my face. Not when I'm grinding my teeth and dreaming of shoving him into the dirt.

He's assessing me. He has to be under six feet, shorter than me. I have at least three inches on him, but he's acting like he's eight feet taller. "I haven't seen you in any of the business classes."

"Yeah because I'm not getting an MBA," I say bitingly.

"Engineer?" he asks, probably gauging how much I'm worth to him.

"Music."

His lips lift, amused. He has no reply other than that smarmy "I'm so much fucking better than you" smile. Then he turns to Audrey again. "Let me walk you to class, baby."

Her body is as rigid as the Aristotle statue in the quad. I don't think she's breathing.

Concern washes over me in a cold rush, and I run a hand through my hair. "We're still talking here, man," I say, casual enough. "How about you run along to Rigging the Stock Market 101 or Life as a Corporate Crony 102 or whatever?"

Guy says in a bored tone, "Funny."

"I don't know why you think it's a joke."

He tilts his head to Audrey. "Est-ce que ce gars te dérange?" *Is this guy bothering you?*

Acid sears my veins. Not from the fact that he can speak French, but the fact he thinks he's protecting Audrey from me. It takes all my willpower not to come at him right here with what I know. How rough he was...I breathe hot fury through my nose.

Audrey shakes her head, her face drained of color. "Je pense qu'on devrait juste être amis. Toi et moi." *I think we should just be friends. You and I.*

Guy appraises her. "Let's talk in private."

"Nous parlons en privé." *We are talking privately.*

She's smart. She doesn't want to be alone with him, so she's giving him the illusion of privacy by talking in French. A language he doesn't think I know.

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"On peut prendre les choses plus lentement, si c'est ce dont tu as besoin." *We can take things slower, if that's what you need.*

Audrey offers a polite smile and clasps her hands together, bringing them to her breastbone like she's barricading herself from him.

My muscles strain. I stuff my fists in my leather jacket.

And I listen to her tell him, "Je veux juste me concentrer sur mes études. Pas sortir avec quelqu'un." *I just want to focus on my studies. Not dating.*

Guy considers this, his gaze sweeping her from head to fucking toe. "Je ne vais pas te supplier." *I won't beg you.* He switches to English, probably so I can hear this part. "I can be your friend, Audrey. But just know that there are other girls who'd kill to be with me. So think carefully about whether that's *really* what you want. Because when you realize what you lost and what we could've been together—I might not be available when you come running back to me."

I let out a laugh.

Guy eyes me with disinterest. "Big Bird, was it?"

"I haven't heard that one since middle school. But makes sense, coming from a twelve-year-old boy who thinks he's the center of the universe."

His pretentious smile is so goddamn grating. "Right."

"*Right.*" I take a threatening step toward him, and when Audrey tries to follow, I extend my arm to stop her a couple of inches behind me.

"Right," Audrey says like she's planned this whole encounter, nothing is out of her control here. "Let us move on…shall we?"

He still has a condescending expression on me.

I want to punch him—and the urge to throw my knuckles in a face isn't a frequent feeling for me. My hands are my life. Fucking them up is not only painful when I grip a fingerboard and bow but also stresses me out more than anything else. The inability to play to my standards…it's torture.

I keep my arm against Audrey for another beat, and I see a flicker of irritation in his green eyes. He doesn't like that I've touched her.

I don't stop.

Audrey shifts her hair off her shoulder. "Well then—"

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"As interesting as you think you may be," Guy says to me, slipping his hands casually into his pockets, "you're not part of what's going on between me and her. Your opinion is worthless, but that's likely commonplace for you. You do know what commonplace means?"

"Non, j'en ai aucune putain d'idée," I sneer. *No, I have no fucking clue.*

He releases a sharp laugh, then arches his brows with mock admiration. "Looks like Big Bird doesn't have worms for brains."

"Looks like you do. You didn't even bother asking her why she just wants to be friends."

"Because it doesn't matter. I respect her decision, even if it's a poor one."

Audrey clasps her hands harder together, drawing our eyes down to her. "I've decided to stick to my decision. Guy, I'd like to just be friends."

That's more than what she really wants from him. But I get prioritizing your goals over your well-being. I do it all the damn time.

Guy nods to her, then unpockets his phone. "I'll see you at practice, Audrey." He slides a blank look to me. "You should stay out of my way. Next time I see you, I'm not going to be as genial."

I laugh. "Same goes to you, you fucking piece of shi—" He's already walking away.

My nose flares.

As soon as he's out of earshot, I ask Audrey, "You thought *that* was your dream man?"

She faces me, color returning to her cheeks. "Arrogance isn't an unattractive quality when balanced *well*...and I...I..."

"Okay, okay, okay," I say fast. "I'm not asking for a ten-page report, Virginia." I touch her shoulder blade, very gently, but even that touch causes Audrey to draw in a sharp, aching breath.

Every little noise she makes has been whirling in my head like a hypnotic melody I can't shut off. That one is getting added to the growing list. Fucking great.

Audrey swallows, then pools her hair onto her other shoulder. "And anyway..." She glances at the shadow he left behind. "I don't know what kind of connections he has. Sometimes it's better to keep your enemies close."

CamScanner

Connections.

Jesus, I hope he has none. I don't want to think about that fucker having actual power to do anything but bark up a tree. Exhaling a heavy breath, I look down at her and begin to frown, my brows knotting. "Why the fuck are you smiling?" Her lips have tugged up in a pleased smile.

"Step one is complete," she says.

"What the hell was step one? Because *my* step one is that guy, named Guy, getting his fucking face shoved in the ground and eating grass."

"Step one was letting him down gently."

I make a face. "*No*."

"Step two is crushing his ego in my bare hands."

"Okay, better."

"Step three is watching him cry."

By the determined glint in her eye, I would bet on her to make it happen. Hell, I want to help her make it happen.

She smiles a devious little smile at me, and it's hard not to smile back this time.



Later in the day, I'm sitting in Advanced Orchestration when my phone starts blowing up. This class has a total of *twelve* people all quietly reading an orchestral excerpt that the professor just handed out. My phone buzzing in my pants pocket sounds like an assault from a beehive.

Professor Johnson immediately looks my way. "Birdie?"

"Sorry. I just..." I tug my phone out of my pants to turn it off. But when I see the names on my screen, I grab the strap of my backpack. "I have to go."

"Everything okay?" Professor Johnson frowns. All eleven students stare at me as I struggle to push my chair into the desk, the leg caught on something. I leave it.

"Yeah, *yeah*," I say quickly. "Just a family emergency."

I don't hear anything else the professor says. I'm out the door. My thumb hurriedly scrolls down my screen, reading the texts from

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Audrey's brothers.

ELIOT

You hurt my sister. You die.

A slow, agonizing death.

I gave her condoms. Use them. Or your dick will be flayed.

Jesus *fuck*.

TOM

DUDE WHAT THE FUCK? WHY ARE YOU SLEEPING WITH MY SISTER?

YES! I'M SCREAMING AT YOU!

BEN

Hey, I know we don't know each other that well. But maybe don't sleep with Audrey so soon after her first time went that bad. Like give her a second. Ok?

My throat is sandpaper. I don't even realize it's sprinkling outside until I'm thirty feet from the building, and water beads up on my leather jacket. Audrey confessed to telling Eliot about our sex pa—*thing*—I knew that. But I was hoping they'd wait over twenty-four hours before absolutely annihilating my phone. Because, you know, we haven't even *had* sex yet.

When my phone rings, I let out a relieved breath, seeing it's just Phoenix.

I answer, then quickly send him a video request. As soon as his moody face fills my screen, I ask, "Can you tell your boyfriend to stop blowing up my phone? I'm about to block that dumbass."

"You're calling *Tom* a dumbass?" Phoenix laughs in disbelief. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," I reply. "Did I text him shouty caps when he started sleeping with you? No. Because I'm not obnoxious."

"Man, you're sleeping with their *little* sister."

"I'm not."

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"You're not?" Phoenix's expression darkens with protectiveness like maybe someone is spreading a nasty fucking lie about me.

I wipe some water off my jaw, the rain picking up. "I mean...not *yet*."

He glares. "Do you have any idea what you're doing? This is a girl who made a PowerPoint to tell her brothers she lost her virginity. *That* girl."

When he says it like that...I press my tongue against my teeth, trying not to smile.

Phoenix tightens his eyes on me. "Bird."

"Stop—"

"You like her."

"I don't. I actually hate so many things about her." I strengthen my pace. "But she makes some good points. You know, I'm excellent at sex—a top tier lay—and I can ensure her second time won't suck."

"You are playing with so much fire, man." He squints. "Are you—are you walking in the rain?"

Yeah, it's pouring now.

"Builds character," I tell him, increasing my speed to a jog. I'm not trying to catch a stupid fucking cold. I hate being sick. I hate canceling on people. I hate anything that makes playing music harder.

An incoming call hits my phone. I frown, not recognizing the number. "Do you know who this is?" I read off the digits to Phoenix.

"That's Beckett Cobalt."

I slow down in confusion. "Why the fuck is he calling me?"

"He doesn't text."

My brows furrow. "Did he break his thumbs?"

"Pick up the fucking call and ask him."

"Hard pass."

Phoenix scowls and pushes his dark hair out of his face. "You're being a little bitch about this."

"Big bitch," I correct.

"Man, if you want to get into bed with a Cobalt, you're going to have to deal with *all* the things. You can't run from it."

"I'm not. I'm power-walking—"

"Birdie—"

"It's just *sex*, Phoenix. It shouldn't be that complicated."

CamScanner

"She's a Cobalt. It *is* that complicated."

I let Beckett's call drop, then he immediately calls again. "Fuck, this guy is relentless."

"Answer it."

"Hell no." I shake my head. "I'm not you. They don't get unlimited access to me."

"You think you have a choice?" he asks, his jaw all sharp lines. "You know what I would do to protect you from douchebags?"

"I'm not a douchebag."

"I know that. But they don't know you, Bird. You're not letting them." He expels a rough breath. "Look, I'm friends with Beckett and Charlie, but some things need to come from you. I can barely soften Tom's concerns about you fucking and chucking his *sister*."

"That's not…" I sigh hard.

"Just look at it from their perspective," he says. "Their little sister just got through a very bad fucking experience with someone. If that were you, I would be circling the next person you were with like a Great White."

I slide my fingers through my damp hair and pick up my pace again. "It feels like they want me to be canonized as a saint."

"No, you could be Jesus Christ, and they'd still be putting you on the hot seat. This is what they do. They're overprotective as fuck, and they have a lot of reasons to be."

I tense. "They still think this fucker used her?"

"Tom and Eliot still do. But there's no evidence to back that shit up."

I just met Guy.

I want to tell Phoenix, but my throat burns. Lightning cracks the sky, loud enough for my brother to hear. He gives me a dark look. "You trying to die?"

"You could strand me alone on an island. Make it easier."

"Never, asshole."

I flash the camera toward the street, then back at me. "I'm getting on that bus." My brother's screen suddenly goes black. "Phoenix?"

He comes back with a glare at me. "I have to go. Guess who's calling me now?"

Beckett. "Your new best friend."

"Shut up."

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I smile, knowing I'm irreplaceable in my brother's life, but the good feeling lasts only a few seconds because I'm very aware that I do not make his life easy. That sucks for him.

Weight bears down on my chest and stays there as I step on the bus.

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34
AUDREY COBALT

AUDREY

Where are you?!

Charlie doesn't have his read receipts on, so I'm unsure if he's even *seen* my panicked text. My heart has catapulted through the roof. It no longer belongs inside my body.

The small win I had earlier today by confronting Guy and not turning into a stupefied mess has slowly but surely blown to pieces. I've promised the team all week that Charlie would be here for practice, that Charlie would help us succeed and dominate collegiate quiz bowl.

We're halfway through practice in an echoey two-hundred-seater lecture hall—only four of us present.

Because Charlie is completely and *tragically* missing in action. Not a peep from him, which is frankly just like my eldest brother.

He is a spectral. A ghost.

No one but his bodyguard and Beckett know where he is half the time.

Oh no...what if he flew across the ocean? What if he's in Denmark or France or Portugal? If he is in the Polynesian Islands, one of the literal *farthest* places he could go, I might truly never recover from this embarrassment.

Guy checks his expensive watch with mild annoyance. I've tried not to stare too long or too hard at him. I'm worried if I do, I'll have a flashback of *the* night. I want it erased from memory, not to live in perpetual infamy inside my brain.

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Lia, Wilcox, and I are in the first row. It makes it more difficult to *avoid* Guy, who leans against the professor's desk right in front of my face.

He lets out a long sigh. "Should we let Charlie on the team if he can't even bother to make practice?"

"He's going to make it," I assure. Because if he doesn't—I will need to outfit a coffin with my name.

Wilcox is sitting on his desk, tossing a rubber band ball between his hands. "I don't know. Maybe the probie is making things up."

"I'm not," I snap.

"Audrey wouldn't lie," Guy says, sticking up for me casually. Which is...surprising.

Given that I just friend-zoned him hours earlier.

But he hasn't brought up our conversation on campus or made practice awkward and uncomfortable. I've even been more confident in my decision not to quit quiz bowl. *See, it's working out, Audrey*.

Except for Charlie being a no-show.

Lia bites the end of her pencil, then points it at me. "Hey, maybe he's playing a practical joke on you. I don't have a brother, but this seems like something a brother would do, right?"

"Possibly." I'm sweating.

I don't sweat.

And Charlie does not find humor in pranks. Has he been a part of them? *Yes.* But he'd say, "under duress," when Eliot and Tom rope him into their mischief and mayhem. I highly doubt Charlie being tardy is Eliot's doing. Eliot *wanted* to be here.

He would want Charlie to be on time.

It prompts me to send a quick text to Eliot.

AUDREY

Do you know where Charlie is??

His reply comes instantly.

ELIOT

He's not at your practice?

Then another text.

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ELIOT

Didn't it start at 7?

AUDREY

Yes. Do you think he was in a car accident?

ELIOT

I'm about to find him and hit him with mine.

I stifle a gasp. I can't remember Eliot ever threatening to murder one of our brothers. Being a unified family is everything to him, and that means keeping us all *alive.* Even hyperbolically.

AUDREY

Fratricide is not allowed.

ELIOT

Where's your practice being held?

His show begins in half an hour. He cannot leave *Amadeus* at the last minute. All those people in the audience, everyone who *paid* to see Eliot—their disappointment and ire—no, no, that *cannot* happen.

My fingers are flying over my phone.

AUDREY

Thank goodness, he's here. Charlie made it! Enjoy your show!!

"Audrey," Guy says, prying my attention from my phone.

"Apologies." I flip my phone face-down.

He clutches the professor's desk loosely on either side of him. "Who's the composer of the *Moonlight Sonata*?"

"Beethoven," I say with ease. I don't feel like being nice. So I add, "That question was elementary."

Guy has a slight smirk. "Okay. I wasn't looking at the packet. How about you throw me a history question off the top of your head, Cobalt?"

He doesn't understand this is like playing checkers with me. "After surviving a scheme by her son involving a collapsible boat meant to

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drown her, this woman swam to safety. Victoriously."

His jaw sets. I swear I see his eye twitch. Before I can truly gloat, he says, "Agrippina the Younger. Try harder next time, freshman."

"Same to you." I toss my hair over my shoulder and ignore the strain in my ribs.

Guy keeps his eyes fixed on me, and I refuse to meet them. *Refuse*. But the longer he stares, the more my skin burns. Lia swings her pencil between us. "Is there something going on here?"

"We slept together," Guy admits casually, like it's not *private* information. Like he didn't just spill the loss of my virginity with the same nonchalance as he'd use to order his breakfast.

"One time," I add hotly. My pulse thrums in my ears. *Don't think about it. Do not think about it.*

Wilcox laughs. "Not up to your standards, probie?"

Something like that.

Guy checks his watch again. "Wilcox, don't be crass. She's just a freshman."

My face is beet red. "What is that supposed to mean?" I ask Guy.

He appraises me. "We can talk in private." It's the same thing he suggested on the quad this morning, but I'd rather jump off a cliff into the Aegean Sea than be anywhere alone with him.

"Dis-moi ce que tu veux dire," I demand. *Tell me what you mean.*

"Tu es jeune. Manifestement inexpérimentée." *You are young. Obviously inexperienced.*

"Oh, they're talking in French," Lia says into a smile to Wilcox like she's witnessing something cute and flirtatious. This is anything but that. This is the very opposite of that!

I hang on to the fact Guy didn't say *vierge*. The French word for virgin. He just thinks I'm eighteen and lacking experience. That's better than the truth.

I ask, "Pourquoi manifestement?" *Why obvious?*

"Je pense que je t'ai peut-être fait peur avec la taille de mon sexe." *I think I might have scared you with my size.*

Oh my God—this is why he thinks I want to just be friends? That his dick is too big for me? The absolute ego on this man has clouded his braincells.

I sneer, "Je n'ai pas eu peur." *I was not scared.*

CamScanner

"Tu ne serais pas la première fille qui ne pourrait pas me gérer." *You wouldn't be the first girl who couldn't handle me.* My ears ring. I'm not the first. That makes it so much worse. Before I can gather a reply in my head, he adds, "Mais si jamais tu veux réessayer, j'irai plus lentement pour toi." *But if you ever want to try again, I'll go slower for you.*

"Considerate," Charlie says—turning all of our gazes to the door where my brother, my *eldest* brother, has arrived.

I'm too overjoyed by his presence to be vexed by his tardiness. I've never been happier to see Charlie.

He strides deeper into the lecture hall, holding his cane but not using it. He grips the ebony wood at the center. His eyes flash to me for only a moment before he sets his irritated yellow-green eyes on Guy Abernathy.

Wilcox cranes forward, intrigued.

"Holy wow, this is happening," Lia mutters, thunderstruck. "Charlie Keating Cobalt is here."

I am beaming at his notoriety. I hope Guy shrivels in the darkness of Charlie's humongous shadow.

Guy pushes off the professor's desk. "Considerate and prompt. All things I am, but clearly you are not. You're late. Practice starts at seven sharp. We don't make exceptions, even for an alleged genius."

Wilcox seems fascinated by my elusive brother. "I'd be willing to give a fifteen-minute grace period for a genius."

"Sixty minutes," Lia says, still stunned.

Charlie has on a casual cocoa-brown knit sweater, his hair disheveled like he's repeatedly put his hands through the golden-brown strands. No road rash, no hives, no bodily injury. I'm uncertain why he's late, but again, I hardly care anymore.

I sit taller. Ready for war.

Charlie cocks his head at Guy. "I'm not here for you or this fucking college that I don't need. You set the time for a *practice* that I also don't need. I won't come on time. Get the fuck over it."

Guy snaps a peeved look at me like I've invited the universe's biggest asshole onto the team. I am supremely proud that asshole is my brother. Let Guy *writhe* in discomfort. I just hope...*please don't kick me off the team because of Charlie's attitude.*

CamScanner

“He is surly but smart,” I defend Charlie on instinct, more to Lia and Wilcox. “He’s the greatest asset our team could have.”

“Not likely,” Guy says to my brother. “When that person is me.” He spins a pen between his fingers, assessing Charlie with a long sweep of his eyes.

Charlie stares at Guy like he’s a carcass needing to be eaten. “We’ll see at the Princeton Invitational. I’m only participating if my sister is on the team with me.”

“We heard,” Wilcox says. “Lia and I are going to take turns subbing out. We were already struggling to work our schedules around prior obligations.”

“My bio research,” Lia says in a daze.

Guy hasn’t stopped sizing up my brother. “If this is so beneath you, why the hell are you here?”

Charlie leans his weight on his cane. “At the request of my sister.”

Guy cuts a look at me. “We don’t need your brother.”

“I beg to differ.” I bow forward. “He is exemplary. Together, we are stronger. Together, we can’t lose.” Charlie shifts a subtle look to me, one I can’t entirely read. But it’s no matter.

“Guy, let’s not squander this opportunity,” Lia says. “If anything, Charlie will definitely distract the other teams.”

Guy nods curtly. “Like he’s distracting you now?”

“Rude,” I snap.

“It’s the truth,” Guy says simply.

Lia isn’t perturbed. “He’s on the team.” She’s stuck on her phone. “Oh, I have to take this. It’s Izzy.” She’s gathering her stuff. “See you all this weekend. Nice to meet you, Charlie! Lia Chung!” She introduces herself halfway out the door.

Wilcox shrugs at Guy. “Lia has a point.” He checks the time on the analog clock. “I’ve gotta jet too.” He clasps Guy’s hand in a goodbye. On his way out, he raises his brows at Charlie in amused farewell, then shouts at me, “Bye, probie!” and exits.

Guy lingers as if wanting to be the last to leave. I realize he almost always is.

I slip my purse on my shoulder, latching the pink heart buckle. Then I wait for Charlie, only for him to tell me, “Go wait in the hall with Oscar.”

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Oscar Oliveira is his bodyguard.

He's casting me out? Anger torches my insides. We're supposed to deal with Guy *together*. "What for?" I question under my breath.

He dips his head toward me, his eyes cold and unpleasant. Yet his words come out softer than usual. "I'm giving you a golden opportunity, little sister. Take it. You won't want to hear this."

I trust Charlie. But now...I really want to hear it. When offered Pandora's box, I am going to open it every single time. To my detriment.

It's as though he knows.

Charlie has this agonized pain in his eye.

"I will be here to aid your endeavors," I tell him brightly, cupping my hands behind my back. "Whatever you need."

He whispers down at me. "I need you to grow a titanium backbone and do not *fucking* cry until we've left his sight."

"I will not cry," I assure, my pulse suddenly accelerating.

Charlie tosses the cane higher into his hand, gripping it back at the center. He walks toward Guy, who's hardly moved from his relaxed position against the professor's desk.

I keep a healthy distance. Here for support and applause.

Guy gives Charlie another once-over, then laughs and skates a cool hand through his toffee-brown hair. "Come to warn me away from your sister?"

I pipe in, "There is nothing to warn. You and I are *not* together." I stand firm by this. *Very firm.*

Guy isn't acknowledging me. Not as he tells my brother, "It's a little late for that."

I bristle, then recoil. I try to push my chin up, but I find myself looking around for...for steel-gray eyes, for what's become a constant, for Birdie.

Charlie stares Guy dead in the face. "You like fucking freshmen," he says coldly. "Naïve, innocent, *gullible* girls who are bright-eyed about the future and what lies ahead. Because you feel powerful. Because it's a match you know you won't lose."

Guy drags out a long nod. "It sounds like you're threatened by me, Charlie."

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"People like you give credence to why I hate humanity. I'm not threatened by you. I know exactly how this is going to end, and I know I'm going to beat you in every way that matters to you. It's actually boring. You *bore* me."

Guy smirks. "I feel the exact same about you."

"Yet this challenges you." Charlie waves a finger at *me*.

I've gone utterly still. I'm not sure when I took my last breath.

Charlie drills a vicious look into him. "You've proven you can catch a rabbit that hops in your hands. It's *pathetic*. Try toying with someone who knows how to bite back, and then maybe you'd come within a thousand fucking yards of being remotely equal to me."

Guy lets out a low, rumbling laugh. "Right. And I should be listening to the guy who's done *nothing* with his life. You're an unemployed leech on society. You have no ambition. No drive. At least your little sister—naïve and innocent as you believe she is—has more purpose. What is yours, Charlie?"

"And why would I tell you?" Charlie says with a loose shrug. "You think I care what you think of me? You take low blows because you can't reach high enough to hit me. Flatter my sister. Tell her everything she's ever wanted to fucking hear. Try to win her back. Of what little I do enjoy, I will enjoy watching you waste your time that you value so fucking much."

Guy sucks in a long breath. "Don't let your brother talk about you like that, Audrey. It's demeaning."

If he believed his own words, he'd be saying them to me instead of observing my brother's reaction. There's no sincerity. Guy cares very little about me—I know this.

He cares about being better than those around him.

Yet I'm still struck cold by Charlie's view of me. I've known it…I've known it…I've known he thinks I'm so utterly naïve, but to tell *Guy* that?

It hurts.

It hurts so much, I can't see in front of me for a moment.

I adjust my purse on my stiff shoulder. "You don't need to tell me what to do," I say to Guy. "I am capable of deciding things for myself, and I've decided to leave whatever testosterone-fueled showdown this

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is. So long, farewell, adieu." I keep my voice steady, and I strut out with my chin held high.

It only trembles once I'm down the checkered marble hall.

Charlie is at my side in seconds.

I can't even look at him.

I march angrily ahead.

Once I'm inside the parked Range Rover, I slam the door shut on Charlie. He jerks it open and glares as if *I'm* the irritant.

As he slides beside me, I throw my purse at him.

He lets it hit him in the face. I feel marginally guilty. I almost *apologize.* Then I buckle myself in, and I replay exactly what he said to *Guy.* "I am not a rabbit." Tears sting my eyes. "I did not fall prey to Guy's manipulative tactic of sowing seeds of division between me and you, Charlie—but I see his intentions. You realize I see it?"

Charlie tries to soften his unfeeling gaze on me. It looks painful for him, the act of being *kind.* "So what if I called you a rabbit—"

"It's not what I am!" I shout. "So I may've hopped into his hands. I am still a *lion.* I am as resilient as all of you. I have *bite.* I can stand up for myself. Although I prefer being a part of a team, a team that does not discredit me so flippantly—"

"It wasn't *flippantly*," Charlie says, tugging at his hair before he digs in his pocket. The car has started moving, Oscar behind the wheel.

"Then you intentionally discredit me and devalue me," I snap, trying not to cry. I hear Eliot in the back of my head, *We do not cry over Charlie.*

"Yes," Charlie says. "You are a shiny fucking toy to him. He is a dog."

"So you dull my shine? So then you realize I am not a rabbit." I whirl toward him. "Just say it."

He yanks at his hair. "Call Jane."

"I'm not calling our sister so you can avoid speaking to me. You must face me yourself. Do not be a coward, Charlie."

He pulls out a pack of cigarettes. "You are clever and gullible. Quick and foolish. Resilient and *impulsive.* So obnoxiously prideful. And innocent. You've had the *gift* of being innocent—an innocence you've tried to strip since you understood what it meant to grow up."

"Far too early, you would say."

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"No, I've *wished* you would grow up faster." His yellow-green eyes seize mine. "I wish you were hard-hearted and cold and cruel. I would've pushed you there had it not been for people like Ben. I would've pushed Ben there had it not been for people like Beckett."

My throat swells and eyes burn. "Why, Charlie?"

"Because I am *selfish.* Irrevocably, unforgivingly *selfish.* I would rather my little sister be someone she isn't—just so I don't have to watch her make horrible fucking decisions over and over again. Human mistakes that many with your naivety and optimism would make. I would rather you be *inhuman.* Like me. And I will keep trying to harden you for my benefit. Not for yours. And I will do it in heartless, punishing ways."

I blink away the hot sheen in my eyes. "You think yourself a monster?"

"I don't *think* it," he bites back. "I know it."

My mind whirls, and I slide dazedly back into the seat, going still and quiet. Charlie has a cigarette between his lips. He strikes a lighter, and the flame eats the paper. I tense, even as he rolls down the window and blows smoke out into the night.

Cigarette scissored between two fingers, he perches his wrist on the windowsill. No wind gusts into the car, not as we stop at a light. The scent of nicotine and tobacco twitches my face into a cringe.

Charlie sees.

I pull myself straighter against the seat. "He smoked afterward." I stare into the image for a moment. "Instead of caring for me the way I would've liked, the way I always imagined a man would care for a woman, he rested there and smoked like he'd been full and satisfied. I wouldn't have minded being a meal to the man I loved—I am quite the meal—but how could I love a man who was so uncaring toward me?"

I blink out of my dazed thoughts I've spoken aloud, just to see Charlie snuffing the cigarette out on the windowsill. He flicks it into the night and rolls the window back up.

Charlie is not a monster.

I will never view him as one. I could never. Just like he will never see the ferocity in me. He will always view me as a vulnerable hare.

"We both don't see each other the way we see ourselves," I tell my eldest brother. "We likely may never. But can we at least agree that it's

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going to be us against him?"

Charlie tips his head to me. "Why do you think I'm here?" And then he says deeply, "Ensemble."

My eyes mist. I begin to smile hearing our family's battle cry. "Ensemble."

Together.

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AUDREY COBALT

"There are sixteen colleges competing today. Sixteen teams," the Princeton student tells us behind a long check-in desk. "We're splitting you into two groups. Each college will play seven preliminary games in their group. Top four from each will advance to the winner's bracket. Bottom four into the loser's bracket. The bracket is an elimination tournament, so lose one game and you're out. Understood?"

"Unnecessary explanation, Davis," Guy says. "You know that we know how this works."

Davis smiles. "Got to do it for every team. Here are your badges." He slides over lanyards with our MVU logo on them. "MVU is in Group A. Your team will start in the auditorium." His eyes linger a second on my brother. "Wait, you're—"

"Where are your bathrooms?" Charlie cuts in.

"Uh...down that hall and to the right." Davis points it out. Once Charlie disappears, Davis turns back to Guy. "You have Charlie Cobalt on your team? What the fuck, dude?" He blows back in his seat and whips out his phone. "Is he as good as his dad?"

"Better," I pipe in.

Guy slides me a look. "We don't actually know. Charlie refuses to practice."

"Jesus. So the rumors are true. He's an asshole?"

"Hello? I'm his sister." I wave a hand. *Am I invisible?*

Davis squints. "Oh. Shit. I didn't know he had a redheaded sister." He skates a long look down my body. *Ugh.* I snatch my lanyard off the desk and quickly follow Lia down the hall.

My lack of reputation does not bother me in the slightest—I'm more annoyed that my brother being a bit of a prickly pear is common

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knowledge among these college students. For his sake, I'd hoped that tidbit would have remained on online forums.

On my path to the auditorium, my phone pings.

TOM

Going to Van Stapele in Amsterdam for you. I will get you multiple, MULTIPLE, cookies if you promise not to sleep WITH MY BOYFRIEND'S BROTHER. Thank you.

Van Stapele sells only one type of cookie. My mouth waters just imagining the famous gooey dark chocolate, the center a decadent white chocolate filling. It is *divine.*

Before Tom left this weekend for his sold-out shows in the Netherlands, he told me, "You can't be with Phoenix's brother. He will give me hell for the rest of my life about my sister wanting his dick. Please, for my sanity, *do not do it.*"

I expected his reaction since he'd learned that I haven't actually slept with Birdie yet.

So I responded, "You have the thickest skin of us all, and you want to tell me Birdie St. Pierre is going to get under it?"

Tom had his fingers threaded together on top of his head and paused, considering this logic. "I see what you're doing, Audrey Virginia, and no—this is not okay. Choose someone else. Anyone else. Like...wait for Charlie to get a girlfriend. Hook up with his girlfriend's brother. That'd be hilarious. I'll laugh with you."

"It might be eons before Charlie ever has a girlfriend. And what if she's an only child? I might never have sex again."

"That sounds great. Let's go with that."

I tried not to smile, and I kept my fingers laced together. "This is a little funny, though, don't you think? Me and you with broth—"

"*No.* This is unfunny. This is the stuff of waking nightmares that will kill me onstage. You want me to die this weekend?"

"Phoenix won't let you die because he would die without you," I reasoned.

He groaned, "I'm already dead. Why is this happening to me?"

I'm not even surprised he's trying a different tactic now that he's had time to think on the plane. I smile while I text and walk.

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AUDREY

I appreciate the offer, but I will have to politely decline. Sex with your boyfriend's brother is imminent and invaluable. I can neither be bought nor swayed.

TOM

Gotta go call Mom and Dad and remind them they made a mistake in giving me a little sister.

He loves me.

I have hope he'll come around at some point.

Slipping my phone in my purse, I enter Princeton's auditorium. Two desks are situated like a face-off on a small stage. Charlie is already seated at one of them.

He never went to the bathroom then. As I approach the stage, I scan the sparse crowd. It's not as if this is a high-action sporting event. Of the several rows, only the first couple have butts in seats.

My parents are notably absent.

I asked them not to come, citing my nerves. Which is true. The last I spoke to my mother, she asked, "How are things with you and Guy?" Her voice, all frost.

My voice, all composure. "They are going."

She listened to the pause. "That's it?" The phrase, *a mother always knows*, most definitely applies to mine. "Going how?"

"Well, I would say it's going south. That would be the general direction—but it's for the best. I want to focus on quiz bowl, and we've agreed to remain friends." I made a quick excuse about needing to study, not wishing to delve into the specifics.

"I'm always here, gremlin," she said. "For whatever you need, your father and I are here."

They completely understood when I asked them not to attend my first invitational. I'd be entirely distracted if they saw me compete alongside Guy—more focused on their reactions toward me and him than the questions being volleyed.

So I'm not scanning for my mother and father in the crowd. Instead, I search the rows for Ben and Harriet, who promised they'd be here.

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I spot them at the end of the first row. Ben wears his worn blue ball cap backward, and he has an arm slung around his girlfriend, who's in plaid pants and an edgy ripped crop top. I helped her cut her yellow-blonde bangs the other day. She said she always does them herself.

It was one of the greatest tasks she's bestowed upon me.

The honor of bang cutting. We are, for sure, future sisters.

Seeing me, she perks up just a teensy bit—which is a lot for Harriet. She raises her hand chest-high in greeting. I wave an enthused one back.

Ben smiles at me—a very radiant Ben smile.

It breathes confidence in my lungs. He's okay. Learning I lost my virginity to a jerk did not trigger his OCD, as far as I can tell. Everyone has assured me he's fine. Evidence: he's here and not running away from me like he's a bomb meant to kill me.

I'm about to turn to the stage when I stagger, and my heart jolts at the sight of the hard jawline and annoyed pout of my tutor in the audience.

Birdie is *here*.

Yes, I invited him, but he told me that he wouldn't have time to make the trek to New Jersey when he has to practice for the Stravinsky Competition. I did not expect to see his face.

He's seated in the middle of the second row, a direct view of the stage. Not near my brother at all—which means maybe Ben doesn't know he's here either. I can't fathom a world where my friendliest, most social brother would shun Birdie.

It's all I can think as I climb the three stairs to the stage.

As I settle next to Charlie, Birdie's eyes find me. I want to mouth, "what are you doing here?" but I also don't want to draw attention to him. I'm trying hard not to smile, but it is a wasted challenge. His brows rise the longer I openly *stare*.

I feel Charlie plant an annoyed look on me. "You invite heartache in that direction, impétueuse petite sœur." *Impetuous little sister.*

I break eye contact from Birdie to adjust my buzzer closer to me on the table. "I don't know what you could possibly mean."

"Getting into bed with Phoenix's brother," Charlie says, hushed and aggravated. "Someone who I've heard does not, under any circumstance, do relationships."

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I shift my hair to my other shoulder. *Under any circumstance.* I take a reassuring breath. "I'm not in the market for a relationship either."

"And what happens when you are?"

"I see your points. They are quite helpful, and I will evaluate further later."

"You won't," he says flatly. "Tu n'apprends jamais." *You never learn.*

It is the meanest thing he's said all day, but it doesn't puncture like it would've before our talk in the car. "You never say anything nice anymore. It's as if New York has sucked your soul dry."

"As if I had one before New York." He gives me a sardonic smile. "You could learn from your mistakes, so I don't have to keep watching you make them."

"I will listen to my heart first and you fifth, and you will watch me be so very happy—"

"Momentarily," he cuts in bitterly, his gaze shifting slightly as Guy enters the auditorium.

I straighten my posture. Charlie remains lounged backward, his demeanor incredibly apathetic. I do not take this personally, as it's his natural aura.

Guy is on the stage, and in the first row, Lia peels away from her girlfriend Izzy, a strawberry blonde wearing overalls and cute cat-eye glasses. Bodies start filling the auditorium, and the Syracuse team takes their seats at the table across from us. *This is happening.*

When Guy makes it to our table, he asks us, "Ready?"

"Always," I say confidently.

Charlie ignores him.

To which Guy ignores Charlie back, like he's proving my brother isn't worth his attention. The second Guy chooses the chair beside me —one I'd thought Lia would take—my pulse suddenly speeds.

I try to brush it off.

I knew staying on the team would mean I'd have to tolerate his proximity. *I knew that.*

But I hate that I can smell him. The faint trace of cigarettes and Meyer lemon is a noxious combination. How was I ever attracted to him? I try not to wail on my self-esteem too much, but it's difficult not to internally kick myself.

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The next few seconds feel like thirty minutes. It's harder to breathe. My eyes dart out into the crowd, landing on Birdie.

He's bent forward, his forearms braced on the back of the empty seat in front of him, and he's twisting a silver ring on his finger as he stares directly at me.

I grip his steadying gaze.

The nod he gives me is encouraging, fortifying...everything, really. Until I feel Guy look from me to Birdie. Nerves assault me, and before Guy returns his gaze to me, I quickly rotate toward Charlie, about to make casual conversation. But my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.

I must appear panicked, because Charlie suddenly stands. His eyes tell me, *Move.* I don't argue. My pride has taken a backseat, and I happily switch chairs with my brother.

If Guy reacts, I don't check.

The moderator and scorekeeper settle at a table between MVU and Syracuse, and the audience falls to a hushed silence, tensing the room.

Only one game takes place in the big auditorium with spectators, and by the luck of the draw, we landed here first. All the other preliminary matches are happening right now in smaller classrooms down the hall without the pressure of an audience. We'll rotate next game, but I have no time to shake off the nerves.

I scoot forward.

Fingers prepared to press my buzzer.

Charlie's hands are nowhere near his own personal buzzer, and of course, he's slouching.

The moderator begins, "This monarch cultivated a public image through royal progresses, during which she chose to ride on horseback rather than by—" *Beep*.

"Elizabeth the First," Charlie says.

"Correct, for fifteen points."

Guy sends Charlie a hard look. That was a history tossup, and Guy is our history specialist. I smother a smile by pressing my lips together. I don't think he anticipated my brother to be so quick.

The moderator starts reading the next tossup. "In addition to being a concert pianist, this composer wrote an article on the life of Georges Bizet, a family friend, for *The Century Library of Music*—"

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My head thrums. *Shoot, shoot, shoot.* This is me. I think I know it. It has to be Cécile Chaminade. But am I one hundred percent certain?

"This composer's piano miniatures were far more popular than their more serious, extended works for opera and ballet—"

If I buzz in too early, I'll cost us points. Negative five. Then Syracuse will be able to take their sweet time to answer without us looming as a threat. So I wait.

"After this composer's 1908 American debut, they gained widespread popularity and clubs were organized to perform and enjoy their music—"

Charlie is motionless beside me. I have a feeling he might know this already and is just giving me a chance to answer myself.

"A flute professor in the Paris Conservatoire commissioned this composer's *Concertino*, opus 107, for the annual event known as the Concours—" I buzz in.

"Cécile Chaminade," I answer.

"Correct, for ten points." *No.* I answered too late and lost the power.

The four Syracuse students start whispering for a moment, possibly gathering a new strategy.

The next question is in chemistry, and Charlie answers it for fifteen points.

Geography, again to Charlie for fifteen.

World Lit, again to Charlie for *another* fifteen.

He answers so early, Syracuse has no chance. The longer this goes on, the more defeated they become. Lia is absolutely beaming at the end of our table, while Guy has an iron grip on the buzzer.

The moderator reads, "A spider-form god aided these figures in defeating the Cloud-Swallower—"

Charlie buzzes. "The Zuni hero twins."

"Correct..." The moderator trails off as the door creaks open. Princeton students begin to quietly spill into the auditorium. I suppose word has gotten out that Charlie Cobalt is here and doing exceptionally well to boot.

Charlie doesn't mask his irritation.

"...fifteen points to Manhattan Valley," the moderator finishes announcing, and the scorekeeper changes the tally on the electronic board. "New arrivals, keep it down, please."

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Two questions later with Charlie dominating, the auditorium door never shuts as more people sneak in to witness history. With every seat filled, students begin to press against the back wall.

The scorekeeper goes and locks the door, barring anyone else from entering after Syracuse complains about the disruption.

Lia whispers excitedly to me, "Exactly what we wanted."

Yes, yes, and I will not let the extra attention rattle me. I will not. *I will not.*

The moderator continues, "After leaving Steventon, this author began writing the novel *The Watsons*, which she abandoned after about seventeen-thousand words."

Oh, I know this!

I perk up, then wait for my brother to buzz since he's the lit specialist today. Charlie doesn't move. I flinch when the *beep* comes from the other table.

"Jane Austen."

"Correct, fifteen points to Syracuse."

Guy sighs roughly, then leans in closer to Charlie. Even one chair over, I begin to smell him. It takes all my energy not to recoil in disgust.

"Wilcox isn't here," Guy whispers to my brother. "The lit questions are for *you*. Answer those and leave the history ones alone."

Charlie cuts him with an agitated look, then his yellow-green eyes flash to me with a pierced yet softer stare. Is he concerned? Am I cringing?

I doubt I'm breathing. Breathing entails inhaling, and I'm afraid I might gag if I catch another whiff of that garbage human.

I imagine vomiting on the table, and I just can't survive that humiliating moment in front of a packed auditorium. There are phones out. Students are filming. I will perish from embarrassment.

Charlie is still watching me trap my breath.

I'm fine, I want to tell my brother.

But there truly is no time.

One game only consists of twenty questions. Charlie answers the rest at a voracious speed, ending the match quickly. My head is spinning when the final score is announced.

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"Manhattan Valley wins with two-hundred-twenty points. Syracuse, fifty."

Light clapping resounds from the crowd. It's only coming from Ben and Harriet. The rest of the students are whispering so loudly it sounds like a foghorn blew. Everyone is stunned by the rapid blowout.

No thanks to me. I might have answered all three of the music questions before Syracuse, but I didn't get a single power.

As I descend the stage, I aim my sights for the second row. The middle. Looking for Birdie. *I hope I did him somewhat proud.*

But he's not in his seat.

In fact, he's not in the audience at all.

My stomach drops.

When did he leave? Why did he leave? Was it the large crowd? Was it his stress and school or something else entirely? Those questions keep plaguing me as we exit into the hall before our second game.

Our security keeps students from flocking after us. Oscar is using his arm as a barrier to stop people from approaching Charlie. My brother is used to the attention and has mastered the art of showing disinterest and avoiding eye contact.

Once we've lost the crowd, Lia says, "Did you see their faces?" She laughs, which almost brightens my mood. "I thought they were going to shit themselves."

Guy adjusts the cuffs of his sleeves. "The opposite, actually. They were *seconds* from accusing us of cheating. Which, maybe they have a point." His eyes flash hot to Charlie. "Even geniuses don't know everything. So what the hell was that?"

"The objective is to win. We *won*," Charlie retorts, then claps slowly, mockingly.

I clap for real with my fingertips. "We did really well."

Guy sweeps his gaze over my brother. "So you are cheating."

"Charlie would *never*," I say with my entire being. "Where is your proof? I'd like to see it."

Guy stares down Charlie. "Admit it."

"So there is no proof," I state. As Tom would say, *case closed.* We are victorious.

"I'm not cheating," Charlie says. "But I'm also not sitting on questions just so you have the chance to buzz in. Is the goal team points or

CamScanner

Guy's personal points?"

"Team points," Lia chimes in, then slides a look to Guy. "Didn't we say we wanted MVU to be ranked first? Does it matter how it happens?"

Guy clenches his jaw. "Yes, but our team has always been set up so there's no generalist having a shadow effect on the rest of us."

Charlie tips his head. "Buzz in faster."

Guy lets out a peeved laugh.

I smile to myself. Seeing him unnerved is so satisfying.

Students begin to spill out of doors, switching classrooms for their next prelim game. Lia tugs at Guy's sleeve. "Come on. We need to get to the next game. You two can beef it out later." They go on ahead, and Charlie hangs back with me.

"To call you a *cheater*," I say. "How awful. Repugnant, really, but we knew that." I fix my purse on my shoulder, instinctively scanning around for Birdie.

But I stop as Charlie says, "You knew the Jane Austen question."

"As did you, but my discipline is music and fine arts. Not literature."

He grimaces. "You *really* want to play by his bullshit specialist rules?"

"Well..." *He's the captain*, would be my normal response, but I suppose this isn't a normal situation.

Charlie knows me like a book he's read over a million times. "Advice, little sister, don't dumb yourself down for the team, especially when the team consists of the prick who—"

"Thank you for that advice," I say quickly, my heart speeding. "I concur. If I know it, I will buzz in." I release a breath. "You're taking your own advice well. Not dumbing yourself down for the team."

Charlie begins shaking his head.

I frown. "Wait, Charlie, are you...?"

"Throwing questions on purpose?" He arches his brows. "*Yes*. I am." He winces a little as he puts more weight on his bad leg. "If I answered everything I knew, more than one person would accuse me of cheating. I'm trying to endure today without getting strip-searched for a wire."

I'm not particularly surprised.

CamScanner

It's not that Charlie is twenty-five, a couple years older than most of the competitors. It's that I've seen him consume so much knowledge throughout my life—reading, observing, studying the world—that it's no mystery to me how his brain could be stuffed so full. I wouldn't expect anyone from the Ivy League to contend with him.

It's inspiring.

My knowledge-devouring brother inspires me, as he has since I was little. It's why his opinion of me matters so much more than anyone else's. When you revere someone, their praise holds extra power.

Seeing him in action today is stoking my love of learning. I can't wait for tutoring with Birdie—and it has all to do with matters of the mind.

Not the heart, this time.

Birdie.

I can't search for him now.

We're off to our next game in a classroom. No one is allowed to spectate, so we're free of an audience for a while.

When Charlie misses a question against Harvard, I now recognize it's purposeful. He lets me grab the questions I know while stonewalling Guy. We beat Harvard with a closer score, and the moderator gives us a twenty-minute break before the next game.

Once I'm in the hall, I take out my phone. All I can think about is Birdie. Is he still here at Princeton or did he already go home? And what's going on? I have a sinking feeling *something* isn't right.

AUDREY

Are you okay? Where did you go? I didn't see you when the first game ended.

Guy suddenly sidles next to me. I try not to stiffen under his scrutiny. His eyes slither down my burgundy skirt and ivory sweater. I'm wholly aware he's not cataloging my outfit as *cute*.

He rotates more toward me. "You need to answer quicker, freshman. You're not getting any powers."

"I'm not getting any negs either." I lean against the wall, craning my neck in search of Charlie. He's not back from the bathroom yet. Now I wish I'd gone too.

CamScanner

Guy tracks my gaze, as though knowing who I'm looking for, then he lowers his puke-green eyes on me. "As a favor to you, I won't kick him off the team for cheating."

"He did *not* cheat."

"No one is that quick, Audrey. Not even your father—"

"My father was groomed to run a Fortune 500 in his early twenties," I interject. "Charlie has had the luxury of doing whatever he desires in that same frame of time, and you believe he's wasted that time doing *nothing*. But you're seeing just a sliver of what he has done. So of course he is better than my father at quiz bowl. There was never a doubt in my mind that he wouldn't be." It is a triumphant endnote.

Guy smiles like I spoke sweet nothings in his ear and not declarations of war. "See, that passion you have, Audrey, I admire."

"I'm not interested in your admiration of me, as I have enough for myself." My phone buzzes at the perfect time, and I hurriedly check the message.

BIRDIE

I'm fine. I'm at the Blair Arch, I think it's called. And yeah, I was watching you for a few minutes but had to pop out. I'm glad you got Cécile Chaminade.

He's still here. That's all I can think. "I'll be back—"

Guy checks his watch. "You have *fifteen* minutes." His warning cuts deep.

"I'll be back by then."

"You better. We can't forfeit a game to the host school. You do know how that looks?"

"Yes, yes. I promise, I'll be back." I'm rushing out and setting a timer on my phone.

Praise the Cobalt blue skies that my mother has taken me to Princeton plenty of times while I was growing up. As her alma mater, she's given speeches here and shown me around campus enough that I know the way to the arch by heart.

It takes me five minutes.

I am running.

In three-inch heels.

CamScanner

My feet hurt, and I will need to put Band-Aids on my blisters later. The gothic arch is built into Blair Hall beneath the building's ornate clock tower, and I hurry up the stone steps into the archway. Birdie is here—my heart lurches at the sight of him.

He leans against the stone wall in the middle of the vaulted passageway.

His eyes flit to me, and even from a distance the whites around his gray irises are reddened considerably. I hate that my gut was right. Something is terribly wrong.

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36
BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

Today was never supposed to go this way. I wired Chase the thirty grand this morning. That growing weight was thrown off me in a second flat, so much that I felt better about taking time to watch Audrey's competition. I wanted to be there for her.

I still do.

But now I can't.

I can't catch a fucking break.

And now Audrey's standing in front of me—as another reminder that my life is a wrecking ball. I will swing and hit anything close to me. Isn't bludgeoning myself enough?

She's out of breath, panting, her eyes searching mine. "What happened?"

"Did you run here?" I frown.

"It was more like a sprint, I think." She's rapidly fixing her wind-snarled hair.

If she left the competition early for *me*...

"Audrey, the invitational—"

"We're on break," she reassures, tugging down her skirt. "I have time before the next game."

Concern tightens my muscles, and I glance back out toward campus. I have to believe her. She wouldn't sacrifice her goals just to check in on me. I would never want her to.

"Birdie...?" She searches again. "What's going on?"

I should brush her off, not bother her with this. But I know Audrey so well now, and she will dig her feet into this stone until I offer up answers. I'd rather do this as fast as possible so I don't waste more of her time. I fish my phone out of my pocket and angle it to her.

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DO NOT ANSWER

Thanks for the money, but the price has increased now that this is a four-time Grammy award-winning artist we're talking about. I've got a buyer set up for 100K. You have one month to match the price.

Her face falls. "Birdie, I can—"

"Please don't offer me money. I'm not taking it."

"But—"

"I am *not taking it,* Audrey," I say from my core, trying to get her to understand. "You might think it's an easy fix—because to you, I'm sure it is. But I am not going to be *indebted* to you. I don't want all my problems solved because I met a rich heiress who can solve them, and you'll say I don't have to pay you back—that it's not a debt—but it is a deep-cutting one. Even if I don't give you a dime."

She does understand because she says, "I won't put a debt on your soul."

I nod tightly. "Thank you."

"So what are we going to do?" she asks with earnestness.

I can barely breathe. "There is no *we*, Virginia. You're not involved in this."

Her expression breaks like I impaled her, but that hurt flickers out so fast. I watch her posture straighten and face pinch into determined coldness. Walls raised. Sheilds up. It's agonizing watching her steel herself against me. But I don't share my burdens. I can't.

"You're stressed," she notes. Her eyes flitting around my face before stopping on my lips. "I could help with that at least."

Her eager blue eyes rope me in. We're both breathing hard in the passing seconds that feel like minutes. I'm too weak today to do anything but surrender. I step closer and closer, then I collide into Audrey, my hand sweeping against her freckled cheek, slipping to the back of her head. I thread my fingers through her orange hair and hear her expectant little gasp.

It is instant euphoria to my mind.

An annihilator to my senses.

My body craves more of what she's offering. Something to remove the pressure from my chest. A release. A dopamine rush.

I could…just for a second…

CamScanner

She raises herself on her tiptoes—and that move sends me over. I crash slowly into her soft lips, then deepen the kiss with more desperation. The need for her coils my muscles. Kissing Audrey is as intense as she is.

I feel her fingers clench my shirt. I feel her body bow into mine. I feel her tongue following my lead. I feel her determination, her desire, her fucking affection. Whether I go slower or faster, kissing this girl fuels a fire I can't put out.

I don't want to put out this fervent feeling. I want to draw it out so it never dies down.

Edging back off her mouth, so slowly, I fixate on the parting of her lips and the breathy, impatient noise that leaves them. *Fuck.*

I came to this arch for the acoustics.

Her heavy-lidded eyes meet mine. I am in a fucking haze with her. The next sound she makes—breathy and higher pitched like she's begging me for air—reverberates off the walls. It amplifies around me, and I am so done.

I grab her ass, lifting her up against my chest. Her sharp gasp is a new melody. I hate that I love her soft whine so much that I never want her to stop pleading and demanding.

Her legs wrap around my waist, and I press her back into the stone wall. I kiss the fuck out of her while her hands roam my chest and abs, driving up my black tee.

I clasp her cheek with one hand, and my other is beneath her skirt, holding her ass. My fingers tease against her panties.

She's not wearing tights.

The warmth between her legs is fucking unreal as her thighs are split around me. I can't discover how wet she is, but my cock wants to find out.

"Haydn," she moans against my mouth.

Fuck. I push her harder into the wall.

She lets out a softer pant. "Please," she whispers.

"No," I grunt out. Her needy little cry echoes around me, and I flex my muscles as pleasure rushes through my eardrums. I need back on her. I want in her. I lift her head a little, then descend back onto her lips as she whimpers.

And then I hear a *beep, beep, beep.*

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The phone alarm jolts me.

Ripping my lips off hers, I watch her hands shake as she unclasps the heart-shaped buckle to her purse. What the fuck am I doing? I gently, carefully, drop her to her high heels.

She pulls her phone out and turns off the alarm. Her face is bright red. "I have to go—"

"Yeah, I'm sorry." I run a coarse, angry hand through my hair.

A frown overtakes her features.

I clarify, "I shouldn't have done that."

Her lips lift. She even touches them. "Please don't apologize. I enjoyed that…immensely."

My lungs try to fill, but my ribs are compressing them. I take a half-breath. "You're going to be late, Virginia." *I fucked up her competition.*

"I am not. That's what the alarm was for. But I need to go now."

"*Go*," I urge.

Her smile widens on me as though she's engraving this moment in her memory. I watch her eyes flit whimsically around the arch, around me, then land back on my eyes with tangible elation.

My lips twitch. *What the fuck?* Why am I smiling? It's just…seeing her pleased. Yeah…that feels good.

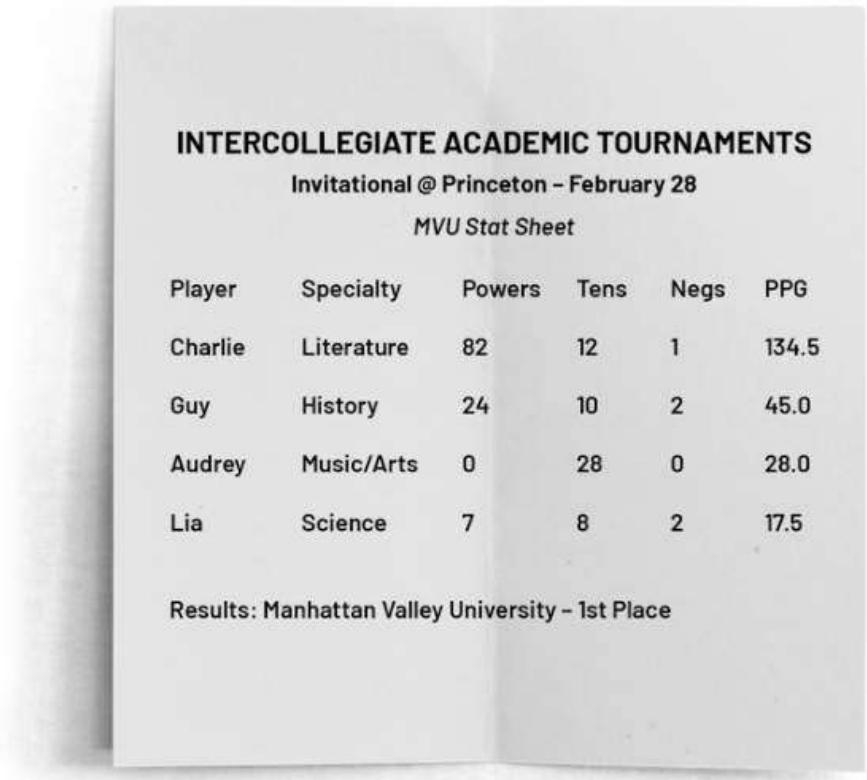
Really fucking good. She hasn't moved yet though.

"*Virginia*," I growl.

"Bye, bye, Birdie." She waves me off with a haughtiness that makes me instantly hard again. She turns around, racing down the steps, and I don't take my eyes off her while she runs.

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INTERCOLLEGIATE ACADEMIC TOURNAMENTS



INTERCOLLEGIATE ACADEMIC TOURNAMENTS

Invitational @ Princeton – February 28

MVU Stat Sheet

Player	Specialty	Powers	Tens	Negs	PPG
Charlie	Literature	82	12	1	134.5
Guy	History	24	10	2	45.0
Audrey	Music/Arts	0	28	0	28.0
Lia	Science	7	8	2	17.5

Results: Manhattan Valley University – 1st Place

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

I'm going to be okay. I make a spreadsheet with the number of hours I need to tutor Audrey and the time I have left. I will be right up against the deadline—but I'm going to be okay.

It's a revelation that comes after a Sunday matinee at the Manhattan Opera.

I don't want to get behind on rent or all my other living expenses. Picking up orchestral jobs is how I pay my bills. Royalties from my time with Nothing Personal are how I eat better than boxed mac and cheese and how I can also afford drinks at Gillies now and then. Not that I have time for that *now*.

I finish filling in for Richard Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods*. The five-and-a-half-hour show requires *two* intermissions, and I use each one to map out my program for the Stravinsky Competition. I have a vague outline of what I'll need to practice for Round 1 by the time I'm on the train heading back home.

It's been a long day—and yet, I cannot pull my mind away from Audrey.

She's been a fucking curse on me ever since our kiss at Princeton. How she felt in my arms. Her legs split against me. My hand under her skirt. It's killing me. Not to mention I've been eighteen thousand years without sex. (*Twenty days.*) It's an added torture. So after I shower, I try not to second-guess my feelings. It's what I'd do under any normal circumstance before I met her.

This is normal for me.

My usual.

I reach out to her by video call. She picks up almost instantly.

CamScanner

"Hi, Virginia. Where are you?" I prop the phone on the window ledge and tug a black shirt over my head.

She's on her bed, her white headboard behind her. "My bedroom. I'm finishing a report for my Astronomy class."

Shit. "I won't bother you then—"

"Wait, I would very much like to be bothered," she says hurriedly. "I'm also almost finished with the report, and I meant to call you anyway. I think I might need some late-night tutoring. The Romantic era is quite expansive, and we've really only covered the surface."

I give her a look with a dry laugh. "Yeah, *no*. There will be no additional late-night tutoring. We're keeping our normal hours. I know what you're trying to do."

Her bottom lip juts out in a too-cute pout. "But what if I truly need the help?"

"Then it's free of charge." I sit on the edge of my bed to put on a pair of socks.

She can see me. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Have you eaten dinner?" I ask.

"I had take-out. Sushi." Her brows knit, watching me.

I meet her inquisitive blue eyes. "Can I come over?"

Her smile is instant. "For sex?"

I groan. "Virginia, you don't need to announce it to your bedroom. This is supposed to be *casual*."

"You're my first foray into casual," she says. "I'm but a novice."

"Okay, well we don't need to make it a big deal." *This is just like any other time*, I remind myself. It has to be. It can't be anything serious.

Her eyes search mine with more speed. "Are you stressed then?"

I shake my head. "I'm just incredibly fucking horny."

"Because of our kiss yesterday under the arch." She nods resolutely like she's certain this is what has ratcheted up my desire. "I touched myself last night to that too."

Jesus *fuck*. I scrape a hand through my hair. "Great," I say, quickly rising to my feet. "Can I come over? Or is your brother blocking the door like the giant boulder from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*?"

"Eliot is out. Sunday is a two-show day for *Amadeus*, so he won't be back until late."

CamScanner

Even better. I stand in front of the phone, close enough that my face is the only thing in the screen. "Let me guess, you're going to make me ask for a third time."

Audrey's face is one big euphoric grin. "You can come over, Birdie Haydn St. Pierre."



Her brothers still do not like me.

It becomes even more evident when I'm stuck in the lobby for twenty minutes dealing with the Cobalts' security team. Phoenix went through something similar when he got close to Tom, so I try not to get in my head about it. I'm patted down and asked a ton of questions. How long I'm staying, who I'm here to see, and why I have condoms in my wallet.

"I've been here before," I argue as I physically pull my T-shirt off my head. "Where was the strip search then?"

They don't answer that.

After what feels like forever, they finally escort me to the elevator and ride up with me to the twenty-first floor. I'm shocked when they let me walk down the hallway all by myself.

When I knock on the door to Audrey's apartment, I decide not to tell her about it. It's not something she needs to worry about, and it was a mild inconvenience at best.

The door opens, and it takes every...single...ounce of restraint not to immediately crash into her like a goddamn five-car pileup. Her hair cascades in fiery waves over her pale pink top dotted with tiny flowers, her shorts matching.

Cotton. Thin, *thin* cotton. See-through cotton.

String is knotted in a bow between her tits, her nipples already hard peaks beneath the fabric.

Not to mention, the shorts—the fucking shorts—ride up her thighs, flaring loosely at the hem as they brush against her ass.

It's one enormous tease and somehow the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

"I wore this," she says, waving a hand down her body. "To prove a point, Haydn. I can be casual."

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I choke on a laugh. "You think *that* is casual, Virginia?"

"There is no lace," she defends. "And it's not silk. Nor is it a chemise, teddy, or babydoll dress. It is very *casual*." She tosses her hair over her shoulder like she's won. Like she's beaten me. I think she might have.

My dick is throbbing. I drag in a hungered breath through my nose.

She raises her chin in defiance. "I am not changing."

"Good," I say, my voice husky. "Because I don't want you to." I crash into her. My right hand on her face, my mouth on her lips, my left hand slamming her door shut. I'm backing her up through her cluttered kitchen and into her richly draped living room.

I let her come up for air, and in a soft pant against my lips, she asks, "How long has it been in Birdie St. Pierre's law of time dilation? Ten thousand years since you've had sex?"

"Eighteen thousand." I pick her up, grabbing her by the ass, my mouth ravaging hers. I suck on her bottom lip, and her whine is an instant hit of adrenaline.

Fuck. "Which one is your room?" I ask.

I've only ever been in the communal areas of her apartment. She wraps an arm around my neck and points toward a door.

I'm back on her mouth, slipping my tongue against hers. The need to be inside her intensifies—and I barely look around when I enter her bedroom. It isn't until I gently set her ass on her mattress that everything slams into me.

Her bedroom.

The white four-poster bed with sheer, billowy curtains. The endless rows of novels lining floor-to-ceiling built-in bookcases, a ladder accompanying them. The floral drapes hiding her window. A girly vanity and plush rug, one that I hate I'm stepping on with fucking boots.

I immediately bend down to take them off.

My eyes keep circling her things. It's everything I'd expect to be here. Including an elegant crystal chandelier hoisted above the regal bed.

Princess is on the tip of my tongue, but I'm being rampaged with an intense feeling I've never had with someone before.

Because I don't *know* people I sleep with. Not like this.

It's a head rush that I'm trying to clear. By the time I've pried off my shoes, Audrey has propped herself on her elbows. Of course she's

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watching every little thing I do.

"What's with the lights?" I ask her.

"What do you mean?" She's genuinely confused.

It's so harshly bright, my eyes are stinging. "You like keeping it lit like you're in a dentist's office?"

Her cheeks flame. "It's for *casual* sex, Haydn."

I see. "Okay, Virginia, we can dim the lights." I go to the wall switch.

She studies me from afar. "Do you prefer them dimmed?"

"I could fuck you in the dark, in the blinding light, in a room bathed in blue—I just want to fuck you." I hold her blue eyes. "How is that for poetry?"

"*Barbaric.*"

I almost smile off hers. I don't touch the switch yet. "If you want it this bright—"

"Dim," she murmurs.

That's what I thought.

I soften the lights, and they cast a warm hue over her hourglass frame. Her breath shallows, her collarbone strict as she pulls in oxygen.

Fuck.

Unable to take my eyes off her, I fist the back of my shirt, tugging it fast over my head. When I toss it on her bucket chair, I realize she's staring at the bulge in my pants.

Her face is rosy.

I don't take my pants off yet. She's studying my tattoos and muscles like she'd done in my apartment. It unravels a part of me that I'm used to staying wound tight. After skating a hand through the messy strands of my hair, I'm about to get on the bed.

"I wasn't sure…" she says, which stops me. One knee on the mattress.

"About what?"

"Whether I should turn on music."

"Yeah, no, I'm not fucking you with Taylor Swift in the background." I confidently climb onto the bed.

Her smile inches upward. "We can put on your casual sex playlist."

"Really driving the word *casual* into the fucking ground."

CamScanner

She has a wicked glimmer in her eye. Audrey loves overusing words until it's just silly. Her humor verges on absurdity...and I don't want to like absurd. I don't want to like her.

Oh, but I more than like her.

I've known I do.

"You are the music tonight, Virginia," I tell her. "I need to hear every noise you make." I lift her by the hips and hike her farther up her pink comforter.

Her breath hitches as I place her down softly.

I brush a strand of her hair out of her eyes. Then I use my knees to break apart her thighs. She writhes into the bed, and I mutter a low, "Fuck."

I sit up off her.

"Don't go." Audrey suddenly hooks her fingers in my belt loops, then tries to tug me down on her with the force of someone who lifts teacups and sugar cubes.

I'm a concrete wall. I barely need to flex each time she wrenches me toward her. I stay upright and give her a look.

One last tug at my belt loops and she collapses backward in a prissy little heap. "Stay," she demands.

"I was never going." I spread my knees on the bed which splits her open wider.

She arches her back, her breath sharper.

I flex my abs. *Fuck.* I watch her claw at the comforter. "Hold onto me if you need to," I tell her.

She immediately catches my left forearm as I drive my hands up her soft, soft—so fucking soft—thighs. All toward the hem of her pale pink shorts.

She's looking at me with breathy anticipation like I'm about to enter her. It's driving me up the wall, but there's no way I'm taking her at any speed other than *slow.*

Really fucking slow.

"How many fingers have you taken before?" I ask.

She contemplates this for several long seconds.

I shake my head at her. "I'm failing you if you lie to me. Giant F."

She gasps. "You're going to fail me?"

CamScanner

"You're going to lie to me?" I hike my brows. "I already know you're inexperienced, Virginia. This is happening. I think you're sincerely miscalculating how badly I want to fuck you right now."

She tries to subdue what is an uncontrollable smile. "I shall be honest."

Shall.

I roll my eyes, but her silken cadence caresses my ears. "Give me a number."

"Zero," she whispers.

She's never been fingered. I try not to think about her first time having sex. Getting this information is going to make me want to slam that fucker into the pavement. "What about your own fingers?"

"One time, but I just preferred other stimulation."

I pick up her hand in mine. Yeah, she has *slender* fucking fingers.

Audrey adds, "But we don't have to do that. It won't get you off."

I reach above her. "Do you have to do anything tonight?" I grab a pillow and put it behind her head. "Work or something?"

"No."

"Then we have all night, Virginia."

"All night," she repeats in a breathy pant, her neck and chest reddening.

"You okay with that?"

She nods vigorously. "Yes, please."

"Okay." I glide my fingers through my hair, staring down at her. "Try again." I take her hands in mine, then fit her fingers back in my belt loop. "Try."

She grins as she tugs me toward her, using the same effort, but I come down on top of her, gradually, purposefully. I kiss Audrey deeply, grinding into her while we're clothed.

She moans against my lips, then I brace my weight off her with my forearm and knee. Still kissing her, I feel down her warm body. Her staggered, uneven breaths cause me to pause and *assess.* Until I'm assured they're noises of arousal and not panic.

My hand slips down her cotton shorts, shifting the damp fabric of her panties aside. I break the kiss to watch her expression. She's just as eager to watch mine.

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Our lips are a heartbeat apart. We're searching each other, connecting in a way my mind isn't comprehending as much as my body, and I cup her face with my left hand. Then with my right, I slip my finger inside Audrey.

Her legs twitch under me. Her breath falters, a noise stalling in her throat. I don't add any friction. I do nothing but stay inside her.

"You okay?" I whisper.

"Yes, *yes*. It's just…" Her eyes glue to mine, not blinking.

"It's just what?" The intensity of her gaze, how our breaths shallow in sync together—I know. I see, hear, and feel the answer.

She's overwhelmed that I'm inside of her…and this is just my finger.

Audrey finally blinks, shakes her head a little to then say, "You're very good at this, Haydn."

I let out a laugh. "We've barely even started. Hold the compliments."

"That will be the only one."

I roll my eyes, then kiss her.

She's already wet and swollen, but she is…so tight. Like unbelievably fucking tight. I have to ask, "When you touch yourself at night, do you use a toy or put anything inside you?"

"No," she says into a quiet pant. "But I've used a bullet vibrator. Not often. I like rubbing my clit more."

My cock strains against my pants. "Okay."

"Is that bad?" Her voice pitches.

"No. You're just really tight. I want to make sure this isn't going to hurt you." I move my finger deeper inside her, and her breathy gasp fractures softly into a shaky exhale. *Yeah…fuck*. I can tell those are pleasured noises. But I ask anyway, "How does that feel?"

She nods over and over.

"Lost for words?" I bend down to kiss the edge of her mouth. I brush my lips against her ear, then I suck her earlobe and listen to her hitching breath.

I pulse my finger inside Audrey, and I rock my weight forward with the movement. Grinding like I'm fucking her with my cock and not my finger. Her hips naturally buck against my hand.

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"*Birdie,*" she cries out my name with new desperation I haven't heard. Blood rushes to my cock, which throbs so fucking painfully, and I try to ignore every mental compulsion to push inside of her.

She clutches onto my biceps, her eyes fastening to mine. I'm not sure we've ever really stopped looking at each other.

As I pick up speed, her hand falls to my forearm, the one that's between her legs. Her grip strengthens when I pump my finger against a sensitive spot in a rhythmic motion. I thumb her swollen clit at the same time. She contracts underneath me.

"*Birdie.*"

She is destroying me.

I pause for not even two seconds.

"*Birdie.*" It's a starved complaint. A puff of air breaches her lips into a cry. I'm still holding her cheek, and she turns her mouth into my palm.

Fucking *God.*

Her warm breath hits my hand. There's not a musical instrument in the world that would compare to every last sound she is making. Not one.

I don't muffle her honeyed moans. "I'm putting another finger in you," I tell her before sliding a second inside her tight pussy.

Her breath snags and face pinches.

I stop.

Her eyes flame on me. "Keep going, *you must.*"

I can't help but laugh. Then I kiss her before whispering, "I'm not going to hurt you, but you're also going to need to *really* beg me if you want it, Virginia."

I grind against her a bit. She gasps into incoherent words.

"What was that?" I ask.

She pants out, "I will not beg."

"No?" I begin to pull my fingers away.

She bucks up into me with panic-stricken eyes. "*Haydn.*"

"Audrey," I soothe, sending my fingers deeper into her. "I'm not going anywhere."

Her body melts into the pillow.

Her dreamy gaze on me is a mindfuck. My heart hammers in my ears.

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"Beg me," I tell her. "Fucking beg me, Virginia."

Her thighs clench tight against my hand. *Fuck.* Her pussy grips my fingers.

"You can do it, princess," I say, staring down into her the same way she stares up into me. "Just a little begging. A tiny bit."

A whine catches in her throat. "*Please.*"

"Please what?"

"Please make me come."

"Only if you don't fall asleep after. Because there's a lot more I want to do to you."

"I won't." Her breath sharpens. "*I won't.*"

"You sure?" I ask seriously. "Because you've conditioned yourself—"

"I'm sure. *I'm positively sure.*" She claws at my arms. "*Please. Please. Please.*"

With two fingers, I fuck her senseless. I perform the movement too well. She's writhing underneath me. Squirming. Her clit swells beneath my thumb, and when she comes, she's all limbs. It's like trying to wrestle a live animal down. She bucks, contracts, vibrates. The full-body orgasm is a sight to witness. My brain is spinning in every direction imaginable.

It lands on one thought, *I need to make her come again and again and again.*

When she descends from her peak, I avoid her sensitive clit, but I keep my fingers inside. Her pink top sticks to her tits. Nipples so hard against the cotton. The ends of her orange hair are wet.

"Your turn?" she asks, eyes dipping down to my dick.

"No. You need to get built up again."

"But—"

"But what? I'm not small." I watch her eyes descend to my pants, and I can practically hear her saying, *How big are you?* I think she'd actually say it if she wasn't drawing so much air into her lungs. I explain to her, "The more aroused you are, the better it'll feel when you take my cock."

Her lips part, breathless. "I'm…plenty…aroused."

"I want you more aroused, Virginia. You can do this again."

"I can't…I'm…too…"

"Too what?" I ask.

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"Too..." Her eyes flutter like she's trying to keep them open.

I smile. "I fucking called it."

"I'm not...asleep."

"Prove it. Sit up."

She slowly pulls herself onto her elbows.

"Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to use my two fingers inside you to make you come again. You will probably pass out, Virginia. So I'm going to *patiently* wait for you to wake the fuck up before I take you. How does that sound?"

Her eyes spark with heat. "Joke is on you, Haydn. I will *not* be passing out."

"We'll see," I say in challenge. And then I make good on my promise, and when I start pumping my fingers—I make sure this lasts a little longer. I'm careful with her, listening to each sound so I don't hurt her at all.

I'm coated in my own sweat from bottled arousal.

I've never been this turned on in my life.

I've never held out this long.

I need her so fucking bad, but I'd never live with myself if I didn't draw this out as long as I can. Her next orgasm runs through her entire body again.

Her eyes are heavy-lidded as I pull my fingers out of her pussy. They glisten with her cum. I suck my middle finger—what I think she's going to call barbaric, but her chest collapses in desire, her eyes all-consuming.

She tastes as intoxicating as she smells. Her heady expression has me scooping my arms under her shoulders and holding her head. I'm pulling her up against my body, and she reacts with such peaceful content. Like we're in clouds.

What a fucking dreamer.

A burn presses against my eyes.

I blink out of it and lift the bottom of her top. "Will you stay awake while I take off your clothes?"

"Yes."

"Okay. We'll see."

She's too exhausted to move, but she watches as I carefully peel her cotton top up to her stomach, then higher. Over her tits and up over

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her head. I toss it aside.

I drag my hand over her breast. I'm so fucked. *I'm so fucked.* And it's not just how beautiful she is. No, it's how she's looking at me.

I mean too much to her.

"Take me," she whispers into a soft demand.

My chest tightens. My vision blurs. Lowering back down, I cup her cheeks in two hands. "Audrey, look at me."

She widens her eyes on mine.

"You have to promise me something first," I breathe.

"I will. I can." Her lips nearly meet mine in a passionate uprise.

I draw backward.

She frowns.

And I tell her, "Don't fall in love with me."

Her face breaks. "Birdie—"

"If I do this, you can't fall in love with me. I already told you what this was. But I need you to promise."

Her features mortar. "I promise."

"In French."

"Je promets," she breathes out. "I promise, Birdie. I promise I will never fall in love with you."

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AUDREY COBALT

I wake up naked—or at least, shirtless. My cotton shorts are still at my waist and slick against my thighs. Birdie's bare back is the first thing I see. His feather tattoos drifting down his shoulder blade. His pants remain on, and he's perusing my bookshelf.

"Did we have sex?" I ask.

My voice jolts him. He drops the book and curses under his breath as he picks it up. "Does it look like we had sex, Virginia?"

"Your pants are still on, and your cock is still hard—so I'd say *no*."

"Astute observation skills this one." He touches himself, adjusting his dick. If that isn't the most barbaric thing I've seen...and I thoroughly enjoy watching it. My body heats instantly.

"You fell asleep," he adds. "I told you I'd wait for you to wake up."

"How long have I been out?"

"Around fifteen minutes." He slides the book back on the shelf. "It's actually perfect."

I frown. "Perfect for what?"

"Fucking you all night," he says. "While you sleep, I'll recover, and we can go again each time you wake up."

Oh...I press my thighs together to keep the wetness at bay. But that sounds incredibly enticing, especially when I'd been a little self-conscious earlier about my post-orgasm tiredness. Like maybe I'd ruined myself by masturbating to fall asleep all these years. Birdie telling me it's something that's *good* sends little flutters inside my belly.

He starts unbuckling his belt.

I slide higher on the bed, tucking my knees to my chest. My nipples ache for touch. My whole body does. I can't wait to have his hands all over me again. It's slight torture he's all the way across the room. I

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watch him, questions suddenly forming that I can't contain. "Is this what you did with your other hookups? Make it last all night?"

His jaw clenches.

"Was I not supposed to bring them up?" I frown.

"No, it's not that." His abs seem to contract in more prominent ridges. "You can bring up anything."

"Then what?" I ask.

He pauses for a second. "I've done all-nighters. But this is different…" His eyes skim my room again.

"So you're saying you didn't make them promise not to love you in French." I try to banter, but resurfacing that memory pangs my heart. I don't know how to sweep that moment under the rug. I don't know if I want to. I'd like to thrust the knife in deeper between us and twist and twist and twist. The pain feels better than nothing at all.

"Yeah. Because I wasn't afraid they would fall in love with me," he says, honest. He's always been honest. *Not relationship material, Audrey*. I know. *I know*.

"You have nothing to fear, Haydn," I say confidently. "I am not even close to loving you."

His nose flares. "Good."

"Perfect." I push my hair off my strict shoulder.

He scans my bookcases again. "I also didn't know my hookups liked reading *Little House on the Prairie* or *The Boxcar Children.* Or that they collected love potions—"

"Gifts from Kinney," I cut in fast. He's heard me talk to my best friend on the phone, but he's yet to meet her. She's bought me fancily bejeweled love potions over the years, as they remind her of me. "I haven't drunk one since the third grade, when I became quite infatuated with a boy from the movie *St. Elmo's Fire*. It was the boy with an earring and leather jacket, so I knew it was odd"—I catch Birdie's hard blink at me—"but don't worry. Those love potions are merely décor." *Some of my favorite trinkets,* but I leave that out.

He shakes his head in such a Birdie way. Like I am so outrageous. "I'm not worried that shit will work. I'm more concerned you're willing to poison yourself in the name of love."

"There is no greater reason to poison oneself."

He stares directly at me.

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I don't shy. "But again, I do not love you. I would *never* poison myself for you."

"Great." He skates a hand through his unruly brown hair, turning toward my bookcase. "It's just different, knowing more about you."

"Good different."

He laughs. "Not even asking."

I watch him unbutton his pants with one hand. "You wouldn't want to make this last all night long if it was horrid."

"So smart," he tells me, striding toward the bed. He rubs his thumb over his lip piercings, as if in deep thought. I want to ask, but I'm caught on him taking off his pants and chucking them aside. Now just in black boxer-briefs. The ends of his symmetrical thorn tattoos hide beneath the elastic band.

He's so tense standing before me. I'm unsure why. His body is lean masculine lines of muscle, the kind most would flaunt in photos.

He doesn't think...? "I'm not recording us," I assure him. "I wouldn't. Especially since the risk is the same for me. My family is famous—"

"I don't think you're about to take nudes of me."

I scrutinize his unbearably constricted posture. "You just hate being in the nude then?"

He releases a drier laugh. "No. I'm not usually insecure about it."

I think quickly. "Then you hate being naked around me?"

He nods, rigid. "Yeah."

"Because I stare? I will look away—"

"I don't want you to look away," he interjects. "You're going to see something because, yeah, you stare. Most don't even look that closely. You're also someone who asks questions, and I need you to not make a big deal about it."

My mind spins. "Are we talking about your cock? Is it pierced?"

"We're not talking about my cock." He exhales, "Fuck it." He rolls down the elastic, stepping out of the black fabric. I'm so focused on the large, hard erection, one I estimated to be much smaller, that I don't even investigate elsewhere.

I'm too stunned since I've only seen a cock this big in porn.

"Are you this size when you're soft?" I wonder.

He smiles. "I see my dick has distracted you again."

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"It has not," I argue, sitting higher up the headboard as he climbs on the bed.

He kneels in the center and lets me drink in all of him for the first time. I haven't moved on from the main spectacle. He laughs again. "I'm not even fully hard, Virginia."

"Pardon?" I squeak out.

"It'll be okay," he comforts. "You're acting like I have a horse cock—"

"What would you call this?"

"Above average."

"*Well* above average," I counter.

"Okay, I think I've probably seen more dicks than you."

This is true. I have no good rebuttal.

He assures, "I'm not going to ram into you, Audrey."

I exhale, trying to relax my arched shoulders, and as my gaze drifts to his thighs, I go cold as I see… "Birdie." My breath shudders.

He doesn't move.

I crane forward and perch on my knees to inspect closer. Scars of varying colors and widths mar his inner thighs. So many. Too many.

I lose count of them. Most are silvery like they'd been third-degree…

I lift my gaze to his. I can hardly breathe. His Adam's apple bobs. We stare deeply into each other, and I ask, "Are these…?"

"Burn marks," Birdie says. "I used to burn myself. With a lighter."

"Used to?" I whisper, breath still caged. The caramel-colored ones are fewer and appear newer.

"Yeah—when I was a teenager. Stress just got too much." His voice is tight. "Most recent time was last year. It's been a while." Last year doesn't seem that long ago, but I suppose it's not yesterday. It's not since we met.

I sit on my heels and bow closer.

"You can touch them," he says. "You don't need to be afraid to touch me there. I'm not hung up on it."

I slide my fingers along the scars. He doesn't bristle. He's just watching me.

"I don't usually tell people, or even show them like this," Birdie explains. "But I want you to understand *why* I made you promise not to

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love me."

I pull my hands back, listening.

His eyes tunnel into me. "It's not coming out of nowhere. I don't have it in me to give you a relationship when I can barely be there for myself." He's even quick to clarify. "I can't put time into you like you deserve out of a boyfriend. I can't put in the type of energy you need. I can't take on more. I can't do it." He swallows hard. "And if you don't want to go further than this—I understand that too." He clenches his jaw, bracing himself for my response.

I rise higher on my knees, almost eye level with Birdie. He's naked. I'm practically there.

He's never been more vulnerable with me, even at the risk of me being the coyote who eats him whole, even with me being everything he's hated. I don't take this for granted. I don't want to harm him.

I'm certain he doesn't want to harm me.

He lets me graze my fingers across his hard jawline. I've never really held his face like he's held mine. I place my hand on the strong curve, a landscape I've memorized. Sandpapered and masculine and Birdie.

The choked sound from his chest is low, guttural longing.

"I still want you," I breathe out, my heart combusting with desire. "I still want you. I want you to ravage me completely, endlessly. All night long."

He takes my face in his hands, and his lips find mine. This kiss is different. It's sensual and pulsing. It leads us down to the mattress. I prefer when he guides and I follow, and he seems to prefer this too.

Then he hooks his fingers in my shorts and panties and slides them off my legs.

He moves with liquid purpose, like a slow flowing river, and I'm swept up in the current. Before I know it, the comforter is drawn down, and we're on the sheets. He keeps a firm hand on my inner thigh and reaches for a condom he left on my nightstand.

Then he sits more upright. Kneeling between my spread legs, he stares down at my warmth where he plans to enter. His expression is all hunger. Like if he's not inside me this very instant, he will perish.

"Your starvation ends today, Birdie St. Pierre."

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He rips the condom with his teeth. “I’m going to warn you, Audrey Cobalt.” He rolls the condom on his hard shaft. “This isn’t going to last long once you come.”

“Then I won’t come—”

“You will come,” he says firmly. “That’s my fucking demand, princess.”

My lips rise, then break apart as he leans forward, rooting one hand to the mattress. He hooks his other arm under one of my knees and brings my leg toward my chest.

I hold his carved biceps, watching as he guides his cock into me. Just the tip at first, then he lets go and clasps my cheek. His eyes flit to mine while he flexes his hips forward and eases in.

I gasp and gasp, my thighs trembling.

Birdie is trapping his breath and groans. Rough, pleasured noises sound strangled in his throat. Tendons strain in his neck. “*Fuck*.”

I feel that *fuck* as he pushes deeper and deeper. The fullness, the pressure, relieves a pent-up ache, and my body is humming so much that there is no pain. Not even a little.

He grunts, his hand on my cheek, thumb brushing my skin. “*Audrey*. I’m about to start moving,” he says in warning. “Does it hurt at all?”

“No, please. *Please*.” I just need more. “*More*, you must...*please*.” I hear my whine, and I do not care if he hates the sound. I’ve never begged so much as I have this night.

He grits his teeth, breathing rougher through his nose. Birdie thrusts in slow, fluid motions. My legs quiver beneath him. He begins to go faster, then faster. I mimic just once with my own hips, but I fall into his mesmeric pace.

Birdie is inside me. His forceful, adoring tempo lights my skin on fire. He kisses me, then his lips brush my ear, “Touch yourself, Virginia.”

He must read my confusion. So he pries my hand off his arm and sets my fingers on my clit. He moves them for me before letting go. My hand is shaky as I start circling my sensitive bud.

My body immediately responds with instant heat. I dizzy. Even more as he watches me, as I watch him. We’re welded in pleasure to-

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gether, stoking embers into an inferno. Sweat slips off his jaw and meets my glistening skin.

His consuming eyes are on mine as I'm jostled with each of his thrusts forward. I don't tear my gaze off his. I never want this to end, but I cry out as the friction becomes too extraordinary and I self-combust.

The orgasm ripples through me. Toe curling. Body shaking. It's always like this. Like running a marathon all at once, and when it's over—I'm so tired. So spent.

I don't want to fall asleep. Not again.

But he's rubbing my cheek. He's kissing my temple. I hardly see him discard the condom. I drift for several minutes, then wake to ask, "Again?"

He questions whether I can, but we decide to try. It's similar to the first time. Only he lifts himself off me and brings me against his cock, his hands on the curve of my hips. Seeing him enter me—I reach a new height almost instantly. We come together. I can feel him twitch inside me. I'd mentally index his expression, but my eyes roll back.

As I fight exhaustion this time, he lies beside me and pulls me against his chest. The embrace is quietly intimate as we face one another. His fingers stroke my damp, clingy hair off my brows and forehead. "Birdie," I whisper, trying to keep my eyes open. They flutter over him, my lips ghosting his skin. "Why name you Birdie?"

He feels around the bed, finding his phone.

Then classical music begins to play. The lively orchestral sounds conjure images of merry gardens, lush greenery, and lilting, fluting… birds.

He shows me his phone, and I barely register that Joseph Haydn composed a piece called *The Bird.* I'm lost in the cheerful melodies. My eyes close gently. There is nothing more comforting than being held in his arms and hearing this music. Nothing more that could ease me into such peaceful slumber.

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39
BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

I wish I had my cello. It's the first urge of the morning. I can't remember the last time I woke up with that thought. I'm not even picky—I'd take a piano, a guitar, a fucking *flute*. All I want to do is play "Waltz" from Tchaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty*.

It's in my head, raging against my skull to release.

Audrey is curled up in her comforter, soft breaths leaving her thinly parted lips. I'm sitting up against her headboard, my eyes burning as I take in her delicate features. *Fragile* isn't a word I'd associate with Audrey, but seeing her sleep, she appears so fragile to me.

Daylight tries to pierce through her floral curtains. I look up at the crystal chandelier. It's not the first time I've spent the night at a hookup's—but this feels so fucking different.

It all felt different. I'm trying not to let that freak me the fuck out. Because I set *clear* boundaries last night so neither of us gets confused.

I exhale, run my fingers through my hair. Then I check her clock.

9:30 a.m.

My muscles bind. *Fuck*. My Intro to Post-Tonal Theory class is happening right now. Perfect, yeah. I'll have to ask a classmate for notes, but it's all right. I wouldn't trade last night for anything. Definitely not for a college course.

Carefully, I slide out of the covers, trying not to disturb Audrey. She only has one class on Mondays, an astronomy lab that isn't until late this afternoon. So I want to let her sleep in as long as she can.

I would also like to be here when she wakes up, but I'm dehydrated as fuck.

What's the probability I'll run into Eliot this morning? He seems like the type to sleep in...right? I convince myself of this as I pull on my

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boxer-briefs and pants. Don't bother with a shirt or belt. I'll be in the kitchen and out in a second flat.

As soon as I slip out of the door and gently shut it behind me, I am *so fucked.*

Eliot is not only awake, but also currently making a smoothie in the kitchen. The buzz of the blender cranks up my nerves. It feels overtly threatening as he meets my gaze.

I nod to him, casual enough.

Eliot cuts off the blender, his eyes flitting from my bare chest to my face. "Have a good night?"

"Yeah. I'm just getting some water, man."

He motions to the barstool. "Sit. Have a green smoothie with me."

"Pass, but thanks—"

"I insist." His dark glare says, *this isn't a request you can refuse.*

Which, fucking *fine.* It's his place.

But being bossed around by Eliot Cobalt feels like being forced to watch flesh-eating beetles from *The Mummy* crawl over my skin. I naturally do not want to take it.

I'm trying to listen to Phoenix's advice. *These are Audrey's overprotective brothers. Understand where they're coming from.*

Sure. *Sure.*

I don't sit. But I am honest when I tell him, "I'd like to be in the room when Audrey wakes up. I'm just grabbing a glass of water."

Eliot splays his hands firm on the counter. "You're not in a relationship with my sister. I think she'll be fine not seeing her fuckbuddy right when she wakes up. Unless..." He lifts his brows. "Circumstances have changed?"

My ears are ringing on the word *fuck*buddy. Never thought I'd be dying to hear the words "sex partner" right now.

I run my finger over my lip piercings, then roll my eyes into a hard shake of the head. "No. Same circumstances. We're not labeling this, so don't call me her fuckbuddy. If you're *dying* for a fucking label, your sister likes saying 'sex partners,' so have fun with that one."

Eliot maintains a steady glare on me.

I grimace and shrug at him. "Hey, how about we just speed run through whatever this is? You tell me not to hurt your sister or else

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you'll chop off my dick. I promise that I have her best interest at heart. Cut scene."

He snaps the lid off the blender. "Your script needs reworked. That's not close to how this is going to go."

Great.

He pours the green smoothie into two glasses.

I rub the back of my neck. "I told you I don't want a smoothie."

"It's not for you." Like he has psychic powers, the apartment door swings open.

Tom carries a teal-and-white striped pastry box, his shaggy hair wet and eyes bloodshot. I'm guessing from jet lag, not drugs. There would be a nuclear fight between the happy couple if Tom were using. Plus, Phoenix and Tom just landed at LaGuardia a couple hours ago, flying in from Amsterdam.

"He's awake?" Tom says to Eliot about *me.*

I make a face. "You knew I was here?"

Tom doesn't comment on that. He shields his red eyes like he's blocking the sun. "Dude, where's your shirt? I don't want to see that."

I laugh. "Why? Because it reminds you of how long you've wanted to suck my dick?"

Tom goes red. *Too easy.* "Dude—"

"I kid," I cut in. "It probably reminds you of how much your sister wants to suck mine." I should really shut the fuck up.

Eliot looks like he's restraining himself from hurdling the kitchen island and shoving me into the wall.

"The fuck, Bird." Phoenix has arrived, kicking the door shut.

Tom glares at me. "You're sleeping with my *little* sister. Times have changed. For starters, you're no longer allowed to just wander around with your pecs out."

I give my brother a look like *this is your boyfriend, really.*

Phoenix snaps a sharper look back. "You just talked about his sister sucking your dick. Dish it, fucking take it."

True.

I scrape my hand over my head, about to ask how they knew I was here. Then I see Phoenix gripping black headphones around his neck, and I hear raging vocals from Limp Bizkit's "Break Stuff"—a song my brother had on repeat after his explosive breakup with Chase.

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It puts me on edge. "What the fuck's going on?" I ask as the door opens again.

Only Audrey and Eliot live in this apartment, but I've been here just *twice*. I have no idea if this trickling in of Cobalts is normal.

Because Charlie, Beckett, and Ben have arrived. Bringing up the rear is a five-foot-one, scowling blonde girl. Harriet Fisher: Ben's girlfriend and, more importantly, my brother's *good* friend at this point.

I'd like to think she doesn't want my dick roasted on a fire. Not when we watched *Home Alone 2* together and agreed Kevin was kind of a little shit to his parents and didn't deserve the free trip to New York.

I'm not paying attention to the escalating chatter.

My plan is to grab a water and remove myself from whatever hangout is occurring. I haven't even fucking *showered*. I just fucked Audrey last night. This is by far the most bizarre situation I've ever been in, and I didn't think anything could top Virginia's PowerPoint.

This won't.

This can't.

I'm being eviscerated at every turn on my way to the fridge.

Charlie is agitated by me.

Beckett is cautious of me—he might actually hate me.

Eliot would like to kill me. I suspect the only reason he hasn't punched me is because of Tom.

Tom tolerates me like a canker sore

Ben…Ben is different. He's the only one who doesn't look ready to cannibalize me, but not enough to throw me a fucking lifeline.

Water bottle obtained. I am so close to returning to her bedroom when Charlie calls out, "Don't go anywhere, Birdie."

I skid to a stop in a living room that looks more like stage dressing. I'm starting to feel like I'm starring in a comedy of errors. Punchlines are on me.

It becomes more evident when the door opens again and a skinny middle-aged man with graying sideburns and black-framed glasses enters. Even Phoenix wears confusion.

This isn't Audrey's dad.

Connor Cobalt is one of the most recognizable faces in America. Her parents are icons for those striving to be poised, sophisticated, and for-

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midable as fuck. I have never strived to be what they are.

I have *never* wanted to meet her parents.

I could be a magician given how many times I've disappeared out of the act already. Because Phoenix has *tried* introducing me whenever I'm with him and they're in the same vicinity.

I will meet any of his friends who are one degree from this family, but the actual Cobalts?

Yeah, I've been ducking and dodging.

Now look at me.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice, Hugo." Eliot shakes the stranger's hand, then introduces everyone around the room. Getting to me, he gestures like we're friends. "Birdie St. Pierre. The one being tested."

"The what?" Phoenix snaps.

"Hugo Fairchild," the man introduces himself, as if my brother isn't a live wire five feet from him. I wonder how many times the Cobalts have asked for his assistance in weird ass situations. "I'll be administering the polygraph today."

I choke on a laugh. "A lie detector test?" I want to break into harder laughter because—yeah, this is pretty fucking funny if I were Tom or Eliot.

It'd be funnier if I didn't just have sex with Audrey for the first time and desperately want to be there when she wakes up.

Phoenix glares. "The fuck he is." He looks to his boyfriend. "*Tom*."

Tom raises his hands. "Dude, it's just routine—"

"Routine? Then why didn't I take a polygraph?" Phoenix combats.

"I didn't take one either," Harriet mentions.

"We considered it for you, Harry," Tom tells her.

"Shucks, thanks, Thomas," Harriet deadpans. "Is your sister even dating Birdie?"

"No, actually," I mention, avoiding a scathing look from Eliot. "I guess I'm just this special." I tense more. "So what—you heard I was here this morning and jumped on the opportunity?"

"Would there be another one?" Charlie says. "Pulling you into our world is like pulling *teeth*, when usually we can't barricade people out fast enough."

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I will take that as a *yes*. They saw the chance to corral me and seized it in a nanosecond. "Carpe fucking diem," I mutter.

Eliot points to a gothic armchair, very fucking macabre. "Your seat."

"*Tom*." Phoenix scrapes two hands through his hair, his face crushed like his boyfriend is actively betraying him. "You said you were *just* going to ask my brothers questions. You can't make him do this."

"I swear I mentioned a lie detector," Tom defends.

"I thought you were fucking *exaggerating*, nepo baby." Phoenix can't look at him. Shit.

Tom is taking this like a knife to the heart. They're both being way too fucking emo over something revolving around *me*.

"Hey, hey, it's fine." I hurriedly sit my ass down in the stiffest chair imaginable. "I'll do it."

Surprise comes from every angle of the living room.

Phoenix shifts his weight with heat, still ready to drag me out of a burning building. "You sure, Bird?"

"Man, I'm already in the fucking chair." I look at Eliot. "Money clearly doesn't buy comfort."

"I wasn't planning on making you comfortable," Eliot says.

Tom wheezes out a laugh. "Funny, Eliot Alice. Okay, new idea—let's go easy on him."

"No," Charlie and Eliot say together.

I roll my eyes. The faster this goes, the faster I can get back to what really matters. I glance over at the short hallway to her room. "One condition: no one wakes up Audrey," I tell everyone as they disperse across the room's period-style furniture. "Be fucking quiet."

Ben has a deep frown on me. "Audrey will want to join you in solidarity."

I blink into a fucking harder eye roll. Of course she would.

I do not want her to be hooked up to a polygraph. Hell no. And not just because I'm trusting her with the biggest secret of my life right now.

Etching our first time together with an end note of me getting interrogated by her brothers—that's a great memory. Really *great*.

I didn't promise her romantic.

But I did assure it wouldn't be a shitshow.

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“I’ll give her a recap later,” I say as Hugo clips something to my finger. “I just want to run through this and be with her when she wakes up.”

She’s been vehement about ensuring that fucker did not leave a mortal wound. I will kick myself for eternity if I scar her. This can’t be a shitty experience when, in her mind, it’s writing over the shitty one she had.

It might be casual sex, but I also know…I know the gravity of it.

“We’ll be quiet,” Beckett assures me.

It doesn’t really hit me what I’m agreeing to until Hugo wraps a cuff around my forearm and tubes around my bare chest and abdomen. “This measures your heart rate, pulse, blood pressure, and changes in your breathing patterns.”

Yeah.

I’m in trouble.

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

"Is your full legal name Birdie Haydn St. Pierre?" Hugo asks, seated on an ottoman to my right.

"Yes." I grip both wooden armrests, trying to be motionless as Hugo calibrates a tiny red machine, cords hooked up to my body. He reads the findings on his laptop.

"Is today Monday?"

"Yes."

Phoenix is a level eight concerned. He can barely sit. His leg is jostling under his forearms, his phone in his fist. I'm sure he's thinking this is going to ratchet my stress to a boiling point.

I hope he reads the *I'll be fine* in my glare.

"I'm still establishing your baseline," Hugo says. "Answer naturally. Have you ever cheated in school?"

"No," I say easily.

"Have you ever lied to avoid getting in trouble?"

I stiffen, my brain rapidly cycling through college at Berklee. All I can think about are my made-up sob stories I told other students so they'd let me jump them in line for the high-demand practice rooms. That's not really avoiding trouble.

Have I ever lied to my parents?

I can't think. I just say, "Uh, probably at some point."

"Yes or no answers only."

"Yes."

Now that everyone is scrutinizing the way I'm breathing, I wish I had a fucking shirt on. I haven't been anxious about whether I smell like sex. Yeah, I haven't showered yet, but I did clean up in her bathroom last night after taking a piss.

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And my brother would've definitely said something if I stunk.

So I'm relaxed.

Relax.

Hugo checks his laptop. "We're calibrated. The test is now beginning. Whenever you're ready." He's telling Eliot, not me.

"Five minutes or less," I remind the Cobalts. I need control of some aspect of this circus. It cramps my stomach thinking I don't have any here.

"Set a timer, Tom," Beckett says calmly, and my muscles try to unwind when Tom starts one on his phone. Phoenix slips Beckett an appreciative look.

Eliot, the only one standing, flicks a lighter in his hand. No phone, no sheet of paper, he just says off the top of his head, "Are you interested to hear what questions you're about to be asked?"

I blink a couple times. *Fuck.* "Yes," I grit out the truth.

Everyone stares at Hugo. "No deception indicated."

Eliot grins.

Yeah, yeah, *yeah.* I am curious. "It doesn't mean I'm enjoying this," I mutter.

He flicks his lighter open. "Have you ever watched porn?"

I exhale a humorless laugh. "Seriously?" I eye Charlie, Beckett, and Ben. "Is that a crime?"

"Yes or no," Hugo tells me.

I scrunch my face at Eliot. "*Yes.*"

"No deception indicated," Hugo announces.

Eliot continues, "Have you ever watched our parents' illegally filmed sex tapes?"

Oh, I see. "Nooo," I draw out the word. "Will not. Have not."

"No deception indicated."

I raise my brows at him like *happy*, but Eliot isn't showing whether he's relieved or still heated. Ben is easier to read. He's glancing more down the hall toward Audrey's bedroom than at me.

I want to kill time. "Have any of you watched it?" I ask them a very personal, disturbing question, and I'm met with nonreactions. Desensitized, I guess.

Charlie tilts his head at me. "Tom, add a minute to his timer for every digression."

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Cannot pull one over on Charlie Cobalt. Fuck, fine.

Eliot shuts the lighter. "Have you ever tested positive for an STD?"

I hope these are all this easy. "No."

Hugo nods. "No deception indicated."

"Have you ever gotten a girl pregnant?"

"No."

Another truthful pass for me, and Eliot is quick to ask, "Would you die for your brother?"

"Yes," I say without any pause.

"No deception indicated."

"Would you die for Tom?"

Tom is smirking.

I grimace at my brother's cocky little boyfriend. "No."

His face falls.

"Deception indicated," Hugo says.

Tom laughs—way too loudly. I'm shaking my head and telling him to shut the fuck up before Audrey hears. "That's bullshit," I add to the examiner. Doesn't this thing read heart rate? My pulse wasn't even spiking when I answered that question.

Tom is so smug. I've been ribbing him for a solid year, and this is basically the first real thing he has on me. "You would die for me," Tom says. "The machine never lies, dude."

"If that was even a little bit accurate, it's because you're my brother's whole fucking world."

This prompts Eliot to ask, "Would you die for Audrey?"

"Are you all obsessed with life-or-death hypotheticals—?"

"One minute added," Charlie decrees.

Fuck. Eliot asks again, "Would you die for our little sister?"

I swallow, my fingers digging into the armrests. "Yes."

"...no deception indicated."

My jaw tics, not sure how I feel at all. Other than *exposed*.

I look straight ahead at the ornate oil painting on the wall, the ancient city on fire. *Destruction*, Audrey had called it. The result of hubris.

"Would you die for me?" Eliot questions, quickly reclaiming my attention.

"No," I state plainly.

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"No deception indicated."

Eliot doesn't seem surprised. I guess they now know I'm not willing to be a sacrificial lamb for just anyone.

Now Eliot is staring me down like I'm about to see the blade of a guillotine.

I was hoping he'd go around the room with that one question, but I stiffen, feeling the shift before he asks, "Did you tutor our sister with the intent to sleep with her?"

My chest caves. I clench the armrests tighter and try to calm my angry pulse. "*No*," I force out. "Fuck no."

"...no deception indicated."

I'm suddenly glad to be hooked to this machine. I do care if they think I'm taking advantage of their sister—because that's flat-out *untrue* and so far from who I am. I've done nothing but set boundaries.

Charlie suddenly speaks. "The night of Valentine's, when she ran to your apartment after her date, did you have sex?"

My nose flares. Being asked that punctures something deep. "Wow, you must really think I'm a piece of shit—"

"Yes or no," Hugo cuts in.

"No." My throat sears. "Absolutely fucking *not*."

"No deception indicated."

I exhale a cutting breath and stare at a melted candlestick on the coffee table.

"That morning when you woke up?" Charlie asks.

I want to rip off the tubes around my chest and scream. I can't even breathe. I'm not blinking as the candlestick blurs in my hot vision.

"Bird?" Phoenix says, worried.

"No," I get out. "Never. I would've never."

"No deception indicated."

Those questions are necrosis. It's still eating me alive.

A dry laugh rumbles through my chest, my lips pressed in a pained smile. "You really believed I would've?" I ask Charlie. Their sister was in physical *pain.* What kind of motherfucker...? I would *never.*

Charlie arches his brows. "I knew you didn't."

"Then why ask me that, man?" I shoot back.

"To see your reaction."

CamScanner

I don't care if he got what he came for. I smear my hands down my face, jerking the cord. Then I fix the clip on my finger as Beckett asks, "Have you ever filmed yourself having sex?"

"The fuck, Beckett?" Phoenix says to him.

"For leaks," Beckett explains. "You're lucky no one's tried to dox you yet with how popular The Carraways is."

Is he prophetic?

Fuck.

Although, it's not like Chase hacked into Phoenix's phone or computer, but he does have personal info of my brother.

"Stay as still as possible," Hugo instructs me.

I am back to being motionless as Beckett repeats, "Have you ever been filmed having sex?"

"No."

"No deception indicated."

"What about photos?" Beckett asks. "Does anyone have nudes of you?"

Sweat builds against my hot neck. All I can think about is Phoenix. I cage my breath and shake my head.

"Answer verbally, please," Hugo says.

"No."

Tension contracts my abs. Silence strains the room as Hugo takes fucking forever to say, "Inconclusive."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Phoenix pinches his eyes. "Birdie."

"It's *wrong*, Phoenix." I check over my shoulder, like my conscience is going to jump-scare me. I'm lying to my brother about something. Just not this *exact* thing.

"Have you ever taken nudes?" Beckett rephrases the question.

"No," I say fast, but my pulse is out of whack. I feel my heart vaulting in my chest.

Hugo pauses for too long. "...deception indicated."

"Okay, this thing *is* broken," I tell the room.

Charlie narrows his eyes on me. "Why do you care so much about whether or not we're aware you have nudes?"

"I don't," I stress. "I've *never* taken them."

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Beckett is confused. “Did someone take them of you? Without your consent?”

“That sucks,” Harriet says, too dry. “That does suck. I mean that genuinely.”

Phoenix flames. “Who?”

Mother*fuck*. “Next question.”

And then Ben asks, “Are you in love with Audrey?”

It is a bomb drop in my brain. One atomic explosion.

Beeeeep. Tom’s timer goes off.

I release a breath, then yank off the cords. “I’ve only known her a month, Ben.” No one protests and forces me to answer past the timer. To my benefit, the Cobalts take their rules very seriously.

As everyone begins to rise, I ask Charlie, “Get what you want out of me?” I’m still upset over his questions—more than the others.

He forces a half smile. “You mean have I learned you don’t handle pressure well?”

I’m starting to realize Charlie is more than just book-smart. “Okay, thanks.” I nod tightly. Then I turn, and Tom is placing the teal-and-white pastry box in my hands.

The label says, *Van Stapele.*

“Give these cookies to my sister,” Tom says. “She’ll appreciate it, dude.”

Tom is a good brother.

I would rather give him shit than tell him that. Taking the box, I quietly, carefully, gratefully go to her bedroom, and I’m ecstatic to find she’s still sound asleep.

It’s so quiet, with no sounds of footsteps or even faraway chatter. Just the hum of the heat blowing from the air vents.

After placing the pastry box on the nightstand, I crawl back on the bed and lie behind her. I curve my arm over her chest and press up against her back, holding her so close. As her eyes flutter open, I watch her teeny-tiny, rosy-cheeked smile grow bigger and bigger.

My lungs fill.

She twists a little to look up at me, her hair spilling on her pillow like a spreading fire. “Bonjour, barbare.” *Good morning, barbarian.*

“Morning, princess.” I cup her warm cheek, placing a kiss on hers. “You feel okay?”

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She flushes more beneath my hand. “Just a little sore.” She blushes more. “I don’t mind this sore. I like feeling where you’ve been.”

“I get an A?”

“A-minus.”

I let out a laugh. “What are you docking me on this time?”

“You’ll have to call me for casual sex again to find out.”

I smile. “Hard bargain.” I can’t stop staring at her.

“Now you grade me.”

“Nope.”

She gasps, rolling more into my chest. “That is so unfair—” She cuts herself off, peering at our threaded legs. “You’re in pants?”

I raise my brows at her. “You missed a very eventful morning, Virginia.”

Her eyes glitter on mine. “You’ll tell me all about it?”

“Later.”

“Why not now?” Her devious smile says she will make *later* become *this moment*, and my lips rise and rise and rise, craving to hear the conviction in her voice, how she places weight on words as if it really is life or death.

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AUDREY COBALT

I am not falling in love with Birdie.

I *will not* fall in love with my brother's boyfriend's brother...it's preposterous.

I've also driven this point home to my brothers, who must've believed Birdie and I were more serious than we are—because does every girl Eliot sleeps with undergo a lie detector test?

I think *not.*

Though I am grateful that Birdie withstood a polygraph and still wound up in my room. They didn't scare him off.

It's made me rather giddy.

So as the days zip by this week, I toss a coin into the drained fountain outside Delaney Music Hall, and I silently wish, *Birdie St. Pierre will sleep with me again.*

I'm just a woman wishing for extraordinary sex.

By Thursday, my wish comes true when Guy cancels quiz bowl practice due to a "lack of commitment" from one of the team members. That team member being *Charlie.* It's an idiotic chess move, but I'm happy I'll only have to see Guy's atrocious face come Saturday at the Rutgers Invitational.

Even happier my Thursday has freed, and Birdie asks if he can come spend the night. Sex for the second time with Birdie is *glorious.* He sits on his heels and lifts me by the hips, then he lowers me on him while I hold his neck.

The mental image of sinking down on Birdie's cock engrains deep into my brain stem. I will simply have to die before it ever leaves me.

But the next day, it's not *all* I think about.

CamScanner

One of the things I dreamed of when moving to New York are nights out with my brothers, so I'm ecstatic when our schedules align on Friday.

"I refuse to let Guy Abernathy take New York from me. He doesn't have a monopoly on Manhattan. I am planting my joy here, and he will *cower* in its wake," I declare to Eliot.

He grins. "There's my sister."

I feel seven feet tall.

I reaffirm this declaration to myself at the theater as Eliot captivates playgoers, his portrayal of young Mozart nothing short of magnetic.

Of all the times I've seen my older brother perform, this is the first I've gazed at the live orchestra for so long. The music being critical to *Amadeus,* the orchestra isn't cloaked in a pit but rather onstage at various crescendos, and for tonight, Birdie is among them.

With each stroke of his bow across his cello, my heart tugs a little fiercer. Everything goes dark around him.

He's all my eyes want to see.

A true professional, he sits patiently and still during orchestral pauses. He never tries to scan the audience, even knowing his older brother is in a box seat, along with my brothers, Harriet, and me, of course.

I do not expect him to search for me, nor do I desire him to. His concentration on the music is so painfully beautiful, I'm not wishing to disturb it.

I just enjoy this, watching him play. The vivid, lively notes he creates with other musicians stings my eyes, and my smile becomes overwhelming.

"He's marvelous, isn't he?" I whisper to Harriet on my right.

"Yeah, he's killing it," Harriet whispers back. "Eliot always has the crowd eating out of his hand."

I don't clarify that I meant Birdie—because she's right. Eliot is *superb.* He should be praised.

It's over in a blink. When the cast takes their bows, my cheeks ache and my heart won't stop bouncing. The supporting cast wave over to the orchestra for their applause.

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I spring to my feet and clap with excitement that my eldest brother lacks.

Charlie gives long, slow claps, his ill-humored eyes on me, but once Eliot bows, I clap just as vigorously. My applause is meant for *all*.

I tell him that explicitly.

Charlie tips his head. "To be young and dumb."

I scoff. "As though you are *old*. You're twenty-five. No foot near the grave."

"Pity."

I lift my purse on my shoulder. "Do not joke like that, Charlie." I crane my neck back toward the stage, but Birdie is gone.

He is not special.

Well…that's not quite right. He *is* special to me in a very relaxed, informal manner. This is punctuated when we're all leaving the theater and Birdie catches us on the bustling sidewalk, different Broadway shows letting out around us. Bright lightbulbs and flashing advertisements illuminate us in the night.

He's saying goodbye to Phoenix. Is he leaving? He's not staying out with us?

I pay half-attention to Ben asking me which bar I want to go to. "Any bar…" I trail off, my pulse skipping as Birdie casts a glance backward. At me.

Our eyes latch and linger. Cello on his back, Birdie peels away from Phoenix to approach me.

I rock onto the tips of my toes. "You were—"

"No compliments," he says firmly.

I fall to the flats of my feet. "You are—"

"Insults only. We aren't friends, Virginia."

I huff. "You cut me off one more time, and—"

"And what?" he challenges, which blazes my lungs.

I stare deeper into him, remembering him inside me—and I wonder if he remembers too because his breath staggers—then I let out a frustrated growl. "You are simply *horrendous*."

The corners of his mouth twitch, stifling a smile. Then he adjusts the strap of his cello. "I have to work on my composition project tonight, but if you need me to come over when you get back home, just text."

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“Likewise.” I clasp my hands behind my back, chin hoisted. “If you need me, I might be available.”

He suddenly cups the back of my head, then my neck, and I think it’s to kiss me—but he’s pulling me farther out of the crowd and flush to his chest. Several people plow through the street behind me, close to mowing me down.

My pulse shoots to my throat.

“Time to go,” I hear Beckett near me. Our bodyguards squeeze in, and Birdie is eyeing the shifting pieces around us.

“Fuck,” he mutters, but I don’t pay attention to how I’m being protected on a congested street. I leave vigilance to my brothers and our security team. We all have our strong suits.

“Audrey,” Ben says, not far. He holds Harriet close to him, using his six-foot-five build to shield her from body collisions. “We need to move.”

I nod, understanding, and focus on Birdie. “Well then,” I say to him, “goodbye.”

He hikes his cello again. “Later.” He dips his head and places a kiss on my lips. My body buzzes with electric warmth, and my brain follows when he says, “Don’t overthink that, Virginia.”

I will just replay it in my head instead.

My smile hasn’t receded, not even as Birdie leaves and I’m on a late-night adventure with my five brothers and Ben’s and Tom’s one true loves.

It only wavers when we enter a heavy metal bar. Likely chosen for Phoenix and Harriet. I am along for the ride. A voyager. So the last thing I want is to make a stink about…well, the stink. Thick cigarette smoke waters my eyes, and my stomach backflips with each inhale.

I put my wrist to my nose, hoping to breathe in my Chanel perfume as we gather near the back wall. Ben glances down to check on me, and I quickly pull my arm away and beam.

He’s unfortunately not returning the smile. “Is the smoke bothering you?”

“No, not at all.” I take in a deep, awful breath to prove my point and force away a cringe. “It’s pleasant enough.”

Harriet bites down on a Jolly Rancher, eyeing me, then Ben, and back to me. “You want one?” She offers a hard candy.

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"Yes, please." Maybe it'll mask this stench.

She's rifling through her backpack-purse for an extra-large bag of Jolly Ranchers. "It does smell like Marlboros in here, Cobalt boy," she says to Ben. "We should probably go somewhere else—"

"No, *no*, it's nice," I interject, rising on my tiptoes to peer over heads. It's rather crowded, and my oldest brothers haven't even tried to fight toward the bar yet. Harriet hands me my favorite flavor Jolly Rancher—watermelon.

I love her.

Ben motions to our oldest brothers. "We're not staying, right?!"

"*Ben*," I gape. "I am fine."

He sends me a soft, empathetic look. Which normally I absolutely adore, but I really am quite all right.

I doubt there's anything I could say that'd stop Ben from caring. I wouldn't want him to stop.

All my brothers quit smoking around me once they learned I have a visceral aversion to cigarette smoke. At this week's Wednesday Night Dinner, Eliot wouldn't even light his pipe. Our mother should've been thrilled, considering she detests smoking of all kind and only allows it on Wednesdays, but she asked flat-out, "What is going on?"

No one admitted to anything.

Eliot told her, "I'm expanding my lifespan. The world needs more of me for far longer."

Tom chimed in, "Secondhand smoke kills, Mom."

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously but let it go for another time, most likely.

I love my brothers for sheltering this atrocious detail of my life until I'm ready to share. It's made me feel closer to them in New York. Especially when they had every opportunity to push me back home by telling our parents this city shredded me apart within a couple months.

I am not in pieces.

Case in point, I am whole enough to be out and about.

At the bar, I waft the hazy air, and I tell Ben, "See, it's already clearing up…" I trail off because he's peeling away to speak to Beckett.

I whisper to Harriet, "I don't want He Who Should Not Remain to ruin tonight." It's what Kinney has named Guy Abernathy, and it feels

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apt.

"That fuckface isn't here," Harriet whispers. "Not even in spirit. He can't ruin shit."

She's right, of course. I nod repeatedly, drawing my shoulders back. I try to clap to the heavy metal, but it's unclappable music. I don't understand this rhythm, and I wish I could ask Birdie what it is.

Maybe I should ask Tom.

Or Harriet! She's particularly talented at drums. Just when I'm about to ask her, Beckett comes up behind me, his hands on my shoulders. "We're leaving—"

"No." I whirl around to him. "*Beckett*. We must stay."

"No one wants to outlast your undying pride," Charlie snaps.

I am not hurt.

That did not hurt. I take in a long breath.

Ben is glaring at him. "Was that comment really necessary?"

Charlie opens his mouth to respond.

"Charlie," Beckett warns, then says gently to me, "It's early. The night isn't over, Audrey."

"The night is always young!" Eliot bellows, slinging an arm around Beckett and Tom. "And this place isn't up to par for what we have in store."

"The vibes aren't it, Audrey Virginia," Tom echoes. "Dull and boring." He widens his eyes at Phoenix, who then chimes in, "Yeah, the music isn't even that fucking great."

"Lame," Harriet nods.

I see what they're doing, but appreciation swells inside me tenfold. "Well, if you all insist."

"We insist," Eliot and Tom say in unison.

"Where?" Beckett asks Eliot, who's pulling out his phone.

He has it to his ear. "Amatus Amata. I'll get them in." He motions toward me, Ben, and Harriet, and this is when I truly beam.

We're going to a 21+ venue.

When we enter the castle-like nightclub, my eyes become enlarged orbs of glee. I practically twirl my way up to the balcony level where ivy cascades down pillared arches bathed in waterfall-blue hues. I lean over the curved, vine-entangled railing and see people jumping and grinding to dance music on the ground floor.

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"Let's play a game," Eliot decrees behind me.

To decide what we all drink as a group, we play a six-way game of rock-paper-scissors. A childhood classic. Eliot is victorious and chooses *cherry bombs*. My first foray into the shot made with cherry vodka and energy drink.

It's putrid, but I plug my nose, getting it down.

My brothers applaud me for the success. Yes, even Charlie claps. He's not being forced here against his will. He even smiles when Beckett laughs during Tom's dramatic elimination in the next knockout round of rock-paper-scissors. Phoenix and Harriet have joined us after learning the rules, and she just took out Tom singlehandedly.

Tom flings his hand in the air. "I call foul play."

"I call sore loser," Harriet says dryly.

He grumbles to Phoenix.

Harriet wins the entire second round to my thunderous applause. She asks *me* what I'd like to drink.

"No colluding on the prize," Eliot says simply.

"Those are the rules, Harry," Tom chimes in. "You have to pick something you want to drink."

I interject, "We could change the rules just this once for Harriet."

"No exceptions," Charlie says. "Not even for the Girl Genius."

"Gee, thanks," Harriet deadpans, but she sends me an appreciative glance, then signals to Ben that it's fine. He would go to bat for her too. She takes several long minutes. She's obviously struggling to decide on everyone's next alcoholic beverage. I've sworn to myself I will not get drunk.

I will not.

I have tutoring in the morning with Birdie.

And then Harriet says, "Tequila shots."

No shots can defeat me. For I am a Cobalt.

Undefeatable.

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42
AUDREY COBALT

"Are you drunk texting my brother?" Phoenix asks, startling me—but not enough that I'd spill my dirty martini on my puff-sleeved chiffon dress.

Which just means, I am *not* drunk.

I hug the balcony's ivy-twisted railing and sip my martini. Charlie's choice in drink. Ben was upset he didn't choose water, but we're all hydrating on the side and watching aerial hoop performers. Glittery confetti billows in the air. It's *magical*.

What's less magical is Phoenix's abrupt accusation.

"No." I try to stand straighter. "I am sober texting." I sway a little, then peer down at my phone to recheck what I texted his brother.



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AUDREY

It's absolutely wondrousss, enchantinggg. This might be my new home. You will have to fuck me here, for I shall never return to my apartment. Never ever never ever ever ever.

BIRDIE

Are you drunk texting me, Virginia?

AUDREY

Absolutely not! I am very sober, Haydn. I could perform a back handspring right this very instant.

BIRDIE

Please don't.

"Phoenix." I gasp a little too loudly in thought. "Did Birdie tell you to check on me?"

"To make sure you weren't about to throw yourself over the railing, yeah."

I smile. "That's rather..." My smile disappears at his grave expression. "Not sweet?" I add quickly, "I don't want to be his friend. I'm not asking anything more of him. This is all I want. *Sex*."

"Great." He grips the railing with one firm hand, stares down at the grinding dancers, then back to me. "I'm not going to caution you against Birdie. You have *five* brothers for that. I doubt you want another one—"

"Of course I want another one," I interject brightly. "I'm happy for you to be mine, Phoenix." I gasp again. "Are you planning to propose?"

"*No*." He checks down the railing, but Tom is in deep conversation with Eliot on the other end of the balcony. It'd be impossible for him to hear over the club music.

My smile drops out once more. "You don't want to marry my brother?" The thought utterly saddens me.

"Not yet," Phoenix clarifies. "Neither of us wants to right now."

"I can understand that as well." I finger my diamond necklace. "For as much as I love *love*, I don't want to rush into marriage. I want everything to be drawn out. Kind of like how Birdie draws out kissing.

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He's very talented at kissing. Though he doesn't like compliments, at least not from me…" I sip my martini, lost in thought.

Until Phoenix says, "His money problem."

"Hmm?" I wobble into the railing. "Pardon?"

His eyes darken with concern. "Has he told you why he needs the money from tutoring you?"

"No," I lie into a sip of martini. "No, he hasn't. I wish he did, but we aren't friends. He doesn't share like that with me."

Phoenix grimaces. "Then he hasn't told you about…?" He rakes a hand through his hair, muttering, "The fuck, Bird." I think he must be referring to his brother burning himself. I don't know how to share that Birdie *has* told me this without overcomplicating the lie. Phoenix ends up saying, "Just be careful putting too much on my brother. He has a very serious breaking point."

My stomach clenches. "I am careful. I really am. I didn't ask him to join us, even if I wish he…" *I wish he were here*, I realize suddenly.

Phoenix nods. "I do too."

I frown deeper. "Do you think he'd ever want to be a part of this?" I motion around, accidentally sloshing my martini over the railing. *Oops*. I'm about to apologize to anyone I may have doused down below, but Phoenix says, "That's why he never will."

I'm confused, until he explains, "He's been the person on the ground floor *soaked* with drinks from people above him too many times."

"Metaphorically or literally?"

Phoenix gives me a sharp look. "Does it matter which?"

"I won't spill my drink on him—"

"It's not just you, Audrey. It's all of this."

I have no good rebuttal other than… "If he were up here with us, he'd never be soaked again." I drift into this thought so much, I hardly hear Phoenix's response. His face is a teensy bit blurry when he checks the time.

Tom and Phoenix are flying to Berlin *tonight* for their weekend shows. They don't have long left at the club, and Tom had been hoping to get wasted so he'd pass out on the flight.

Phoenix takes my martini out of my hand.

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"Give it to Tom," I tell him. "He needs it more." The next time I blink, Phoenix is gone, and Beckett is suddenly beside me, putting a water bottle in my palm.

"Merci," I smile up at him.

"You feel okay?"

"Oui, oui. Never better. You?" I sip water. "Should we find you a girl tonight? Your one true love could be here—oh, I can scout some lovely prospects." I crane my neck over the railing, but the dancers all blend together.

I catch Beckett's smile before he reminds me, "No romance ever, ma petite sœur." *My little sister.*

"But you've had plenty of time this week, what with your rare dark days at the ballet." His company schedules a week around this time in March as a mini recovery break. He's mostly been in rehearsals for April, May, and June productions, one of them *Cinderella*—which Beckett has been complaining about. He was hoping May's production this year would be *Manon* or *Onegin*.

Beckett sighs tightly. "One week to fall in love and completely ruin my life."

I gasp, more dramatically than I intend. "It could very well be the best thing that ever happened to you."

"I have no time for a relationship. Past this week, I'll be returning to a schedule that has no room for love beyond the ballet."

I can't help but think of Birdie. I never imagined I'd be sleeping with someone who has similar feelings on romance. But I also never imagined I'd detest the person who was willing—*is* still willing—to give me everything I thought I wanted.

I cringe even *thinking* about Guy, and I snatch a shot off a server's passing tray before Beckett can stop me. I down it, not feeling any sort of burn.

"This is fun." I bounce on my toes. "I needed this."

He places a reassuring hand on my back. "How's therapy going?"

"Well enough. Sonya is the sweetest. She gives good pointers." Implementing the sage therapy advice has always been a little bit of a challenge, but in this situation with my virginity being lost in an unintended upheaval, she simply tells me I'm processing at my own rate and that's okay.

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That's okay. I nod to myself, then swig my water.

Beckett rubs my back, and I find myself leaning more of my weight into him. The way he comforts me reminds me of our father. I don't need to run to him when Beckett is here.

Commotion resounds over the dance pit as more aerial hoops descend from up above. Beckett peels confetti off his forehead. Tendons in his neck and shoulders begin to flex. His entire body goes rigid against me.

I blink a couple times, fighting to see him clearer past a sudden blur. He has contamination OCD, but he does a good job managing it. Still, just in case he's enduring this for me, I tell him, "Is it too dirty here for you? We should leave—"

"No." He catches my wrist as I start to move. "I've been to plenty of clubs like this one. I'm okay here."

I waft some of the confetti away from us anyway. *Shoo.* I steady myself on my heels just as Charlie lands on my other side. "Drunk?"

"*Sober*," I say pointedly. "Would you like me to demonstrate?"

"No." He gazes at Beckett over my head. They speak through their eyes.

Then a choral swell draws our gazes upward. Another aerial hoop lowers. Gold beams of light illuminate a majestic girl in a glitzy pink rhinestone dress. Her curly brown hair cascades as her calves hook on the hoop and she hangs upside down. With such grace, her fingers flutter, plucking invisible harp strings. It's as if she belongs in the air.

Wow. She's incredible...and oddly familiar? I squint. "I think I've seen her before."

"That's Roxanne Ruiz," Beckett says, his voice too tight. "She's a ballerina at NYBC."

"Yes!" I pop up on my toes, remembering her name surfacing several times in the past year. But more recently, I've seen plenty of her. "I've seen her in *soooo* many photos Beth Anne sends me for your Instagram. She's so beautiful, isn't she?" Why is Beckett so stiff?

Why is Charlie swallowing like he has a knot in his throat?

See, I am *not* drunk. I can pick out all these pertinent details. Then it dawns on me. I gasp. "What is she doing here if she's a ballerina?"

"We have no major productions this week. She's obviously picking up work," Beckett says, more to Charlie. "She could be filling in for a

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friend. Her mom owns Amatus Amata."

My jaw drops. "Her mom owns this nightclub?"

"Both this one and the one in Vegas."

There are two places as enchanting as this one? I must meet her. I must tell her this is the most magical place on Earth. I think it possibly rivals Disney.

Why are Charlie and Beckett glaring at one another?

I gasp again. "Are you both interested in the same girl?"

"*No*," they say together.

I gasp…I just gasp. This is all a gasping matter. I rotate forward, and Roxanne is a pink blur in the golden light. "Don't fight over her," I mutter. "She's too pretty to tear to pieces. Not that you've torn a girl apart before, but it's possible, isn't it? Not everyone is invincible. Maybe not even…"

I can't really recall what I say next. I blink, and I'm on a crimson velvet couch in the private lounge, resting mostly against Eliot while he chats with Beckett on the other side of him.

Love is in the air. My smile hurts my cheeks as I see Phoenix kissing Tom passionately against the railing, then I beam more at the sight of Ben and Harriet at the far end of the curved couch. She's on his lap, and he's nuzzling kisses against her neck, making her laugh.

"Aren't they adorable?" I say to Charlie on my left.

He is slumped and glaring at our siblings in love. As if they are causing him physical pain. It is highly dramatic.

"You can't be happy for them?" I wonder sadly. "Why, Charlie?"

He tugs at his hair, then counters, "Why are you drunk?"

"I'm not drunk."

"When you admit you are, I'll admit to you why I can't be happy for *that*." He grinds his teeth as Ben pulls Harriet into a deeper, more loving lip-locked kiss. Charlie looks like he might vomit or fling himself off the balcony. He yanks at the collar of his white button-down, but several buttons are already popped.

I'm unsurprised when he just removes the shirt altogether like the fabric is constricting. He wads it into a ball, then leaves it beside him.

"I may be a little drunk," I say. "But not enough that I won't…I won't miss tutoring tomorrow morning. *I won't*." Birdie depends on me. "Eliot, where's my water?"

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Water finds my hands.

Magic.

What my father does not believe in. Yet there is something about my family that feels magical to me. Wistful. Impervious.

"Wait, Charlie, did you answer me?" I ask him.

"I said I can't be happy for anyone, so why would I be happy that Tom and Ben have found love?"

"You're happy for Beckett all the time, are you not?"

"Beckett is different..." His voice tapers, his gaze narrowing outward, and I track his piercing yellow-green eyes as they land on Roxanne. She's no longer on an aerial hoop. She's very much on her feet and on this balcony level.

Her sparkly pink leotard catches the light and refracts as she approaches our private lounge.

She has sweet nervous energy as she waves at Beckett. "Hey, Beck. I thought I saw you, so I wanted to come say *hi*—I'm not staying long at all. I wouldn't want to interrupt—"

"You aren't at all," I say excitedly. "Come sit!" I scoot farther into Eliot and pat the spot between me and Charlie.

"Oh, I shouldn't."

"Why not?" I ask, right as Tom comes out of nowhere and bumps into Roxanne's back.

"Oops," Tom smirks into a devious laugh.

Roxanne trips over her feet and falls forward onto Charlie's bare chest.

"Oh my God. *Oh my God,*" Roxanne says, wide-eyed. "I'm so sorry." She pushes on his abs to lift herself off him, but Charlie is...Charlie is smiling? Is he smiling?

I gasp. He's smiling! Not his corrosive half smiles. A real one, which grows at the corners of his lips.

Eliot is grinning beside me at the sight.

Until Beckett whispers in Eliot's ear and a deep, dark frown takes hold. What is happening? I need to be sober right away. I guzzle water like a champion.

"I just fell on Beckett's twin," Roxanne mutters.

"You're still on him," Charlie says.

"Oh my God. I am still on you, yep. I will be fixing that."

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He speaks in Russian.

She is hardly breathing, but it appears she understood him.

He switches to English. "You sure you want to?"

"*Yes*." She's still wide-eyed and rosy-cheeked beyond the blush on her light golden-brown skin. "I promise this wasn't intentional. I was bumped into."

"Pushed. Tom pushed you." He snaps a harsher look at Tom, who's practically cackling before he raises his hands in innocence.

"Okay, wow," Roxanne gulps. "You witnessed a top ten most embarrassing moment of mine. I will just go now." She's frozen against him.

"This can't be that embarrassing."

"Umm, yeah it is." She cringes at herself, then finally pushes off Charlie, but he steadies her at the hips. She draws in a breath, blushing more. "Thank you. Thank you, Beckett's brother."

"Charlie."

"Charlie, Beckett's twin brother. Bye. I…yeah. Bye."

"Wait," I call out as she backs up several feet. "Don't you want to stay? Have a drink with us!"

"We aren't staying much longer, Audrey," Beckett says.

I pout. "But *no*, I want to live here."

Roxanne smiles a little at me. "I really just meant to say hi." She waves again to Beckett. "I won't keep you."

Beckett nods toward the aerial hoops. "You were the best one up there, Roxy."

"Thanks, Beck." Her voice is stilted. "Anyway. Have a great night, everyone. Sorry again for falling on you, Beckett's—Charlie. *Bye*."

"Charlie, go after her," I suggest.

But he doesn't budge as Roxanne disappears quickly down the stairs. I've never seen someone vanish so fast.

This water isn't working.

Not at all.

Every color begins to whirl together, and my feet aren't working properly either. Which must be why I'm being carried. My feet are at fault. Eliot cradles me in his arms, and I hold on to his neck, muttering, "I am not drunk. I can't be drunk. I will defeat my drunkenness, I must! For Birdie!"

CamScanner

I don't even care if Eliot glares every time I cast Birdie's name into the air.

You know who isn't glaring?

Harriet.

She makes vegan pesto pasta with me in my brothers' kitchen. Yes, we are back in the luxury high-rise, and the two of us lord over our pound of pasta like it's a pot of gold.

Everything has started to become more coherent. Clearer. I'm panicking less about tomorrow's tutoring session. Birdie needs the money, and he won't accept a dime if I'm not actively being tutored.

With each bite of pasta from the big ceramic bowl we share, I know I will make it. I nibble on a penne with my two front teeth.

Harriet sees and snorts on her bite, the noodle shooting out of her mouth and across the kitchen counter.

We burst into laughter over our pasta bowl.

Ben isn't around to hear. He's gone to check on Mister Feathers since his cockatoo began squawking from his bedroom. But I like having this time with his girlfriend.

Maybe it's all the liquid courage in my veins, but as the laughter fades, I finally ask her what I've been too afraid to broach. "You knew Guy Abernathy when he was the president of the Honors House," I say. "Did you know he was so...he could be capable of..." I frown, swirling the penne in the bowl with a growing pit in my stomach.

Harriet stabs at the pasta. "He was a prick, sure, but dude, *everyone* in the house is some level of conceited. He didn't seem any more arrogant than the rest of us."

We look at each other. "You're hardly arrogant."

"I'd like to think of myself as quietly smug." Her pursed lips try to smile for me.

It makes me smile more, but I frown at a thought. "Ben warned me against him."

"I told Ben that Guy was *cool*," Harriet says, stabbing more penne on her fork. "Like the coolest dude in the Honors House."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I thought Ben was overreacting big time. We actually fought about it."

My heart aches. "You fought?"

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"I mean, it was a small fight." She shrugs. "It felt like the biggest fight we've ever had. We didn't talk for…" She gets red.

"For days?" I gasp.

"For an hour."

I smile.

She battles one that pinches her cheeks. "The point I'm trying to make is that I would've *never* suspected Guy to be an absolute dickwad. Not like…not like he was to you. I spent a whole semester under the same roof as him. I'd never heard a girl say anything negative about Guy. You could've asked me about him before you slept with him—and I still would've given you the green light *and* a letter of recommendation. So if your judge of character is off, mine is too."

It overwhelms me. My eyes sting. "I should've talked to you sooner."

"I should've said something sooner." She lets go of the fork and wraps her arms around me. "I'm not that great at hugs, I don't think."

"It's okay." I hug her fiercer, trying not to cry too much into her hair since she's so much shorter. "Neither is my mother."

We giggle lightly because she knows my mother well. We've spent Christmases together. My mother is basically hers.

When we pull apart, I sniff, then wipe at my cheeks. They are relatively dry. "I can't cry because I need to eat."

"We can cry and eat…" She trails off as Beckett steps foot into the kitchen with dark wet hair from a shower. He grips the towel around his waist, his fair skin so raw and pink from scrubbing.

I stand straighter. Seeing Beckett zero in on the dots of pesto along the counter and the escaped penne on the floor has sobered me more than anything else tonight.

I start to say, "We'll clean—" I cut myself off because Beckett returns in the direction he came from, likely to take another shower, his stride lengthy toward his bathroom.

My pulse speeds. "Harriet, will you clean up while I—"

"Yeah, yeah, *go*." She's concerned too, and as she mops up our mess, I dart toward Beckett and Charlie's hallway, but I'm intercepted by Charlie.

He's in no good mood. "Go to your apartment."

I hear the shower. "But—"

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"*Go*. Take Harriet and Ben with you. I'll clean the kitchen."

"Is he okay?" I can't even remember the last time I'd seen him scrub his skin that hard. I must've been very little.

"Don't you have tutoring in three hours? Worry more about that."

"*Fine*. Tell Beckett I said I love him and I'm sorry for the mess. Deliver this message verbatim please." I only leave when Charlie promises in French.

We're doing that a lot more lately, promising in French. I fall asleep with my alarm set wondering why regular promises are so much weaker between us now.

I wake to my shrill *beep*, then shower quickly, pop Advil to kill my headache, and spritz perfume. In under half an hour, I'm sneaking out of my living room where Ben and Harriet have fallen asleep on the chaise together under a knitted blanket.

I make tutoring exactly at 6 a.m., and of course Birdie beats me here this morning.

"Shocked to see me, Haydn?" I swing my bookbag off my shoulder.

"I never doubted you, Virginia." He hands me an orange juice and a plastic-wrapped honey bun. He brought me breakfast this time, likely knowing I wouldn't have made scones last night. He explains, "Café Noisette was closed this early, so you're going to have to suffer with my favorite pastry."

My heart enlarges far too much.

I blame the lack of sleep for its growth. As I bite into the honey bun, I chew slowly and slowly and more slowly.

Birdie lets out a hard laugh. "Knew it."

I can't even hide how much I'm suffering. I put my hand over my mouth, cringing with each passing second it melts against my tongue. It's *disgusting*. Too chemical.

His laughter fades. "Spit it out."

"Mmm-hmmm." I shake my head faster.

He rolls his eyes. "I'm going to turn around, princess. *Spit it out*." The second he rotates away from me, I do the most unladylike thing and spit the masticated honey bun into the trash can.

When Birdie turns back around, my cheeks are like hot plates. He stares longer into me, then says, "You want to go over the Romantic era?"

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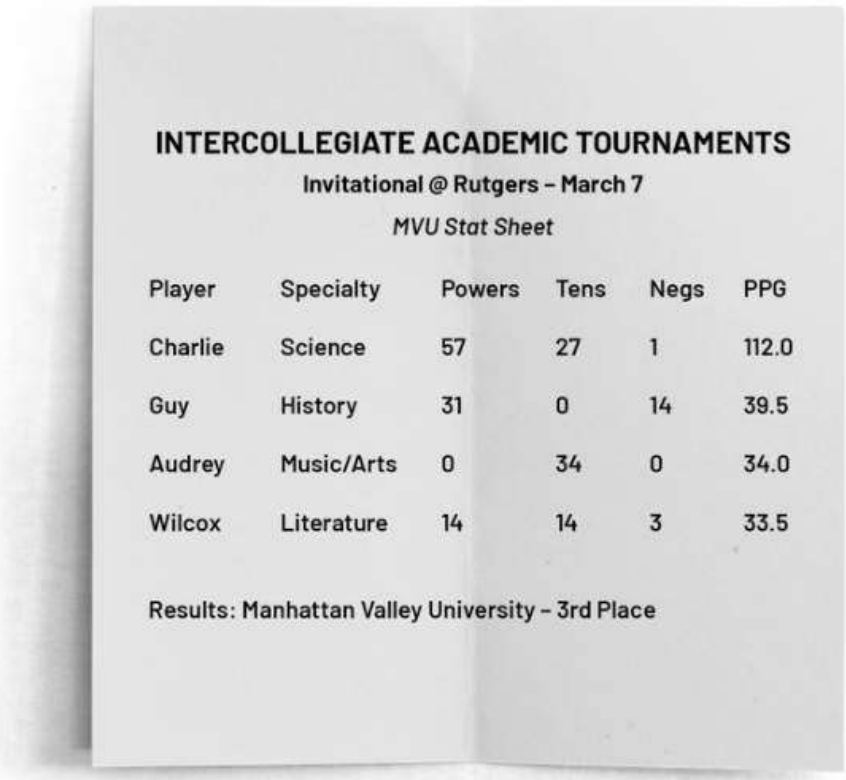
Yes.

I nod quickly. “Please.”

He scrapes his chair toward mine, but the air strains as we silently acknowledge, *This is just tutoring.* Actually...Birdie says it aloud, just so it’s clear.

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INTERCOLLEGIATE ACADEMIC TOURNAMENTS



INTERCOLLEGIATE ACADEMIC TOURNAMENTS

Invitational @ Rutgers – March 7

MVU Stat Sheet

Player	Specialty	Powers	Tens	Negs	PPG
Charlie	Science	57	27	1	112.0
Guy	History	31	0	14	39.5
Audrey	Music/Arts	0	34	0	34.0
Wilcox	Literature	14	14	3	33.5

Results: Manhattan Valley University – 3rd Place

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43
AUDREY COBALT

"Look at this." I'm in my bra and panties, carrying my laptop from my desk to the bed.

Birdie wakes slowly, hugging the pillow around his face while he lies on his chest. He's completely nude, my pink comforter and sheets kicked down to his ankles. Morning light streams through my sheer curtains and bathes his back muscles and his perfectly round ass. The sun knows he's the focal point of the room.

It's a head-rush, too, seeing a man so comfortable in my bed.

This is only the third time he's been over, and I'm still getting used to how picturesque he looks naked. Like every frame of him could be an oil painting hung in the Uffizi Gallery.

I crawl onto his back, too possessed with being near him, on him, against him. When I'm around him, it feels like I'm overcome with a form of lust that can only be cured by physical touch. I lay the laptop next to his face. He groans into the pillow. "*Virginia.*"

"*Haydn,* this is important." I rest my chin on his shoulder and point to the stat sheet from yesterday's invitational at Rutgers.

He pulls his head out of the pillow and squints at the screen. "An email from Satan himself is *not* important," he says into another groan.

I huff. "The numbers are more important than the sender of the email." I tap the screen repeatedly. "Remember when I told you that, with my specialty, forty-five PPG is elite level? I am only *eleven* points away." I grin. "Wilcox must also be taking notice because he didn't even utter the word *probie* after the match."

Birdie uses the heel of his hand to rub at his eyes, trying to focus on the screen. "Why does Satan have so many negs?"

CamScanner

"He was buzzing in ahead of Charlie, but his guesses were completely wrong."

Birdie angles his neck to try to look at me. "Why didn't you tell me that last night?" Birdie couldn't go to Rutgers yesterday, but he did come over late last night to fool around.

"You only asked how *I* did. And I told you, I did *well*. Not exceptionally well. Just well."

Birdie closes the laptop and pushes it away. "You see what he's doing? He's sandbagging your team for his own ego."

"True, and it was…unexpected. But I'm much more focused on my own performance. If I start answering earlier and picking up powers, I might have a real shot at being the *best* music specialist MVU has ever seen." It's what I want. To feel like a victor. To stuff my greatness in Guy's face. I just need to stop being so afraid of getting a neg.

Birdie reaches back to grab hold of my thigh. He effortlessly pulls me down on the mattress beside him, and then he rolls on top of me. His steel-gray eyes seize mine. "And *this* is why you can't have egos on a team, Virginia. You eat yourselves alive."

I can't deny that. I stare at his very kissable lips. "Do you like being a part of a team?" My pulse thumps. "The orchestra, I mean. A band, even."

His hand caresses my breast above my bra, kneading it. "Most of the time, yeah. I like being a piece of a whole. I'm not sure I ever really loved being the center of it all…the star. Solos are cool, but there's nothing like the sound of four, ten, thirty instruments coming together. That's more beautiful than any one person's performance."

His thumb brushes over my nipple, and a breathy moan catches my throat before I'm able to say, "Let's try morning sex."

His nose flares, and he leans down to kiss me. It's a deep kiss. One where his tongue excavates and explores. I'm but a fossil underneath his experience. I'm panting as he pulls away, his lips against my ear, he whispers, "Another time, princess."

"Another time?" I whine. "The time is nigh."

He gives me a look. "Did you just fucking say *nigh*?" He sits up, still straddling me. His large, skillful hands at my waist.

"I did." I prop up myself on my elbows. "What are you going to do about it? Ravage me, body and soul?"

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His lips twitch in an almost-smile. “Goading me won’t get my cock in your pussy. Decent try.”

“I feel you hardening against me, Haydn.” I see it too.

“Eyes up here,” he demands.

I comply, my cheeks hot.

He raises his brows at me. “Listen, you’re the one who wanted to be tutored on Sundays. And you said it yourself, you’re only eleven points from an elite PPG for your specialty. I know I am fantastic at sex, but I’m not going to let you get distracted by it.”

His restraint is so *unnerving*. I pout, “I can be tutored here then.”

“You can’t. I won’t tutor you where I fuck you. It’s a line I’m not going to cross.”

I sigh heavily and collapse back on the bed. Arms splayed out. “Let’s be quick then because I would very much like to try morning sex. Also shower sex, car sex, plane sex. On top, from behind, standing up, sitting down. Oral, anal. I love sex *so* terribly that I want to try every facet of it.”

Birdie smiles in amusement.

“It’s not funny.” I glare. “I’m being serious.”

“I know,” he says. “I just like hearing you say you love sex. That makes me feel like I did what I needed to do.”

My pulse speeds. I hate how he says that. Like there’s finality in it. Like his job is over and he’s ready to leave. “There are still other things to do. Like I was saying—”

“Shower sex, car sex, plane sex. I heard you.”

“Do you want that too?” My chest constricts, awaiting his answer.

He nods, his nose flaring again. His length grows even harder against me. He lets out a low, husky, “*Fuck*,” and he quickly climbs off the bed. Maybe to not tempt himself any longer.

“You didn’t give me an answer,” I tell him. “Will you be the one to do all those things with me?”

He’s grabbing his phone off the dresser and running a hand through his ruffled hair. “As long as you want casual, I’m here.”

Casual.

I know. I know. *I know*. That word can’t hurt me.

He eyes me for an extended tense beat. “Get dressed. We’re not going on campus for tutoring today.”

CamScanner

I frown. “Where are we going then?”

❧

This is not a date, I have to remind myself with each footfall through the marbled halls. Because, unknowingly, Birdie has taken me to one of my top five dream date locations.

It’s not his fault. This is *obviously* the perfect spot for a tutor to take his client. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is a treasure trove of history and knowledge, and it’s one of my most favorite places in the city. Though I spend about a fraction of time here compared to Charlie, who I suspect has clocked in more hours at the Met than all my siblings combined.

We’re on an upper floor with antique instruments, most situated behind glass. Birdie stops by an old grand piano with a dark shell and wooden keys. No glass enclosure for this one—just a low wire barrier around it to keep visitors back.

I read the white placard at the base of the piano.

Pianoforte
Bartolomeo Cristofori (Italian, Padua 1655 – 1731 Florence)
Italy, Florence 1720
Cypress, boxwood, paint, leather, fir, and brass

I frown. “What’s the difference between a piano and pianoforte?”

Birdie’s brows hike. “Jesus, we should have come here a month ago.”

“If I knew field trips were a part of our tutoring plan, Haydn, I would have suggested it.” I hold the folded museum map in my hands. Taking it was force of habit. I know the permanent galleries by heart, but there are always new exhibitions.

“Pianoforte is the earlier name for the modern piano,” Birdie says. “In Italian, piano means *soft*, and forte means—”

“Loud,” I answer.

He simply nods, not nearly as proud of my answer as I wish he were.

“You can smile if I get something right,” I tell him.

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He rolls his eyes. “I wasn’t even asking a question, Virginia. You interrupted me.”

“That is…true.” I flush and try not to waft the map at my face. “So this instrument is the same as a piano?”

“No. You’re looking at the oldest surviving piano in existence.” The enormity of that brings my gaze back to the instrument. “It has fifty-four keys and no pedals. The modern piano has eighty-eight keys. Some people would refer to this as a fortepiano to denote that it’s historically earlier than most pianos.”

When I turn back to look at him, his eyes meet mine as he asks, “Do you remember what instrument the piano evolved from?”

“The harpsichord.” I beam.

His lips twitch in an almost-smile.

“You can clap,” I tell him.

He laughs dryly. “I’m *barely* smiling, Virginia. Don’t push your luck.” He walks down the row of glass-encased cellos, violins, and guitars. I follow close behind, listening to him point out facts of each.

This is not a date.

Not a date.

My heart doesn’t understand what my mind does. I try not to be completely windswept by this afternoon.

By the time he reaches the end of the music gallery, I’m more engrossed in Birdie than the instruments. I learn little things about him. Like how he rubs his lip piercing when he’s deep in thought. He stuffed a baggie of Cheerios in his jacket pocket in case “he starves,” which is really just an hour without a snack. If someone is standing in front of a piece he wants to see, he waits patiently at the one beside it rather than hovering at their back. He winces whenever a child’s shriek hits a high note, but he lets kids cut in front of him to inspect the instruments without so much as an eye roll.

When Birdie checks his watch, it’s no wonder I want this day to last longer. I ask him, “What’s your favorite museum? Maybe we can go there next.”

“That’ll have to be in another lifetime. Mine is the Kunsthistorisches Museum…in Vienna. My parents took me to Austria to compete in a music competition, and I just remember falling in love with that place.”

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"Did you win?" I ask.

He nods once. "Sometimes I wish I didn't."

My brows crinkle. "Why?"

"It'd been a big fight after," he explains. "I wanted to spend the prize money on paying my parents back for the airfare and hotel. But they wouldn't let me—and I know how much it cost just to get me out there. They brought Phoenix, too."

"What'd you spend the money on then?"

"Instruments. I bought my first Custom Shop Gibson." He smiles. "God, it felt fucking good playing 'Cliffs of Dover' on that thing. I still have it, but I abused the hell out of it. It's probably worth half that now." He glances at a display of trumpets, a conch shell in the center of the glass case. "You said you've been to the Met a ton growing up. What's your favorite gallery?"

I open my mouth but close it. My pulse ricochets. "Could we possibly stop the timer?" He has a literal timer on his phone to keep accurate count of his tutoring hours. "Not that I don't want to pay you *more*." My cheeks are on fire. "It's just, if we're to have clear boundaries—"

"You don't have to explain it. I agree." He's already taking his phone from his pocket. "And I don't want to be paid if we're not talking about music anyway."

Why is my heart racing?

Please, *stop*. Maybe I know that I should have just let the timer run. He needs the money, and I could have easily let this tutoring session last another hour. My heart might be too selfish though.

"This way," I say, strutting ahead. For once, I get to lead. The museum is chilly, and I wore a thinner cotton sweater today. I hug my arms a little closer to my body.

Birdie shrugs off his leather jacket. Could he be...? No, he is not about to...

My eyes dart suspiciously at him. "What are you doing?"

He glares. "Aren't you cold?"

I hesitate.

"I'm not offering you a dozen roses. It's a jacket so you stop shivering."

"I am not *shivering*."

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"Whatever. Here." He extends it toward me as we walk. "You can't act like you hate my smell, Virginia. I know you want to smother yourself—"

"Enough." I snatch the leather jacket. He holds my purse as I stuff my arms in the big sleeves, and I try to remind myself he's *infuriating*. He's aggravating me. I do not like him one bit.

Purse strap back on my shoulder, I am engulfed in his nutmeg-scented leather jacket, and I find myself cocooning my body deeper into the fabric that smells so much like him.

Birdie is laughing at me.

I glare. "You won't be laughing when I never give this back."

He lets out a drier laugh. "This isn't finders keepers, princess."

"No, it is lenders stealers."

"So you're going to steal from me?"

"Possibly." I toss my hair over my shoulder. "Follow me, Haydn." I strut ahead, and when I peek back just once, I catch sight of his soft smile on me. It warms my body too much.

I face forward and inhale a sharper breath.

This is not a date.

When we're smack dab in the center of my favorite gallery—Birdie looks like he could take a nearby marble bust and smash it over his own head.

"You're perturbed?" I ask.

"*This*...seriously?" He waves at the fountain like I am beyond ridiculous. But the only ridiculous thing about today is the Cheerios he's stuffed in his leather jacket.

We're surrounded by Greek and Roman statues, but my most favorite thing happens to be the fountain in the center that has no ancient history. It is merely decoration for the museum itself: a large, round black basin with a shallow pool of water and a single gurgling spout. Hundreds of coins already lie at the bottom. I unclasp my purse and pull out a silver coin that's wider and much heavier than a quarter.

Birdie narrows his eyes. "What is that?"

"A half-dollar."

"What in the hell are you doing with a half-dollar?" He makes a face.

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"I have a few of them. Would you like one?" I shuffle through my change pouch.

"No. Are those not rare?"

"Not particularly." I zip up the pouch and clasp the purse. "But the bigger the coin, the bigger the wish." I close my eyes and take a deep, readying breath. *I will keep my promise to Birdie St. Pierre. I will not fall in love with him.* I open my eyes and toss my wish into the water, despite how much it hurts.

My stomach sinks along with the plummeting coin, and when it finally reaches the bottom, I spin on my heels to my tutor.

His brows are raised.

I have nothing to say, mostly because my heart is beating so fast by the way he's looking at me. Like maybe he'll…

He clasps my cheek, his fingers warm as they skate against my skin. I take shallow breaths in anticipation. Then he dips down and kisses me. A kiss that levitates me, body and soul. I feel so effortlessly high. His hands bracket my face, controlling the kiss until he dives his fingers beneath the leather jacket I'm wearing. He settles his palm along the slope of my lower back, and I'm clutching onto the green shirt tied off at his waist.

My dream date.

My dream kiss.

My dream ma—*no.* No, I must not.

I've never in my life broken a single promise in French, and I promised. I promised with my whole aching heart and soul.

When he draws away, he's staring at me with the same pained expression. He clears his throat. "Is there anything else you need to go over? I have to record the film score later today for my professor. So we'll have to wrap this up soon." His voice is too stilted.

I nod, my neck aching. "I think we can reconvene at our usual time."

"Good," he says, scraping a hand against the back of his neck.

"Good," I repeat.

There's really nothing else to say.

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44
AUDREY COBALT

I'm returning Birdie's leather jacket tonight. It's been decided by me. Six days being held captive is long enough, and now, I must relinquish his article of clothing.

I wear it one last time to Ben's ECAC championship game, held at MVU. The hockey arena is packed, but Harriet and I showed up early to snag rinkside seats directly behind the glass in the student section.

My parents aren't in attendance at this raucous game. MVU is ranked high enough to glide into the NCAA Tournament even if they lose tonight against Cornell, and Ben would rather them be there for the ones that matter.

The enemy team is nervous. They're all but biting their nails and yelling and groaning every time Ben explodes down the ice and carries the puck into the zone.

I am elated.

Harriet is anxious, but less about Ben. She flips a page in her genetics textbook, eyeing the ice, then the pages. Midterms are upon us.

I insulate myself in Birdie's jacket and perk up every time Ben skates a little closer.

"Anyone sitting here?" a student questions, pointing to the vacant seat on my left.

"Yes, sorry. It's reserved." I place my astronomy book on it since they're the fourth person to ask and the fourth person to trudge away like I'm an ice-cold bitch for claiming a good seat. My textbook distracts me a bit, and I flip through the pages.

Harriet asks me, "How many exams do you have next week?"

I'm lucky that three of my four classes are English courses, and I've already turned in my papers. "Just one for Astronomy," I tell her. The

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scowl on her face could be studied for lethality. But I know it's not directed at me. "I'm guessing you have many."

"Five," she says into a stressed little laugh that sounds like a hyena dying.

I wince. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. *Yeah*." She raises her voice over a shrill whistle and roar of the crowd as the enemy team takes a penalty. "I wasn't going to miss Ben's ECAC game—even if he told me to. Three times."

I smile. "That sounds like Ben."

"We compromised." She hoists the genetics book, then nods to my astronomy text. "But I am glad I'm not the only nerd in the stands." I doubt anyone would accuse Harriet of being a nerd at first glance. Her black crop top shows off her studded belly-button ring, and she has on low-rise plaid pants.

We both flinch as an MVU defenseman is slammed into the boards. The glass rattles. Students leap to their feet to yell at the enemy players.

Thankfully Ben hasn't been the one sandwiched into the glass yet. He outsizes most other collegiate athletes, being six-five and broad-shouldered, but skilled teams will ensure three players are always swarming my brother.

He is the best on the ice.

An elite player.

It's inconceivable to Ben, more than anyone else, just how extraordinary his junior season has been. He can say there are better skaters, more deserving of the accolades, and I can say I am biased being his proud little sister. But the stats ultimately tell the truth.

I'm not the only one with a PPG score. He has one in hockey, and Ben leads the entire NCAA in points per game this year.

Combine that with his strategic instincts, strong defensive play—even as a forward—and his quick, agile skating, and NHL teams have been circling him all season.

Not to mention, Manhattan Valley won the Frozen Four *last year* in part to Ben. The Winnipeg Jets and Detroit Red Wings both pushed to sign him after the championship run, but Ben turned them down. Rather than going pro and moving to Canada or Michigan, he returned

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to MVU for his junior season. But this year, one of his dream teams has come calling with a much bigger offer.

One he's not sure he wants to refuse.

It means not graduating with Harriet though, and he won't be on campus with her. Which means he won't be on campus with me either.

She smiles a little more seeing Ben swing himself over the boards and skate hard toward the puck with purpose. As if she's thinking about it too, she says, "I can't imagine him not playing in the NHL. He can get a degree whenever. If he waits any longer, he's going to be geriatric in hockey years."

It's true. Most hockey players are drafted at eighteen.

Ben turns twenty-one at the end of the month.

"Last thing I want is to hold him back," she mutters, then runs a highlighter over her book.

I can't tell her Ben will make a choice that benefits him more than her. He wouldn't put himself above the girl he loves. He's always been selfless that way.

Cheers erupt as Ben speeds like a bullet with the puck. Harriet and I leap to our feet. My heart races. "GO BEN!" I shout.

Harriet folds her hands over her mouth with nerves. Eyes big on him.

Ben takes a shot.

The goalie misses. It's in! It's in!! I bounce higher, and Harriet claps with a laugh and hollers, "Way to go, Cobalt boy!" Ben's teammates congregate around him with hugs and pats, all grinning, and then Ben's bright smile finds his girlfriend.

Harriet loves him. It is so clear and apparent how much.

It's okay if I don't experience anything similar…if Birdie doesn't… it's fine. It is really fine. It's not as if I love him.

I slip my arms deeper into the trenches of his jacket and cheer louder for my brother.

MVU leads 2–0, both goals scored by Ben off assists from Dylan Dorsey. They've been such a powerhouse duo all season.

Harriet and I sink back into our seats, and I take out my vibrating phone from my purse, checking my messages.

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BIRDIE

I finished practicing early. Is the game still on?

AUDREY

Yes. We're in the second period.

BIRDIE

Be there soon.

My smile expands so quickly, it hurts my face. I sent him a ticket this morning, but I figured he'd have more reasons not to stop by. Watching a hockey game together is slightly date-adjacent…isn't it?

Harriet fishes out sticky notes from her backpack to mark a page, then notices my smile. "Is Birdie texting you?" she asks. "Is he actually coming here?"

We both had our doubts. So did Kinney. When Harriet and I first arrived two hours early, I'd forgotten I left my best friend on our phone call and she said, "You're doing too much work saving a seat for Tutor Boy's invisible ass."

"Have to agree," Harriet said to me. "Tutor Boy Birdie is a flight risk."

"Really living up to his name," Kinney added.

"He will fly toward me. I'm sure of it," I said, holding out some hope, but after the first period, I decided to accept he might put his studies above a silly hockey game.

I'd understand that.

Now I'm teeming with a giddy feeling as I tell Harriet, "He said he'll be here soon."

She looks apprehensive. "But you're still casual?"

"Yes, very much so." I nod, then stiffen. "You don't think it's casual if a man attends a hockey game with the woman he's sleeping with?"

"I never went out to sports events with the dudes I hooked up with, but I guess this is a special situation."

"Because he's my tutor?"

"Because he's Tom's boyfriend's brother. That's a whole other level of messy. Would expect nothing less from the Queen of Chaos."

My heart blooms three times the size. *Queen*.

CamScanner

Harriet doesn't see the absolute joy she just struck me with. Her attention veers to the rink as Ben whizzes down the ice again.

Then I sense someone at my left, grabbing my astronomy text and sitting.

"Excuse me, that seat is..." My voice dies. My bones calcify as Guy Abernathy relaxes backward as if I saved *him* the highly coveted chair in the stadium.

"Mine," he says with an ugly smile.

My nose crinkles in disgust. I imagine plucking off his wire-frame glasses and chucking them a thousand feet in the air. Yet I can't move a single muscle.

My older brothers aren't around to make him cower.

It's a Saturday.

Beckett and Eliot are at work in the city, and Tom and Phoenix are an ocean away, performing in Munich tonight. Charlie left for Germany with them, since the next invitational isn't until after midterms and spring break.

My only brother in reach is currently in the middle of a championship hockey game.

I can handle this on my own. With Harriet. I am capable. We are capable.

She suddenly sees him and does a harsh double take. "What the fuck? Dude, that seat is *taken*," Harriet growls, bowing over me. "Get away from her, Guy."

He only stares at me. "We have history, Harriet. Don't get involved."

"She's my family—I am involved."

My eyes well at her declaration, but she's stabbing the nastiest glare into Guy. It rouses my courage, and I sit taller, straighter. "She's right. This seat is taken. You must go." I shoo him. "Run along."

Guy relaxes even more. "Saving a seat for Big Bird?" His eyes skim the cozy leather jacket that envelopes my frame.

I hoist my chin. "That's none of your business."

"We're two minutes from the third period, and he's still not here. Looks like he doesn't want to be with you, Audrey."

I will not let this fool hurt me...not again. "Get out of his seat."

Guy fingers the jacket opening near my breasts, and I whack his hand with my purse. Harriet springs to her feet with me. I cast one

CamScanner

quick glance at the ice, and Ben is...not going for the puck. Ben is murderous. Ben *sees* Guy standing up to face me and Harriet.

My brother is in a mad dash toward us just as three Cornell players crash into him at once. One suddenly high-sticks him in the mouth. He careens backward as his blood spews onto the ice. I gasp with the entire arena.

"Oh *fuck*," Harriet curses. "Ben!" She touches the glass.

Guy tries to put a fake comforting hand on my hip. I smack him away with my purse again. "Do not touch me," I warn.

His lips quirk like it's a game.

Am I now a challenge to him? The rabbit he wants to catch once more?

My stomach lurches.

Guy steps closer to me.

"GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM MY SISTER!" Ben roars, skating so hard toward the boards with a mouthful of blood, no helmet, his brown hair damp around his ears and his blue eyes scathing. He's chipped his front teeth.

It wouldn't be the first time.

Guy smiles more, staring up at the jumbotron where this dramatic scene is on full display for our college to witness. Ben doesn't care, and frankly, neither do I.

"We're on the same team, Ben!" Guy shouts casually over the commotion.

Ben reaches the glass, speaking hurriedly to Harriet. "Where's Novak? Get Novak." His bodyguard.

My bodyguard has been instructed not to intervene where Guy is concerned, as he *is* my teammate on quiz bowl, and I haven't wanted to make an enemy of him.

"Ben, it's fine," I assure. "We're fine."

Ben spits a wad of blood on the ice. Two of his teammates are trying to protectively pull him back from the glass as he stares down Guy. Harriet is flagging over his thirtysomething bodyguard, who's been seated near the rowdy team bench—rowdy because my brother's teammates are collectively shouting at Guy to fuck off.

I root myself to my chair, as if nothing is amiss. Ankles crossed, I place my purse on the seat I'm saving for *Birdie*. "You're not sitting

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here," I tell Guy, ignoring the acceleration of my pulse.

Ben barrels forward to sneer, "Get *the fuck* away from Audrey."

Guy raises his brows. "I'm a Cobalt Empire *loyalist,* Ben." Is he lying or is that what he sincerely believes? "Remember that." He winks at me, but he backs away nonchalantly before Ben's bodyguard can reach him and make a bigger scene.

It isn't until Guy is climbing up the stairs that I realize...he took my astronomy textbook.

That fucking *thief.*

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45
BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

Lately, I've been feeling like every second must have purpose. If I don't use my time well, I'm going to drown. Oddly enough attending a hockey game with Audrey does feel purposeful.

I care about her, and if I bail on her invite just because it's not tutoring or a late-night fuck, then does that mean I'm using her for sex and money? I don't want that to be true. The mere thought shoved me out of my apartment like my feet were on fire.

I ran here so fucking fast.

Too fast.

I'm in MVU's hockey arena when there's thirty seconds left in the second period, and I need to piss. So I find the nearest bathroom by the student section.

Halfway inside, I skid to an immediate stop. I don't consider myself a very unlucky person—but today is just not my day.

Guy is washing his hands, a textbook tucked under his armpit. He catches sight of me through the mirror. "You made it."

Confusion hardens my face. "Were you expecting me?"

He shakes out his hands in the sink, then dries them with a paper towel. "Audrey was."

I shift my weight. A sudden, surging fury *sears* my blood. "You talked to Audrey?" My nose flares. Acid scalds the back of my throat, then I go cold as he grips the textbook in one hand. The various blue tabs stuck out of the pages belong to Audrey.

That is *Audrey's* astronomy textbook.

This piece of shit. "You stole her book?"

"I'll give it back next time I see her." He flips through the pages like he's fanning her diary.

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In three hot strides, I'm in his face, and I wrench the book out of his hands. "Don't ever take her shit again."

"Or what?" Guy smiles as if he's a species above me in some animal kingdom.

"Or your head will be in a *fucking* toilet," I growl, controlling the overwhelming urge to punch him. I've never wanted to knock someone's lights out more. It would be so dumb.

So dumb.

He gauges me. "Stay out of this, Big Bird. It's above your pay grade." He tries to push into my chest.

I don't let him bump into me, but I track him with my eyes, not afraid of this rich prick. "She doesn't want to be with you. She's made that clear. Get the fuck over it."

Guy fixes his hair in the mirror.

Fuck him. I'm about to leave this fucker in the dust. Then he says, "Kissing in the middle of the Met is a little tacky, don't you think?"

It takes me a moment to register what he means. *The Met.* Audrey and me. Kissing. More raw anger pours through my bloodstream. "You're spying on her now?"

"Of course not," Guy says calmly, tilting his head back to me. "I have friends. Ones that go to the Met and know my interest in dating Audrey. So when they see she's kissing another guy, they're going to tell me."

"Sounds like spying to me."

"Sounds like you have no friends."

I let out a laugh. "I couldn't care less if you call me a fucking loser." I bite my tongue to not use ammunition from her date against him. It will hurt her beyond...beyond everything.

He rotates coolly to me. "I think you should dump her."

The abrupt demand is a shotgun blast. I have to count to three in my head to stop myself from doing something stupid. *Audrey and I are not together,* I remind myself. But I'd rather drink battery acid than muster a single part of that sentence. It feels so fucking wrong.

All of it.

Especially telling *him* that.

My throat burns. I grip tighter to her textbook. "I think you should stay the fuck away from me—"

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"I have no problem doing that," Guy says. "But what you don't understand is that you're playing a game you will lose. For your own best interest, you need to dump her."

I laugh dryly. "Because you really think *you* have a shot at being with her again?"

"Maybe not, with the way her brothers, and now Harriet, are coming at me. I'm not delusional." He slides an unconcerned hand through his hair. "But here's the thing—I don't like losing." He tosses a crumpled towel in the trash bin. His eyes hit mine in a threatening beat. "And if I can't have Audrey Cobalt, no one will." His gaze flits from my face to my boots and back up. He doesn't say it, but with a single expression I can hear his words in my head, *Especially not you.*

Like I'm the scum of the earth.

I am seconds from sacrificing my hands to lay him on the ground, but a sudden stream of guys enters the bathroom, boisterous with laughter, some complaining about the refs. It must be second intermission. The tension pops, and I come to my senses.

He's all fucking talk.

I'll call his bluff.

The biggest FU I can give him is to walk away.

So I do.

I find the student section, and I'm skipping stairs on the descent to the first row, already spotting Audrey sitting alone. It looks like Harriet is near the team bench, checking Ben's teeth.

When I'm five feet from Audrey, she lifts halfway out of the seat with pure elation. My leather jacket looks cute on her. Just witnessing her excitement to see me is messing with my head. At times, she's like a puppy, and I don't want to love this type of wholesome energy.

So I focus more on my anger over how she likely exuded this same energy to Guy, and he took it and he…

Yeah, *fuck him.*

I'm in her row. "Don't get up for me, Virginia."

She lowers back down.

I drop in the seat beside her. "You okay?"

"Yes—is that…?" She takes the astronomy textbook as I hand it over. "You saw Guy?"

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“Yeah.” Twisting to her, I extend my arm over the back of her seat. “You saw him?”

She tucks a strand of orange hair behind her ear. “It wasn’t awful. I made him cry, internally. I must’ve.” She flips through the book, checking the pages. Her collarbone is so strict, then her blue eyes meet mine with more vulnerability. The truth reddens her gaze. “Well, it was…a little awful.”

“I know,” I murmur, sliding an arm around her shoulders. Audrey leans into my side, resting her cheek against me. I cup the side of her head, hugging her closer, even if I shouldn’t.

I can’t think of anything more I want to do than hold her.

Lighting that rich fucker’s threat on fire also feels good. Too good. I’m not usually this destructive. With my physical well-being, maybe I am.

But with my future?

I never have been.

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AUDREY COBALT

"I've been excelling in New York—there is absolutely *no reason* you need to be concerned," I say emphatically to my mother and father. They've made an impromptu visit to my apartment the same night of Ben's ECAC championship game that MVU won 2-0.

Our parents saw the footage of Ben, bloody-mouthed and furious, exploding toward Guy on the other side of the glass, and of course, they have more serious questions.

Questions I am not interested in answering at this present juncture.

I casually rattle dice in a shaker as if I didn't make a grand exclamation about being *fine.* I play backgammon against my father at my sturdy but scuffed oak kitchen table.

He arches a brow at me, clearly *concerned* in a subtle, subdued manner. "It's abnormal for you to not ask for my help," he says. "It's especially unusual for you to push me away when you're distraught."

So many times, I've sought my father for comfort.

When I was a little girl and scraped my knees on the pavement, I cried, even after my mother blew on the road rash, but my father scooped up my wailing little self and asked, "You want to be held, ma petite?"

I nodded, and he held me against his chest during the Fourth of July party until I was ready to be set down. He hadn't asked if my knees hurt. He'd known they didn't hurt so badly. They were barely scratched.

He'd known I just wanted deeper consoling, and he didn't pretend it'd been about a physical wound. He made certain that I understood what I sought was emotional comfort.

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He provided it. A man who's been deemed *unemotional* and too egocentric to love others. I never questioned how much he loved me.

Then there's more recently. When I accidentally killed Theodore, Ben's pet bird, I ran to my father. The cockatiel died in my care. *Horrific.*

My father made me feel like being a bird murderer wasn't a stain upon my soul. All living things die at some point. Accidents happen. He rubbed my back and whispered calming words, so I'd stop sobbing.

He has a way of filling every crack with cement. Fissures never become craters in his care.

Yet I'm eighteen. I've left home. The time for Prince Snuggleton and for my father to dry my tears is *over*.

I take a deeper breath. "I'm not distraught," I tell him, rolling the dice on the board. *Terrible roll.* "Shouldn't this level of concern be directed at Ben?"

"We've checked on Ben," my mother says. She's near the barstools, snipping thick stems of white tulips. Beautiful flowers she brought over for me. Her features sharpen with each *snip snip.* "Now we're checking on you, gremlin."

I smile, feeling rather loved. I've enjoyed being the baby of the family as much as I've wished to grow up. It's a conundrum, I suppose. To love and hate being coddled. To want and not want the extra attention.

"I appreciate the drop in," I tell them. "Really, but everything is going well now. There was one speed bump with Guy, but I've flown over it."

"Speed bump how?" my father asks.

I move a white checker a few spaces. "As I told Mother, things ended rather poorly with him. We were not a good match. It's your roll."

He doesn't touch his dice. "Is he harassing you?"

"Don't you think I would run to you if he were?"

"No." He smooths his fingers through his wavy hair. "Not while you're here. You'd go to your brothers over me and your mother."

Very true.

"Which is a good thing, isn't it?" I perk up a little, clasping my hands together. "You two have always wanted us to be so very close. Even Charlie and Ben aren't so estranged anymore."

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Mother fills a porcelain vase with water. “I’d prefer to know about everything that plagues each of you, so I can slay all your demons.” She shuts off the faucet. “But I’ve accepted you all will keep things from us. Even if I despise it.”

“I’m not being coy. Truly,” I assure. “I know Guy’s father is on the Cobalt Inc. board, and I’m not trying to make things unnecessarily complicated.”

My father raises a hand like I’m very off base. “You shouldn’t worry about the Abernathys’ association with Cobalt Inc. That’s for me to deal with, and it’s easily dealt with. If Guy is using that as leverage against you—”

“He hasn’t,” I say just as the door whips open. Eliot has arrived from the theater in a blue button-down, dark slacks, and damp hair. *Perfect.* “Eliot can corroborate everything.”

“Hello, hi, welcome,” Eliot greets, air-kissing our mother on both cheeks. He rests a hip against the bar counter, plucking a tulip from the bundle she cut. “Are you putting my dear little sister on trial?” He feigns horror. “Mother, how could you? She’s but a child.”

“Am not.” I glare.

Eliot grins.

I smile back, seeing he’s joking. *Of course he is.* I knew that.

Eliot comes and sits beside me. “I’m here as her representation.”

“She’s not on trial,” Mother exclaims. “But you will be if we catch you in an ugly, heinous lie.”

“I would never deceive the two of you.” Eliot tosses the die in his hand. “That’s treasonous.”

Mother and Father exchange an imperceptible look.

I fold my hands over the table. “I would like to handle Guy myself. There is no need to take care of this for me,” I tell my father diplomatically.

“What did he do that needs handled?”

Mother fits the tulips in the glass vase. She’s hardly breathing.

“Nothing other than be an uncaring asshole. I suppose many men are just like him. Which is hysterical because he thinks of himself as *unique*.” I shift my hair off my shoulder. “All you need to know is he did not assault me. It was a normal bad date, and I’ve already moved on with Birdie.”

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Eliot flicks the die on the board. It plinks against my white checkers. “All truths. Guy is a run-of-the-mill douchebag just like Birdie is a run-of-the-mill fuckboy.”

I gape. “Birdie is *not* run-of-the-mill.”

“Sorry, sister, an exceptional fuckboy.”

“I am the only one he’s sleeping with at the moment, so does that make him a fuckboy?” I contest, forgetting my audience are my *parents*.

“You’ve had sex then?” my mother questions in one tight breath, finding her place at my father’s side. The wooden chair creaks when she sits.

Facing the two of them has never been more intimidating. Thankfully I have Eliot at my side. “Mother, I am eighteen. I would’ve lost it earlier had my brothers not warned every boy away from me as if I had typhus.”

“A job well done,” Eliot congratulates himself.

I glare at him. “We are fighting.”

“We are not.”

“Yes, we are. I do not like my representation. You are fired.”

“You love me, sister.” He squeezes me in a side-hug that makes me smile.

“Fine, you are rehired.”

“Unemployed for two seconds. Charlie could *never*,” Eliot quips.

I want to laugh, but our father has two pensive fingers to his temple. “Guy Abernathy isn’t harassing you?” he asks again since I deflected the first time.

“No.”

“And he didn’t hurt you. Yet he needs handled. Your logic isn’t sound, ma petite.”

“Possibly, he’s a little pestering, but again, I want to crush his ego beneath my heel. I need the victory, not for my parents to come rushing in to give him a stern talking to like I’m in middle school. *Please*.” I motion to Eliot.

“She’s well-equipped, and she’s not in any legal trouble. It’s a collegiate quiz bowl. Small fish.”

“Exactly,” I add. “This isn’t anything serious. I’m not in a war.”

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Mother is still tense, so Eliot reminds her, "Charlie is on quiz bowl with Audrey. He's keeping an eye on her. Tonight was an outlier."

"And my bodyguard is where he needs to be," I say. "I don't need a two-hundred-fifty-pound man to defend me during minor tiffs. My life is not on the line." I jump to another topic. "You'll also be pleased to know I am having safe sex."

"You're on the pill?" My mother sounds shocked.

Because the last time I took the pill, I bled for *weeks.* I hated it so very much, and I never wanted to try it again. I complained during several Wednesday Night Dinners about the woes of female birth control and how unfair it was.

I haven't tried any type of birth-control pill since.

"Well…no, just condoms." Though now I'm questioning whether sex feels any differently without them. I wonder if I'd enjoy it more, if Birdie would too. "Maybe I'll try something else."

Eliot reaffirms to our parents, "There will be no pregnancy scares in apartment 2168. Or his dick head will roll."

I snap a glare at him, then smile at my mother and father. "Is that all?"

Mother collects her hair into a tight pony. "No, I have a fucking *thousand* other questions. We just learned you're sleeping with Phoenix's brother—one who is so evasive that we haven't even met him yet, despite the fact that we are also good friends with his parents."

"What do his parents say about him?" I wonder.

"They *adore* him," Mother says. "They worry about Phoenix and basically worship Birdie, but that is not for you to know from us." She snaps her hair tie. "We should go before I say something I shouldn't. Connor?" She turns to my father.

He's rubbing his lips in thought. "He's your tutor. You're paying him—"

"Not for sex." My cheeks burn. "It's not like that, I assure you."

"When will we meet him?"

"I don't know." I try not to let it hurt.

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

"Is this because of the private jet?" Phoenix asks. "Man, I'll buy you a first-class ticket on a commercial flight. Please don't make me miss your birthday."

The Carraways have a show in Milan this weekend, and Phoenix invited me out there to play with them. My brother has been with me for almost all of my birthdays. Whether we were on the road together with Nothing Personal or at the bar in the city, he's been there. He's offering me an unforgettable twenty-third in *Italy*. Of course, I want to say yes.

But I have an entire spreadsheet dedicated to how many tutoring hours I need to pay off Chase. The margin is so razor thin that I can't miss a handful of hours, let alone a whole weekend.

This decision is only made worse by the absolute hotbox I'm in. Sweat drips down my temple. I turned off the heat in my apartment an hour ago, but it's not budging off a stifling 84 degrees. I'm begging for the whole thing to break again.

In the living room, I have my cello between my legs, and I'm holding up my phone to talk to my brother on a video call. He's in a fancy hotel bathroom. I think they just landed in Milan an hour ago.

"It's not about the private jet," I tell him. "I need to tutor Audrey this weekend."

Phoenix's jaw muscle contracts so hard, his whole face is a blade. "You mean you need the fucking money."

"That too."

"And your Nothing Personal royalties aren't enough?"

I slowly shake my head, a knot in my throat.

He slides a hotter hand through his dark hair. "I get paid in April—"

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"No—"

"It's my royalty check for *Silver Sweet*." He names his wildly successful debut album.

"I know where your money is coming from, man. I'm telling you I don't want a fucking penny. You cannot give me a penny." I must sound as asphyxiated as I feel because he says quickly, "Okay—calm down. Fuck, *breathe*."

I stare up at the ceiling and swallow bile. Phoenix inadvertently paying his ex-boyfriend off with money from The Carraways is sickening. His ex already stole his songs in college and sold them for his own profit.

He wrecked my brother.

He's not getting a *cent* from Phoenix.

I rub a hand against my neck, my fingers glistening with sweat. Fucking *fuck*. I wipe them on the edge of my shirt.

"Are you dripping sweat?" Phoenix asks.

"I'm in hell. Your boyfriend's favorite place."

His glare darkens.

"*Kidding*. I kid. Jesus, I know Tom is annoying as fuck, but who knew he could break your funny bone?"

His jaw tics.

I add, "Just kidding, I knew you never had one."

"Be fucking serious for two seconds."

I exhale a breath. "Okay, fine, I'm practicing in a sauna. Heat is broken, I think. And I haven't been able to play the *Piatti Caprice No. 12* perfectly yet. It's been a while since I had to nail it—but Dad and I agreed it's the best one for the competition."

"How long have you been practicing?"

Five hours.

"Not long enough."

"Why are you doing this? Just tell Mom and Dad to fuck off. You're in grad school. You don't need to win anything."

I stare out for a second, and all I see is Phoenix at sixteen in a voice-escalating argument with our dad. I hear him saying, "We aren't shooting up in the fucking garage, Dad! We're playing *rock music*."

"Your mom and I aren't sending you to that school to play Black Sabbath—"

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"It wasn't Black Sabb—"

"That's not the point, Phoenix!"

"It's not during school hours, Dad! It's after—"

"Your brother is *fourteen*. Do not drag him down that fucking path with you. It's bad enough you got a motorcycle. Heaven fucking forbid you wreck with him on that bike!"

"I wouldn't—"

"No one plans to get in a fucking accident. It just *happens*. If you have no care for your own life, then at least think of your little brother."

"Just call me a bad influence and be fucking done with it!"

"You're a bad influence!"

"Fine!"

"FINE!"

Doors slammed. They didn't talk for about two weeks. I spent most of the time reassuring our parents so our mom would stop moping around as if our family unit was forever nuked.

I don't know how to hurt our parents. I've spent my whole life making sure I don't.

Even when I joined Nothing Personal, I picked up so many orchestral jobs on the side to appease them. They saw I left the door open to play cello full-time. I gave them hope that all their hard work wasn't for nothing.

"Birdie?" Phoenix pulls my gaze to the phone. "You don't have to win this for them."

He doesn't get it. He'll never get it.

I set my bow on the coffee table. "Can we go back to talking about Audrey Cobalt? I like that better."

He nods. "Yeah, let's go back to talking about why you need the money."

I wince. *Fuck*. "Never mind."

He takes a deep breath before he says, "Bring her with you."

"What?" *But I know what*. I thought about this too. A lot. I've considered her coming to Milan with me, but taking a trip with her will complicate things.

"Bring Audrey with you," Phoenix repeats. "You can do tutoring wherever, right? Do it in Milan and take a break for the show. I get to

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see you for your birthday, and we get to play together onstage."

Playing rock music with my brother would be the ultimate birthday gift. There's nothing like it—and it's been *so* long. I haven't been onstage with him since last year. But Audrey...will she understand this isn't a date? I don't want to confuse her.

It might not matter anyway when there's one giant *hiccup* by the name of Tom Carraway Cobalt.

When Audrey had seen that he bought her the fancy cookies from Amsterdam, she'd been ecstatic, especially knowing Tom let me give them to her. She told me, "This feels like approval from Tom. He said he'd only get me these if I didn't sleep with you, but he gave them to me anyway."

I told her, "It feels like pity after he hooked me to a lie detector."

I'd been right.

Tom doesn't like me fucking his little sister. He would prefer I remain Phoenix's brother and that's it. "You really think your boyfriend is going to be okay with me and Audrey on an eight-hour flight together to Milan?" I ask him.

"Just let me take care of Tom," Phoenix says, then gives me a look. "You're not fucking her on the plane, are you?"

"She did mention *plane* sex to me, man. I don't know."

Phoenix blinks into an eye roll. "All right. Just...let me talk to Tom. I can't promise he's going to be happy, but it's your birthday. He's just going to have to deal."

"Hey, you should take this opportunity to get in a fight with him," I suggest. "Just for the hot-as-fuck make-up sex."

He scowls. "How about you dole out relationship advice when you actually try one."

I laugh under my breath. "That was *sex* advice. But okay." I wipe my sweaty palm more against my shirt.

"What about a relationship?" he asks.

"What about it?"

"*Are* you ever going to try one?"

"No." The response is immediate. No thought required. Will not cross that line *ever*.

His jaw tightens. "Tom keeps asking me why you're so against it."

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"Just tell him the truth, man. I can barely keep myself above water. The responsibility of a relationship is something I know I can't handle. It's too much." Keeping someone else happy. Prioritizing their feelings. Their time. Their life. I will fail that person.

I will fail Audrey, and I don't want to make promises I know I can't keep.

"It's going to be hard for him to believe. From the outside, you look like you can do anything, Bird."

I know. "*You* understand I can't though, right?"

His gaze softens. "Yeah, I understand." He glances back toward the door. "Let me know when you've talked to Audrey, and I'll break the news to Tom."

I grin. "Take my advice. Make it a fight—"

"See you soon, asshole."



Later that night, I'm boarding a private jet—but not the same one that I flew to the Grammys. This thing is *massive.* Twice as many seats, all white leather club chairs. A king-size bed located in the rear suite. A *minibar.*

Sitting down, I peer outside the oval cabin window. It's pitch-black except for the runway and airport lights.

Audrey is across from me, the table between us. She buries herself in my leather jacket. She did return it after the hockey game last week. But I just lent it to her after she was shivering on the tarmac in her pink dress: thin cotton, tiny straps. It's *March.*

I'm starting to think she's purposely forgetting a sweater or coat, just so I'll give her the jacket back.

It's worked three times already.

I'm the fucking dumbass who's falling for Virginia's conniving tricks. Because every time I catch her lowering her lips beneath the collar and inhaling my scent, my lungs expand and something primal slams into me.

A need to have her.

I feel the desire stirring now. I breathe deeply through my nose to quiet it. Then I glance down the long row of presidential-looking

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chairs. “This thing is huge.”

Audrey unzips her bookbag. “I don’t use this plane often, but the smaller one is unavailable right now.”

I sit straighter. “How many people does this one hold?’

“Sixteen.”

My chest is tight. *This is good.* Between seeing her on campus almost every day and being with her at the hockey game, I was starting to forget how different we are. I needed this smack in the face.

She places a music textbook on the table, one I told her to checkout at the library. “We can study for a couple hours before we sleep.”

I was upfront with Audrey—how her invite was extended primarily so that I can clock in tutoring hours and see my brother for my birthday.

But now I feel like shit about it. I’d rather talk to her about something else than Strauss and Beethoven. It’s late. “We don’t have to—”

“I would like to.” She opens the book. “Start the timer, please.”

I don’t move.

She glares at me. “Birdie. Do not take away my only avenue to help you while you are helping me. J’aime ça.” *I like this.*

We stare at each other for a long moment, then I start the timer on my phone.

Less than an hour in, and I’m laughing over Audrey gasping about Felix Mendelssohn like he’s some fucking actor in a movie she can’t place.

“I swear I know him.” She huffs and puffs, flipping the pages of the book. “It’s not funny. I’ve heard his name before.”

“Yeah. Because he’s *famous*, Virginia.” I laugh harder. “Why is it bugging you this much?”

She sticks her nose in the book, then gasps again. “There it is! There it is! Ah-ha.” She stabs her finger on a line, then spins the text toward me.

I read the words, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream.*

Then I stiffen. She hasn’t made a deeper connection to something yet—something I want to skip so far over. “Yeah, yeah,” I say fast. “He first wrote an overture inspired by Shakespeare’s play when he was a teenager. Then later, King Frederick William IV of Prussia commissioned Mendelssohn to compose additional incidental music for an ac-

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tual production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* It's what you've likely heard and recognize." She's taking out her phone. "We don't need to play it."

"I want to—"

"What about Fanny Mendelssohn?" I'm tense. "You want to know about his older sister? They were best friends. She was just as talented."

Audrey perks up. "Really?"

"Yeah." I relax. "Some of her compositions were actually published in her brother's name. Like her '*Italien*' which Queen Victoria said was one of her favorites."

"Tell me more, after we listen to this." Then she plays the most famous piece from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and I stare directly at her as the ceremonial trumpets open the song.

Her eyes widen to saucers on me as the full orchestra joins, the string melody so familiar even a regular Joe off the street would know this one.

It's what's played at *weddings.*

Matrimonial music echoes around us, bringing us closer in a private plane that should be too big for two people. I'm not blinking. She's flushing. We breathe harder and harder. I should tell her to turn it off, but I can't speak until it ends.

"Read the title," I say, too huskily.

Her eyes drop to her phone. "Oh. That explains it." This piece is called, *Wedding March.*

"Yep."

She smiles a little at me. I almost smile back, but instead, I release the longest breath of my life, then I tell her, "Play *The Hebrides* overture." I think Audrey will like it. "His 1829 tour of Scotland inspired it after he visited Fingal's Cave on the Isle of Staffa."

"Have you ever been?"

"No." I look her over. "Have you?"

"No, I haven't." She immediately falls into the atmospheric music as the rolling melodies of *The Hebrides* fill the plane. I've always been able to picture the crashing waves, the swirling wind, the storm. It's brooding and evocative, but seeing Audrey soak in the sounds, the overture is suddenly...romantic.

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I lose myself to her slow-rising smile, the brightening of her eyes, the lift of her carriage as if she's on the edge of a mossy cliff and her hair is whipping with the salty wind. I almost flinch when she says, "We should go."

"To where?"

"Isle of Staffa. How far do you think it is from Milan?"

My pulse is skidding. "We're not going to Scotland together."

"For tutoring. A field trip—"

"No." I pick myself higher in the chair, then flip a page. "Robert Shumann or stay on Mendelssohn?"

"Tell me more about Fanny."

I do.

For two hours.

After our tutoring session ends, we migrate to the rear suite. Everything is a deep navy blue in this room: the walls, chairs, and the linens on the bed. It's more relaxing than the luxury white in the front of the plane.

Audrey changes into a thigh-length pink nightgown. "Very casual." She gestures to her body as if she's in a pillow sack. There are ties at her tits that I want to *untie*.

I raise my brows. "You're still serious?"

"It's *cotton*."

She has no clue all the mental urges firing off to *fuck* and *get inside her*. Especially as she struts haughtily into the en suite bathroom.

Pulling my shirt over my head, I lean in the doorway and watch her brush her teeth.

She takes her toothbrush out of her mouth, meeting my eyes in the mirror in a combative stare. "We should have sex tonight."

I chuck my shirt aside, my cock already throbbing. "On your parents' private jet?"

Her cheeks go red. "They don't have to know. I'm positive that more than one of my siblings have had sex on this plane."

I laugh dryly. "That's really convincing me, Virginia." I slip inside the bathroom, our eyes never breaking apart in the mirror. "Maybe you should make me a PowerPoint to really persuade me."

"Maybe I should," she says smugly, then returns her toothbrush to her mouth.

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I come up behind her, listening to her hitched breath as my hands slip along her thighs. I press my erection against her ass.

She almost falls farther into the sink.

Fuck.

My blood runs hotter. "What did you say you wanted to try? Standing up?"

Her eyes are already heavy-lidded, impatient, demanding. "Yes, *yes.*"

"From the front or behind?" We haven't fucked from behind yet.

She plucks the toothbrush from her mouth to say hurriedly, "Like this. Like we are."

I draw her panties down her legs. She steps out of them, then slides a condom closer to me on the counter.

"Only on one condition." I plant a kiss on the side of her neck. She's watching me through the mirror, our eyes connecting again, and I tell her, "Keep brushing your teeth."

She lets out a soft noise, almost a whimper, and sticks the toothbrush back in her mouth. I'm out of my clothes in seconds, then I rip the foil packet and sheathe my cock.

Her eyes hit me in the mirror, and she takes her toothbrush from her mouth just to say, "Haydn, *please*."

"D-minus, Virginia. Can't even keep the toothbrush in your mouth for five seconds."

She glares, then returns it between her lips.

I smile. "Better." I'm naked behind her. "Elbows are going here." I readjust Audrey, placing her forearms down on the vanity so she's slightly bent over. I know her well now. Like how she'd rather have over-instruction than under.

I shift her hair and suck at the nape of her neck while our eyes meet. She trembles against me, especially as I undo the laces across her tits. My movements become rougher, needier, faster—I want inside her so fucking badly. I can't think straight for a second.

I bunch her nightgown at her waist, and clutching her hips, I drive into Audrey from behind so gradually—as she is so *fucking* tight. Beyond wet, beyond swollen.

She moans against her toothbrush.

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All the way inside her, I stay still. My cock is furious I'm not moving. She's letting out breathy gasps against her toothbrush. I pluck it from her lips, setting it aside, then I reach around and turn on the faucet.

White toothpaste smudges the corner of her mouth. Her eyes are fluttering. My muscles are on fire while I'm buried inside Audrey.

"What…" A staggered breath leaves her lips.

I cup my hand under the running water and bring it up to her mouth. "Swish," I tell her.

Her eyes hit mine in the mirror in a lustful haze. "I-I…"

"You don't have to if you don't want to." My voice is so thick. I grunt a little, pushing deeper.

She gasps.

"*Fuck*." I force myself still again.

I can feel her clenching around me every time I open my fucking mouth.

Water is still pooled in my hand. She bends her head to my palm and sucks it up. Her gaze stays pinned to me as she swishes.

I hold her hip. "Spit."

Water dribbles down her chin when she lets out a moan.

"Okay, okay," I coo into a low rumbled noise. *Fuck, fuck*. "Spit, now, Virginia. Before you choke."

She spits the water into the sink basin. Then I immediately collect more in my palm. Her breath comes shallow and uneven, a whimper escaping as her thighs quake against me.

I thought she'd like this, but hearing how much—it causes me to involuntarily rock against her. She falls into the sink, and I stop moving to say, "Again. Swish." My voice is a deep rasp.

She bends down to the pool of water in my palm. This time, her tongue laps it up, licking against my hand. I can't stand it.

I shake the water from my hand at the same time she moans, "*Deeper*." I pull her against me and thrust harder than I ever have with her. Our eyes crash together in the mirror, and for a moment, I'm transported. All I hear is *The Hebrides*. All I taste is the salt in the air.

All I see is her parted lips and lust for more. For this moment, for this second, for *me*. It's a mind melt—every part of fucking Audrey.

Her moans.

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Her gasps.

Her breaths.

She's hanging on to the edge of the sink. I'm holding her against me while I pound into her, but I reach around and brush my fingers over her swollen clit. She writhes. Her back arches.

The sensation is unsustainable between us. It feels like ascending into a storm, breaching dark clouds into a starlit night. I press my lips against her neck. My moans are deeper, rougher, ones I usually don't let out. She cries hearing them. I map out each new sound she makes, so I can replay it in my head tonight after she falls asleep.

"Haydn," she whimpers. She shakes. She's vibrating beneath me. "*Birdie.*"

"Virginia," I moan into her hair. I hold her body against me. Never letting go. "*Audrey.*"

I don't want to let go.

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AUDREY COBALT

My body goes limp with exhaustion, coming down from one of the most mind-altering orgasms I've ever experienced. Really, the entire act—not just the climax—has rampaged me.

Birdie throws the used condom in the trash, then quickly picks me up in his arms, carrying me to the bed. My heart flutters. I hope I shall never get used to being carried by this man. Let him carry me through every threshold on Earth.

I smile at the thought, but it doesn't last long.

Fatigue hits me all at once. I am *so* terribly tired. Yet I don't want to fall asleep. I wish to make this night on the plane last forever.

The sheets feel buttery soft against my limbs. I relax even more when Birdie crawls under the covers with me. I place my cheek on his warm, bare chest.

He smooths back my hair. "That was okay?" he asks. "It was different than what we've done."

Different.

He's not referring to standing up or being on an airplane. "You mean when you bossed me around, Haydn," I say into a tired smile.

His lips twitch in amusement as he looks down at me. "Yeah. *That.* Did you like that?"

"Couldn't you tell?" I frown, lifting myself up on his chest to stare him in the eyes. I hold on to the small burst of energy. "Your cock was in me, surely you could—"

"I want to hear you say it, Virginia," he interrupts.

My cheeks flush. "I liked it immensely." I swallow the rising lump in my throat. "More than I thought I would."

His brows pleat together. "Why is that?"

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I open my mouth. Close it. Raw memories threaten to crash through. I sink back down. Press my cheek to his chest, unsure if I can speak.

Birdie never pressures me.

Never rips me open. He is both gentle and strong. He's what I've wanted in a man, and he doesn't even know how much. He won't let me tell him.

I tilt my chin up. He keeps hold of my gaze, never shying from me.

"Guy ordered me around," I say, not breaking away from Birdie's steeled gaze. "I really thought I liked it in the moment, or at least, I was trying to convince myself I did…but looking back…" My voice tremors. "I think I hated every second of it, Birdie." I pause, panicked feelings resurfacing from the memory. "I think I was scared."

His jaw tics.

"I was scared," I rephrase. "I don't just think it. I *was* really scared when he took away my control, and I couldn't get it back. I kept trying to get it back. He'd thrown me on the bed, and I think it hit me how strong he was—how he could do anything to me and I wouldn't be able to…"

Birdie strokes the corner of my cheek, wiping something wet. "To stop him?"

I let him rub my cheeks. "I'm not crying," I whisper.

"Definitely not," he whispers back, thumbing away the silent streaks down my face.

I lo—like him so much. So terribly much. It's just a very powerful like.

I sniff a little. "So that's why I was surprised how much I liked you being in control—how much I've liked it."

He reaches over, plucking tissues off the nightstand. He passes me one. "I don't take away your control, Virginia. You still have it the whole time. You're the one with the emergency brake pedal."

My eyes sting. It all makes sense. "I trust you," I whisper under my breath.

He brushes my hair back out of my face, his gaze clinging to mine. "You're not the only person who's been scared during sex. I've slept with guys twice my size—people I didn't know. Didn't fucking trust. There have been plenty of moments where things got too rough, even for me."

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My face twists, not liking that for him at all. “I find it hard to picture you scared.”

“I think a lot of people could say the same about you,” Birdie tells me. “You put on a strong front, Virginia.”

That breathes oxygen into my lungs. “We’re the same. You and I?”

He kisses the top of my head. “For this, sure. We’re the same.”

My pulse slows. “Did you speak up and tell them it was too rough?”

“Sometimes, yeah. Sometimes, no.” He shrugs. “Case-by-case basis, I guess. I have enough experience that I knew when it’d pass and when it wouldn’t.”

I lift myself up, my energy returning to me, and I crawl onto his lap.

“She’s risen,” he says into an entertained smile.

I plant my hands on his bare chest. “I have questions.”

He rolls his eyes, his smile disappearing. “Of fucking course this is why you’re not passing out.”

“When you felt like it was too rough, was it when you were on bottom?”

He sits higher up. “Oddly enough, *no*.” He rests his head against the tufted upholstered panel attached to the wall. “I haven’t bottomed all that much. I just go wherever I’m wanted, and that’s usually on top. The times that I got nervous or scared was when I was being face-fucked. There’s not really a more vulnerable position for me than deep throating a cock.”

I’ve never given a blow job, so I can’t even begin to know what that would feel like.

But more so, I’m pained by a history I can’t protect him from. It presses against my chest, uncomfortable and heavy. “You didn’t deserve that. If you could give me their names, I would like to send them unkind letters. Maybe curse their lineages.”

He stifles a smile. “Don’t remember their names. Barely remember what they look like. It’s not weighing on me, Virginia.” He sends me a long, long look that says, *Don’t take this on.*

I nod. “Is this how you feel when I mention Guy?”

“No, I want to do a little more than send *unkind* letters.”

“And curse lineages—”

“I want him to feel what you felt. *Afraid.* I want him to *hurt*.” His nose flares, then he intakes a sharper breath into a wince. “I had a

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feeling you were scared when you were with him, but had you told me and confirmed it…" He blows out angered air and glares at the ceiling. "I wish I was back at the hockey arena. I wish I'd punched him at the very fucking least."

I gather his tense hand in mine, and his fingers uncurl as soon as I touch him. "I'm glad you didn't," I murmur, knowing how precious his hands are to him. I run my fingers along his palm and stare off. "He didn't know I was afraid. I am very convincing…" My eyes burn. "Just like at the frat."

"What frat?" He closes his fingers around my hand.

"Ben was part of Kappa Phi Delta his sophomore year. I surprised him at a party…and I…I'd searched the frat house for him and tripped going down the basement stairs. I sprained my ankle. The president, or maybe it was the VP, gave me a baggie of pills."

Birdie puts his other hand on his head. His muscles so flexed, he feels like a cement block beneath me. "Virginia."

"I took the one that he said was Tylenol." My eyes well. "It was fentanyl."

"*Fuck.*"

I try to laugh, but the sound doesn't release. "The horror in your eyes—I refused to feel that. I didn't want to be horrified. Not at myself, not at the situation. I told myself that Ben's frat brothers were just idiots, that they wouldn't possibly do anything to me if I fell unconscious—*they didn't*," I say fast because Birdie looks like he's about to puke. "They didn't, Birdie. My brothers showed up."

He's pulling me into his chest, hugging me, holding me.

"My brothers showed up," I repeat into a sudden burst of tears, truly letting myself feel the gravity of what could've happened if they hadn't.

I've never really cried over the frat party. I needed to be strong for Ben—who'd been slowly unraveling under the weight of an undiagnosed mental illness. None of us knew what was wrong at the time, but it was clear something *was*.

I wanted to be strong for him.

Maybe if I was okay, he would be okay too.

Here on the plane, I let myself crumble into something noticeably more fragile. Is it that I know Ben is okay now? Or that Birdie makes

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feeling you were scared when you were with him, but had you told me and confirmed it…" He blows out angered air and glares at the ceiling. "I wish I was back at the hockey arena. I wish I'd punched him at the very fucking least."

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Here on the plane, I let myself crumble into something noticeably more fragile. Is it that I know Ben is okay now? Or that Birdie makes

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me feel like everything will be okay, even if I'm not for a moment? I blink against the hot film in my eyes.

He strengthens his arms around my stiff body. Then he whispers, "When was this? How old were you?"

"It doesn't matter, does it?"

"Maybe not to you, but your age does matter to me." He pauses. "I hope I didn't give you the impression that I'd be with you if you were any younger—"

"No," I say fast. "I knew you wouldn't."

He hasn't relaxed. "Were you seventeen?"

"Close," I whisper, meeting his eyes. Mine try to fill again. "I was sixteen."

He releases a hard breath like he's trying to breathe for me. "Keep crying."

"What if I don't want to?"

"I think it'll make you feel better. Because the inverse is you inhaling like you're sucking a canister of air freshener."

I choke out a laugh. "I do not sound like *that*."

"You do. It's actually pretty fucking disturbing, but I've heard worse noises."

I sniff. "Like nails on a chalkboard? Or the sound of my courage slowly decaying?"

"I think that's growing, Virginia," he says. "It's a good sound."

My chin trembles. "Lend me your ears so I can hear."

"Depends."

I nearly gasp. "On what?"

"On whether this is lenders stealers. Because I'll need my ears back."

I can't look away from him. "What for?"

"That."

My throat closes, and I shake my head a little. "I don't understand."

"That."

"Birdie—"

"That."

Tears drip out of my eyes. How long has he liked the sound of my voice? My body slackens against him, and I weep into his chest while he holds me.

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He's right. I begin to feel better. I feel like I can breathe full breaths, enough that I drift and drift into a deep, deep sleep.

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AUDREY COBALT

From the side-stage wings inside the stadium, Tom and I watch the St. Pierre brothers onstage. They're plugging Birdie's electric cello into an amp and pedalboard.

This early evening has been a tornado of constant activity. I've gone to plenty of Tom's shows before but not without a family member. Usually, it's me and one of my siblings or my parents. Being here with Birdie, who is also playing tonight, makes me feel more like an integral piece of the group.

More like someone who isn't just Tom's *little* sister. Like when a woman on the crew taps his shoulder and says, "Tom, we need you to look at the jackets for tonight's show." My brother immediately motions for me to come with him.

I'm beyond giddy.

I can't smother my grin as I shadow my brother around.

We're now backstage in his dressing room. Tom is shirtless, only in ripped jeans. He slides hangers along a rack, trying to decide which black jacket he'll wear tonight.

It's a big deal, considering this is the first time since last year's North American Tour and this year's World Tour that he's ever changed the design on the back. At every show, he tosses his jacket into the crowd, and I can imagine that moment will get the loudest pop from the fans tonight.

He hoists two black jackets up to me. A punkish bleeding heart is painted on the back of one, a fiery blue blade on the other. He's asking for my opinion? The moment bursts sudden joy in my chest.

"The blade," I tell him enthusiastically.

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"The heart it is." He returns the jackets to the rack, and I try not to let his words pierce me. He's just a big brother getting a rise out of his little sister. *That's all.*

Pain blooms too suddenly to ignore. "Why must you be so contrary?"

"What else am I supposed to be? You're sleeping with *my* boyfriend's brother. You want me to throw flower petals and confetti for you?"

"So you'll hate me for eternity then?"

"Eternity is too short. This will definitely extend into the afterlife, Audrey Virginia." He crosses his arms over his bare chest, his blue eyes landing harder on me.

"You're joking…" I'm unsure though. Tom is one of my most hyperbolic brothers. It's hard to gauge his seriousness. "You've been nice to me all day."

"Because it's Birdie's birthday," Tom says into a long groan. "And I'm trying not to ruin it at Phoenix's request. But dude, you are the last person I want here." He points a finger at the ground. "Let it be known."

I shake my head, in a daze. "I thought we were bonding."

"I will bond with you when you aren't sleeping with him."

I scowl. "*Why* is it so bad that I am?"

"Because."

I huff. "That's it?"

Tom expels a deeper, more frustrated groan. His hands fly to his shaggy hair, his fingers threading on his head before slipping to the back of his neck. "*Because*…what happens when he breaks your heart?" He raises his tense shoulders. "What am I going to do? I will choose *you* every fucking time. And it's going to kill me because Phoenix will choose Birdie. And then what? Then what?" His hands fall defeatedly to his sides.

My chest tightens. "You'd choose me?" I say in a small voice, surprised.

He gives me a strange look. "You think I'd pick Birdie?"

"I think you'd pick Phoenix and by association, Birdie, yes."

He laughs, a strained laugh. "You are my *sister*. If your heart is broken, that dude is deader than dead to me. He is toxic fucking waste in

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the Great Pacific Garbage Patch."

The idea that person could be Birdie is unfathomable. "Well, you don't have to worry. Birdie would never break my heart."

"Maybe not intentionally," he mumbles, his gaze dropping, then lifting to mine. "You don't think you'll break up, ever?"

"We're not a couple—so a breakup is impossible."

Tom rubs his face, digging his fingers into his eye sockets. "Holy fuck, you are out of your mind."

"While we're having this heart-to-heart, I have an important question." I wave to the black leather sofa. "You might want to sit."

Tom, surprisingly, takes a seat. He circles his temples with his fingers. "I should have brought Eliot. Fuck *Amadeus*," he grumbles.

Still on my feet, I smooth out my lavender balloon-sleeved minidress, and I cup my hands in front of me. "I would like to give Birdie a birthday gift tonight, but I could use some advice."

"If you're not dating, no birthday gift. That is my advice." He claps his palms together and stands. "Look at how easy that was. We're done here."

"I will be giving him a birthday gift," I counter. "A birthday blow job."

"Ohhhhh my *fuck*." Tom smears his hands down his face. "Please teleport away from me."

"I'm being serious."

"*I'm* being serious," he refutes. "You have a big sister that you can go to for this advice. Ask Jane Eleanor."

"Jane is almost ten years older than me," I say into a huff. "You are only *five*. And I don't know the depth of her sexual experience. She's not an open book, but I know every person you've slept with."

"How does that count? It's only two guys." Tom glares. "But I've had oral sex with *many* more than that, okay?"

I grin. "So you're experienced in that field. Do tell me more."

"I'm in hell. I am officially in hell." Tom starts pacing around the dressing room, his hands laced on the back of his neck again.

I give him a moment before I say, "Let's circle back to the fact that this is for your boyfriend's brother's birthday. I'm sure Phoenix would want his brother to be happy. It would likely make him happy."

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"Let's circle back to the fact that you are *relentless*." He groans up at the ceiling. "Eliot and I created a menace."

"You did not make me what I am," I retort, but I can't deny their influence. There've been many times where I've quoted them and not given proper attribution. "You do want Phoenix to be happy?" I try again.

Tom sighs hard. "Eliot would be proud you haven't given up—so I am doing this for him. *Not* for you. You are still on my shit list."

"For eternity," I say into a nod. "Into the afterlife, which are relatively the same things, but I will overlook that redundancy for you."

He forces a smile, which is more of a wince. "What do you want to know?" he asks me.

"Techniques? What if I choke if he goes too deep? Should I spit or swallow?"

Tom touches a hand to his chest. "Actually, I might be having a heart attack. Maybe this isn't a good idea."

"*Tom*," I complain.

"Fine. Fine." He sits back down on the leather couch. "Don't use your teeth. Breathe through your nose." He closes his eyes. "Do whichever one makes you more comfortable."

"This is about his pleasure, though. Not mine. Which do men like more?"

"Swallow." As soon as he says the word, the St. Pierre brothers come into the dressing room.

Phoenix's brows are raised. "Swallow? Why are we talking about swallowing?"

"*No reason.* No reason at all." Tom lies down on the couch, grabbing a pillow and stuffing it over half his face. "Leave me here to die."

"I appreciate the advice," I say, trying to make him feel better.

Phoenix goes to the couch, lifts Tom's legs, and splays them across his lap. The pillow covers Tom's eyes but not his mouth, and his smile is clear.

Birdie sidles next to me with a laugh. "Tom, this obsession with my dick has got to stop, man."

Pillow still covering his eyes, Tom flips him off with both hands. I've known about Tom's old crush on Birdie for years. He'd complain about "Nothing Personal's hot drummer" at Wednesday Night Dinner.

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It was a funny coincidence that he ended up dating that hot drummer's older brother.

And I am the one with *the* hot drummer from Nothing Personal.

I don't hide my smile.

"And for the record," Birdie says, turning to me. "I don't care if you spit or swallow."

Phoenix has his fingers curled around Tom's wrist, taking his pulse. "Relax, nepo baby."

Tom groans. "You don't have a little sister. Neither of you. There is no relaxing."

"I shall close the conversation," I tell him. "No more talk of blow jobs."

"Forever," Tom says.

"This weekend," I counter.

Phoenix pats Tom's leg. "You'll survive."

"Barely," Tom says. "Don't put me on life support, dude. Just pull the fucking plug."

He rolls his eyes. "Shut the fuck up," he says in a low, hot warning, then nearly smiles at Tom, who still can't see.

"Make me."

Phoenix leans over and kisses him. Tom begins to grin into the kiss. It's absolutely *adorable.* Tom would not like me using that word. I'm sure he'd want *sexy* attached to them, but it is so very cute.

I glance at Birdie beside me, but he's just looking at me. My cheeks heat at the way he's staring, like he appreciates how much I adore our brothers together. I don't believe anything Birdie and I could do would ever break them apart.

Their true love is too powerful to be shattered by us.

As the show begins with sweeping fog over the stage and a frenzied crowd, I watch from the wings with Birdie. I always believed Tom had it in him to sell out a stadium, but witnessing the adoration and rabid hysteria fills me to the brim with pride.

I've watched The Carraways perform so many times, but I already know this is my absolute favorite. Because I see Birdie's expression as

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I don't hide my smile.

"And for the record," Birdie says, turning to me. "I don't care if you spit or swallow."

Phoenix has his fingers curled around Tom's wrist, taking his pulse. "Relax, nepo baby."

Tom groans. "You don't have a little sister. Neither of you. There is no relaxing."

"I shall close the conversation," I tell him. "No more talk of blow jobs."

"Forever," Tom says.

"This weekend," I counter.

Phoenix pats Tom's leg. "You'll survive."

"Barely," Tom says. "Don't put me on life support, dude. Just pull the fucking plug."

He rolls his eyes. "Shut the fuck up," he says in a low, hot warning, then nearly smiles at Tom, who still can't see.

"Make me."

Phoenix leans over and kisses him. Tom begins to grin into the kiss. It's absolutely *adorable.* Tom would not like me using that word. I'm sure he'd want *sexy* attached to them, but it is so very cute.

I glance at Birdie beside me, but he's just looking at me. My cheeks heat at the way he's staring, like he appreciates how much I adore our brothers together. I don't believe anything Birdie and I could do would ever break them apart.

Their true love is too powerful to be shattered by us.

As the show begins with sweeping fog over the stage and a frenzied crowd, I watch from the wings with Birdie. I always believed Tom had it in him to sell out a stadium, but witnessing the adoration and rabid hysteria fills me to the brim with pride.

I've watched The Carraways perform so many times, but I already know this is my absolute favorite. Because I see Birdie's expression as

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Phoenix takes the stage and settles behind a drum kit to thunderous noise. There is something so pure and joyful about the love of a sibling.

My family means more to me than words, so to see the same sentiments written in Birdie's eyes—my heart squeezes until it aches.

And the show, the show is *spectacular*. Tom sings like his soul is being torn from his body, and he commands the entire stage while Phoenix thrashes against the drums. They rope me in as much as they compel everyone else.

I bounce on my toes, and Birdie throws his head into the beat. I try to clap to it, and soon Birdie ends up behind me, his arms around me. His hands find my wrists, and he shows me the rhythm, bringing my palms together. I lean back into his chest, feeling his body move to the tempo. I naturally move with him.

We're dancing together, I realize.

My face burns with hot delight.

Blue lights fade dramatically into sweltering crimson, and I discover Birdie knows the lyrics to all my favorite songs off the album.

"Bruit Préféré."

"Wired."

"Your Epidemic."

I'm up in flames. I fix my hair off my neck with a claw-clip. It keeps falling as I bounce to the more aggressive choruses. Birdie reclips it every time for me.

His arms wrap around my chest. He's holding me during a softer portion of "The Arcadian," and I sway a little with him. My heart feels on the verge of explosion.

It's a perfect night, made only more perfect when Birdie is handed the bow to his cello. Crew are placing his instrument on the stage, plugging it in.

"ENCORE! ENCORE!" the crowd chants while Tom and Phoenix are side-stage with us. They're sweaty and amped, catching their breath for the grand finale.

My brother's smile is contagious. He's light on his feet with adrenaline. His grin pulls wider when he sees me smiling from ear to ear. "What a fucking night!" he screams to me.

I feel it too.

The energy.

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The electricity.

No wonder Birdie played in a rock band for four years. You could get high off this crowd.

"You're amazing!" I yell at Tom over the growing chants, the compliment coming from the depth of my heart.

He smiles brighter like it means so very much to him. It lifts my carriage to new heights.

I clap vigorously as he sprints back out onstage, Phoenix striding out behind him, and my ears ring at the booming ovation.

Birdie waits beside me. "I meant to tell you!" he shouts over the screaming. Our eyes lock for a moment, and everything quiets in my mind. He dips his head to whisper against my ear, "Thanks for being here for my birthday."

It surges so quickly. This feeling. I'm about to open my mouth to reply, but Birdie doesn't linger on me. He stares ahead, breathing harder.

Tom speaks into the mic. "We have a special treat for you tonight. He only comes out for a handful of shows, but when he does, he's *killer*!" The fans know what that means.

Birdie leaves my side to ear-splitting shrieks.

"Killer Ultraviolet" has always been my favorite song off *Silver Sweet*, from even before I met Birdie. I'd been drawn to the melody. How, unlike all the others on the album, this one contains powerful, soul-burrowing strings.

I only realized later that Birdie composed the cello section for Tom and Phoenix. He'd always been a part of this song I loved.

Once Birdie has the cello between his legs, the St. Pierre brothers open the song together with strings and drums, and then Tom's passionate vocals detonate the crowd under a breathtaking switch into vibrant purple light.

I can't keep my eyes off Birdie. I'm utterly transfixed by him, by his unrestricted movement against the cello, by how he feeds into the heart-rending chorus. Though I've seen him play countless times now, I've never really seen him onstage at a stadium.

Never seen him play for a lively crowd.

Never like this.

My eyes burn with deeper emotion.

Sometimes you just know where someone belongs.

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

I fell in love with this song the moment my brother played a demo for me.

It wasn't even a question whether I'd contribute to it. I was more honored than anything—and now I get to play it live.

In front of a crowd...in front of her.

Bone-deep music flows through me like I'm made of vibration. I don't look at anything or anyone. I just hear what I need to hear and let my body move with muscle memory. It's like breathing, full deep breaths until I'm cognizant of how alive I am. There is no feeling that matches being a conduit for creation. For art.

Everything in my chest stirs.

When it's over, I expel heavier breath and hear the crowd, but I just turn and look at Audrey. Catching her enraptured eyes at the side of the stage is a fist inside my ribs. And then I think, maybe there is a feeling that comes close.

There is no detaching my gaze from hers, not even when Phoenix squeezes my shoulder, then throws his sticks in the audience.

I'm on my feet heading toward Audrey. I want to remember this night forever. Stain it over every fucked-up thing that's ever happened to me.

It's a sudden, terrorizing realization—that I've never been this happy.

I don't stay as silver and black roses are being tossed onstage. I'm rushing now toward her, and as soon as I'm within arm's length, I lift Audrey. She lets out a squeaky gasp, then folds her arms around my neck. I kiss her into the backstage area.

I can't stop kissing her.

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I set her ass on a black road case used to store lighting gear and audio equipment. Her legs split around me while I hold her cheeks and deepen the kiss. Her fingers grip my black tee. We're making out for less than a minute, probably, when I hear Tom say, "Oh look, the curse upon our household."

Audrey breaks from my lips to scoff. "It's his birthday. You cannot call him a curse."

Cobalts take birthdays *very* fucking seriously, Phoenix warned me. Which is to my benefit.

"I was calling *you* one, Audrey Virginia."

I can't tell if there is real animosity there, but by the way Audrey humphs, maybe not. I help her down from the road case. On her feet, she says, "We're getting a room."

"Not next to us," Tom says, rotating to Phoenix who chucks a towel at his boyfriend. They're dripping sweat. "Their hotel room is not next to ours, right?"

Phoenix shoots me a look to withhold a joke about Tom hearing his sister come.

Tempting.

But I do bite my tongue this time.



OUR HOTEL ROOM ISN'T NEXT DOOR. WE'RE DOWN THE HALL.

A vanilla-cake sprinkle cookie is sticking out of my mouth while I search my pocket for the key card. She made me birthday cookies with my initials piped in green frosting. It's ridiculous how fancy they are. They taste just sweet enough without being overkill.

I thought scones were her thing, but come to find out, she loves baking and decorating cookies the most, so I knew it meant a lot for her to give them to me.

It probably meant too much.

She twists her hair off her shoulder, waiting impatiently for me to unlock the door. Once I swipe the key card, I turn the handle and kick it open, leading her inside.

Slowly, I take the cookie from my mouth, and the bite goes down thick when I see the bundle of silver and green balloons and the cham-

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pagne bottle on the desk. The sweets, I expected. This…not so much.

"I called concierge," Audrey professes. "I hope that's okay." Her eyes are wide as she watches me. But I'm hung up on it. On everything. The flight, the concert, this night.

I'm too stunned to speak. I must look freaked out because Audrey starts talking fast.

"They're casual," she says. "Casual birthday balloons."

"And casual champagne, Virginia?" My brows hike.

"Precisely." She nods, her chin lifts like she can't be argued with. And I don't want to argue with her. But I can't really lie to myself. I know how I feel about her, and I've just been hoping and fucking praying she doesn't feel the same about me.

But the way she looked at me tonight after I got through playing…

No one's ever looked at me like that, and now *this*.

I rub the back of my neck and inhale a strained breath. "Audrey, you promised," I whisper, my throat tight.

Her eyes well. "I do not love you. Balloons are *not* love, Haydn. They're given as a perfunctory gift to everyone. I would give balloons to a stranger." She waves a hand toward the chiller. "And that champagne is too cheap to be a gift of love." She crosses her arms over her chest and then drops them to her sides. Her eyes lock with mine for an agonized beat. "And most importantly, I could never love someone who made me promise not to love them. It is despicable."

My jaw works, emotion festering. I approach her slowly and press my hand against her soft cheeks. Pain envelops me, and I can see it twisting through her. Why did I put us here?

"Can we start over?" I ask her. "Thank you for the birthday balloons, Virginia."

"And the birthday champagne," she says proudly.

"And the cheap champagne."

Her lips lift.

Mine do too.

Maybe I can let myself be happy?

Maybe?

Maybe.

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

"Sorry we couldn't make your birthday last weekend," Steffi says over video call, seated at a sunny outdoor café. Her dark, wavy hair is knotted in a top bun, and she pushes her sunglasses to her head. "My mom said she was bringing over pancit for you. Did you get it?"

"I did. Already ate it too. Thank you, Mama Reyna." I smile, already wishing I had more of the stir-fried noodle dish that Steffi's generous mom makes every year for my birthday. Steffi's maternal side is Filipino. They've all been in New York for several generations, and out of everyone in Nothing Personal, Steffi is the true New Yorker, having grown up in Queens.

"She's the best," Steffi sing-songs. "Us...not so much."

I make a scrunched face. "When have I ever cared about my birthday?" Even saying it makes me think of Audrey...who suddenly made me care this year. "Just don't tell your mom that."

"Don't worry, she'd still make you a pound of pancit." Steffi leans into the shade of the umbrella. "I just really wanted to be there for you this year. Scally had this whole plan to get on a train from Prague to Milan, but it all went sideways when Riot added a show in Vienna."

Vienna.

What I would've given to play over in Austria.

But I don't mention it. I'm glad Nothing Personal is gaining popularity through these extra shows and that the label is supporting them.

I'm trying hard not to get in my feelings about it. My friends succeeding is *good*. My friends succeeding just months after I quit the band—yeah, it's going to be tougher to swallow.

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The only way I dig through the regret is by reminding myself that my childhood dream had always been to be in a successful rock band with Phoenix. That dream died a while ago. There's no use hanging on to *what ifs* anymore.

"How's the new guy?" I ask, since I haven't heard much about the drummer that they hired to replace me. Just that he's older, closer to his late-twenties, and he grew up in Brooklyn Heights.

"First of all, he's not *you*." Steffi picks up her cappuccino. "No one can compare."

I roll my eyes. Scally and Neil already told me something similar weeks ago. "Blowing smoke up my ass isn't going to change anything."

"It's more truth than smoke, Birdie. You really are one of a kind."

I narrow my eyes at the screen, my phone propped up against a box of Cheerios in our kitchen in Chelsea. "Okay, but I need more details than that. Does he stink like sewage? How many times has Neil told him to lower the decibel of his voice?"

"No noticeable smell. And believe it or not, Hewitt is soft spoken. Neil and him could have whisper-offs."

I grimace. "I hate him already."

She laughs. "When we get back in two weeks, you can meet him and decide for yourself. How's the apartment?"

"Not flooded. Not too hot. Not too cold. I'm thinking there's a fucking miracle happening here," I tell her. "Oh, and your room has a mini-shrine of packages. If you stay in Europe any longer, you're not going to be able to see the floor in there." Neil collects vinyl records, and most of his stash exists in a storage unit down the street.

She shakes her head, but her smile says she's more amused than aggravated. I'm just waiting for Neil to finally pop the question so I can get my wedding invite.

"I'm looking forward to the eternal unboxing." She studies me for a second. "What's going on with you?"

"What do you mean?" I straighten up from the phone.

She frowns. "It's not a trick question, Bird. What's going on in your life? How are you? How many people have you fucked and dumped recently?"

This is the moment I make a joke. I'll laugh it off with her. But I can't even muster a smile.

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Her brows draw together. "*Birdie*."

"It's nothing—"

"It's not nothing. I know you. We were in a band together for *four* fucking years, remember? You don't just get quiet like that unless something is going on."

I groan into a laugh. "Can't pull one on you, Steffi."

"Damn right." She sets down her cappuccino without taking a sip. "But really, what the fuck? Did you meet someone? Do they have a deformity that you don't want to talk about or something? Scales? Gills? A tail?"

"So sweet you think I'd fuck *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*."

She squints. "Who are you sleeping with then?"

I push a hand through my hair. "Last name is Cobalt."

"Ha-ha," she says dryly. "Your brother is dating a Cobalt."

I stare firmly into the camera. My chest tight. Telling Steffi is making this more real.

Her lips part in shock. "Birdie St. Pierre, what the *fuck*?" She jerks backward, and her sunglasses almost go sailing off her head. She catches them before they fall onto the patio table. "Which one? Please tell me it's the actor. I saw a picture of his abs, and I think he might have *eight* of them."

"I'd rather gouge my eyes out than fuck Eliot Cobalt," I say into a cringe, then I take a breath. "It's Audrey. The youngest daughter."

"Holy shit," Steffi gawks. "You're sleeping with Audrey Cobalt?"

I'm not shocked she isn't using the word *date*. She knows me well enough that it's not even in the realm of possibility. I would've said the same thing before my birthday.

But I've had a long time to think this week. During the plane ride home to New York, during the train rides to campus, during lectures and evening runs—I've been thinking about my feelings for Audrey and her *obvious* feelings for me. It became too clear the night of my birthday.

Audrey deserves to have someone that can be happy for the balloons and the champagne. That can take her on dates and call her a girlfriend. Staying with her in this casual *thing* isn't good for her. She'd just be accepting scraps of what she really wants.

For her sake, I need to choose to break it off or go all-in.

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Last weekend was one of the best times of my life. So maybe I have it all wrong. I'm not drowning when I'm with her. Would a relationship change how I feel? How I operate? Would I really be a fucking terrible boyfriend? Would I break her or is this just my rampant fear ruling over me?

Maybe…maybe I could give it a shot.

"It's been casual," I admit, pausing for a second. The urge to correct that statement is too powerful to ignore. So I add, "But I'm thinking of asking her out tonight. Like officially. She has a quiz bowl invitational in Philadelphia. I think it'd be a good spot."

Steffi's eyes glass over like she just opened her arms to a horde of puppies.

"*Stop*," I groan. "You don't even look at Neil like that."

"Because he's not a reformed fuckboy who fell for a girl."

My nose flares. "Still a fuckboy just fucking one person."

"That's literally the opposite of a fuckboy, but okay." She smiles. "Does Phoenix know about tonight?"

"No, and don't tell him. He'll just tell Tom and make it into a bigger deal than it needs to be." I laugh. "I might screw it up somehow. Maybe it's not even the right decision—I don't know, it's just the opposite choice is losing her, and I'm trying not to choose the path that tortures myself." *New for me.*

Steffi presses her hands to her face, her smile so dopey that I'm just shaking my head.

"You've got to stop."

"Never," she says.

"Well, I have to go, so go find Neil and tell him you're secretly in love with me."

"He already knows you're my favorite. See ya, Bird."

"See ya." I hang up and rub at my eyes. There's no going back now. I've told Steffi. *I'm doing this*. Tonight.

I'm asking Audrey to be my girlfriend.

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

My hand is slick with sweat against my phone. I've been on this call for what feels like hours. I keep getting put on hold. It's a beautiful day. Skies are blue, and daffodils bloom along the sidewalk here at Penn. But I can't enjoy it. I can barely fucking breathe.

I'm standing in front of a Victorian building that resembles a cathedral. Might be one of Penn's libraries. I try to scrutinize the worn burnt-red bricks so my pulse slows. Then the arched windows, the turrets at the roofline—"Hello, sorry for putting you on hold."

The rest of the phone call is an out-of-body experience.

I don't know what's happening other than my entire life is being crushed down.

When I get off the phone, I check the time. *Shit*. There's a good chance I missed most of the Penn Invitational. I start running across the campus, back the way I came, trying to find the building I'd left. My heartbeat is in my eardrums. I just need to fix this one mistake. *Be there for Audrey*. This one time.

Let something go right.

I sprint up the stairs into the echoing building and come to a hard stop at the help desk, manned by quiz bowl volunteers. A preppy student jolts at my sudden appearance and hard, panting breath.

"Which room is MVU playing in?" I ask, hands on my thighs, then my head.

"Room 107." I turn, but she adds quickly, "Don't even bother. Security is posted outside. They're not letting anyone else in."

"Why?" I don't know why I'm asking. I know why.

She blinks once. "Becaaause…Rose Calloway and Connor Cobalt are in there. The room is packed, and we're trying not to get the fire mar-

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shals called on us."

Audrey's parents are here.

I knew they'd be here. The University of Pennsylvania is right around the corner from where they live. Where *a lot* of Audrey's family lives. Her aunts, uncles, cousins. She didn't give me a play-by-play of who'd be here other than her parents, Ben and Harriet, and "the most important person on this planet Earth."

Which just so happens to be the only person I was introduced to before I ran out to take a call.

That VIP is the one I'm messaging on my phone. Without her number, I resort to finding her on social media. My account is filled with concert pics from my days in Nothing Personal. I haven't posted in over two months.

I'm just hoping she sees my DM to meet me in the lobby.

One minute passes. Then two. I'm panicking. I just need this day to end.

These ivy-clad volunteers side-eye me from their table while I'm loitering near a Fizzle vending machine. My boots squeak on the marble floor because I'm pacing. I slide my hands against my head. I can't catch my breath. *Please, come on.*

Three minutes.

Four.

Fuck, I should just leave. My chest hurts. Pressure intensifies, and I'm not worried about my pulse anymore. It's going to do what it's going to fucking do.

And what am I still doing here? I stare hard at the exit. I need to go home. I have five hundred things that need to get done. None of which involve fucking Philadelphia.

I need to practice.

I need my cello.

Double doors open down the hall with a decently loud *thwack* followed by the sound of heavy-footed combat boots. I recognize the sound—because it's the first thing I noticed when I met Kinney Hale.

Her boots.

They lace up to her kneecaps.

In an inky leather trench coat and black minidress, she pulls off the '90s goth look. Messy strands of her jet-black hair frame her round

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face, and her piercing green eyes meet mine in an angry beat. "What is your damage?" she whisper-hisses as she lands in front of me. "Where have you been? Audrey was freaked when you left, and I had to convince her that you probably got food poisoning so your ghosty bullshit wouldn't distract her. You're welcome."

I nod stiffly, my neck not working right. My muscles lock up. "Yeah, I…" I run a hand through my hair. *I can't do this.* "Can you tell her I went back to New York. Something came up."

Kinney's face falls. "*No*. I'm not telling her that. You're not leaving."

Jesus Christ. "I can't stay, Kinney. Okay? We don't know each other that well. But I can't stay here."

"The only thing accurate in that statement is that we don't know each other that well. Because if you knew me, you'd understand I'm not letting you leave Philly without talking to Audrey. She will be *devastated* if you just prance on back to New York without so much as an explanation—"

"Just tell her I'm sorry."

"*You* tell her," Kinney snaps. "Good God, you are making objectively the world's worst first impression."

I'm shaking my head. Tension coils through every part of me. I don't want to hurt Audrey. I don't know how not to.

The tension in my chest is almost unbearable, but I'm struggling to actually move.

Kinney frowns, examining me more intently, and I can tell she sees the strain in my body. "Oh-kay." She says the word like it's two, her lips parted and eyes sharpening. "Okay."

I shake my head again. "No, it's not."

Her face breaks. "I know something really isn't right. I get that. I'm sorry I came at you so hard. If you leave here without talking to Audrey, it's only going to make things worse." She shrugs. "But as if I know anything? I'm just her best friend."

Since birth, Audrey has said.

They couldn't be more different—Kinney and Audrey. Seeing this closed-off, gloomy, raven-haired and eyeliner-smudged girl in person and fully realizing *this* is who Audrey loves most in this world…I didn't need another reason to fall for her.

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I draw in a knifing breath. “I can’t wait around here.” The thought of sticking around when her parents are here—when who knows what other family has come to see her compete—I can’t do it. “And you don’t want me to talk to Audrey right now. I can save it for tomorrow when she’s back in New York. I’ll ruin her time here in Philly with her family.”

“You really think she’ll stay here when she finds out you left, Tutor Boy? She’ll know you’re not hugging a toilet from bad shrimp.”

I slow-blink. *I can do this*. Just get it over with. “Is there somewhere she can meet me on campus? I don’t know Penn that well.”

“The Warden Garden in front of the Penn Museum. It’s pretty quiet.”

“Thanks.” I’m about to turn when she says, “Wait—I can go with you.”

“I’m not lying. I’ll be there.”

Kinney blanches, her eyes wider on me. “I-I know you’re probably not lying. But I’m going to be honest, you’re freaking me out right now.”

I open my mouth, then end up swallowing a knot, unable to speak.

She blinks into a wince. Her angsty green eyes drop to her boots, then she tucks a strand of dark hair behind her ear before meeting my gaze again. “I know this person who’s tried to kill himself a bunch, and you just…you kinda remind me of him a little.”

Jesus. “I’m not going to kill myself.”

“But you’re not fine.”

No, I’m not fine. “I’ll be at the Warden Garden. You don’t need to follow me. I promise I’m not going to die. Just tell Audrey to meet me over there.”

“I can do that,” she assures.

I’m about to tell her that I’m glad Audrey has her as a friend, but I can’t get the words out. I just head outside. After a quick Google search, I have directions to the garden, but I make a stop at the bookstore.

The papery, musty smell of books sometimes grounds me. I inhale deeply, trying to get there. But it doesn’t stop. The pressure. My life has changed with one phone call. It’s a head-on collision with reality. I’ve been living in a dream world where I thought I could handle a rela-

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tionship. Where I actually thought, for a second, I could ask Audrey to be my girlfriend.

To have more of her. To give her more of myself.

I want to laugh.

I want to cry.

I want to...

I push into the bathroom. It's empty, and I take the last stall. My hands don't even shake as I pull out my lighter. My pants are at my knees, and I roll up the hem of my boxer-briefs. Flicking my lighter, I bring the flame close to the flesh of my inner thigh.

I never feel the pain at first. It takes *so* fucking long. I just watch my skin in a trance. Vacantly. Distantly. Then it arrives, and I take a razor-thin breath. Relief—it feels like goddamn relief. I press my forehead into the stall's wall. Close my eyes. I go for as long as I can bear, which is too long. I grit my teeth into an ache, my eyes now winced shut. *Fuck. Fuck.*

Fuck.

I release my thumb off the lighter. My skin is raw and enflamed, and even pulling my boxer-briefs back down stings like shit.

It feels amazing.

Because I can't feel anything else.

I want to do it again, but instead I shove my lighter back in my pocket, pinch my wet eyes, and then I take out a bottle from my leather jacket. Twisting off the cap, I pop a Klonopin in my mouth and swallow it dry.

It's fine, I tell myself. *This day is fine*. I'm going to get through it. I'll talk to Audrey and then go home and practice until I can't make a single mistake in the *Piatti Caprice No. 12*.

It's fine.

I leave the bookstore.

On the trek across Penn's campus, I'm in a fog until I reach the garden, and I'm struck by the quiet serenity. Hedged bushes line a long, long, long earthy-green reflecting pool. I sit on the gray stone bench overlooking the glittering water, and I can see the faint outline of coins at the bottom. My stomach lurches.

"Birdie?"

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I release my thumb off the lighter. My skin is raw and enflamed, and even pulling my boxer-briefs back down stings like shit.

It feels amazing.

Because I can't feel anything else.

I want to do it again, but instead I shove my lighter back in my pocket, pinch my wet eyes, and then I take out a bottle from my leather jacket. Twisting off the cap, I pop a Klonopin in my mouth and swallow it dry.

It's fine, I tell myself. *This day is fine*. I'm going to get through it. I'll talk to Audrey and then go home and practice until I can't make a single mistake in the *Piatti Caprice No. 12*.

It's fine.

I leave the bookstore.

On the trek across Penn's campus, I'm in a fog until I reach the garden, and I'm struck by the quiet serenity. Hedged bushes line a long, long, long earthy-green reflecting pool. I sit on the gray stone bench overlooking the glittering water, and I can see the faint outline of coins at the bottom. My stomach lurches.

"Birdie?"

CamScanner

I look over my shoulder. Audrey stands ten feet away, her hair falling out of a gold clip and her heels dangling from her fingers. She clearly ran here.

Barefoot.

And she's not alone. I spot her bodyguard near the hedge.

Pushing off the stone bench, I stand and barely catch my breath as Audrey bridges the distance between us in a quick little jog.

Clouds begin to roll in, sunlight dipping in and out, casting picturesque shadows on her freckled cheeks and worried blue eyes.

She comes to a halt inches from me, gathering oxygen in her lungs.

My throat is raw. Apparent with every hard swallow.

Speak, Bird. "I just realized this is the second time you've run after me during an important event of yours." *Two times too many.*

"Only because you keep receiving bad news during them." She's rifling through my gaze, hunting hurriedly for answers. "It is bad news, isn't it? Kinney said you wouldn't say, but she thought something might've happened…"

I don't know how to keep this from her, so I don't. "I lost my scholarship," I say.

She recoils. "No, there…there must be an error in the system."

"No error, Virginia. I am deemed ineligible for my full ride due to a new ethics complaint in my file. I am now forty-five thousand dollars in debt."

Her eyes flame. "The complaint is from Guy."

"It doesn't matter if it's coming from Beelzebub. It makes no difference. I can't do anything about it."

"I can help." Her persistence, I usually love, but right now it's fissuring me.

"I don't need your help," I tell her. "I have this figured out. I'm spending the money I've made from tutoring on school, and then I'm going to work my ass off practicing for that stupid fucking Stravinsky Competition. I'll explain to Chase that I just need a little more time. I win the prize money and give it to him, and this whole goddamn nightmare will be over."

I just hate that it came to this. That I *have* to win. That there is no avenue where I can lose.

She nods resolutely. "That is an attainable plan. I believe in you."

CamScanner

I breathe deeply through my nose. Now comes the hard part. “I have more bad news.”

Her back straightens, shoulders proud. “Nothing we can’t take on together,” she says, determinedly.

Pain starts at my chest and works through my muscles. Movement hurts. Everything fucking hurts. “I can’t sleep with you anymore.”

She stills. “Pardon?”

Pardon. I want to hear it again. I want to never forget it. Her voice, living eternally inside my head.

“You deserve something better, and I can’t offer you more than casual sex. I will never be the guy that shows up to every function. I can’t stay until the end. I can’t meet your parents or hang out with your friends. I’m not equipped to come to you when you’re having a bad day or to check on you every night. I will be practicing until my fingers are raw and I don’t know what time it is anymore.”

“I’ve told you I don’t need any of that—and to say you haven’t been there for me is an utter lie. We see each other *every* day.”

“Because I am tutoring you. Because I need the money. Because there is *purpose* beyond just the fact that I enjoy your company, Virginia.”

Her eyes well.

Mine burn. “You deserve someone who can give you what you want—”

“Stop!” she shouts, a panicked, flighty shout. The noise makes me want to fold her into me. Hug her. Hold her. It takes everything in my power to stay motionless. “Stop…” Her breath comes in sharp tugs, her carriage lifting and sinking. Fire lances her eyes. “Stop telling me what *I* deserve. I get to choose what I deserve!”

“Then why choose *me*?!” It rips out from a pained depth. “The so-called barbarian with no poetry, no flowers, *nothing* to give you other than meaningless pleasure. I make you come, Virginia, that’s it.” I open my arms wide, showing her this is just me. All me. Nothing else.

“Meaningless?” she repeats like it’s an ugly curse word. “What you’ve given me has been the most—”

“Don’t,” I choke out.

She takes the challenge. “The most *meaningful*—”

“Virginia—”

CamScanner

"Haydn, if you're going to push me away, give me a better reason. Give me the reason you'd stake your life on. Tell me all the ways you hate me. Tell me how much you despise me. Tell me you wish me *dead*." Her lungs labor beneath her ribs.

I feel us breathing in time. Hard, heavy, impassioned pulls of air. We have each other's gaze in a vise, and I tell her from my searing chest, "I hate when you speak, all I hear is every page I've ever loved in novels I've *broken apart*."

Her eyes redden.

I step closer. "I hate when you walk into a room, I *agonize* over the moment you'll leave, even knowing it's better when you do."

Her carriage rises.

"I hate when you're around me, I crave and crave and crave to wrap my arms around you. I hate all the ways you've ever made me feel—things I shouldn't feel with anyone, most of all *you*." I fight through a glassy burn in my vision. "I *loathe* this love. I've loathed it since the moment I fell for you, Audrey. It's *torture* how much I love you—you torture me every minute of every fucking day. That's how much…that's how deeply, I hate *you*." I breathe hard, and my chest meets her body. Too close. It's always been too close.

She blinks back tears. "You love me?"

I pull backward and turn.

"*Birdie*."

I laugh, pained and sharp, twisting around to her. "I also hate how fast I fell for you. I knew it—"

"When?"

I raise my brows. "You want a time stamp?"

"Yes, please."

I love her. I am so fucking in love with her—I can't see through the emotion clouding my eyes. "I knew on Valentine's."

"That night—"

"That morning. In the practice room." I clear the rasp out of my throat to make light of this. "Guess your Grinch cookies worked on me, Virginia." My voice sounds too thick, too husky. Not light at all.

Her chin quakes. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't want you to love me," I say from my core. "I don't want to love you. *I can't.* You were—*are* my last line of defense here. You

CamScanner

promised."

She wipes at her wet cheeks. "It is truly awful, Haydn, to make me promise not to do something that you've already done."

"I know."

"*Truly*." She sniffs, fixes her purse on her shoulder.

She's going to leave.

I crush under the weight of her absence—and she's not even gone yet. She's been the happiest thing I've ever held. She might become the happiest thing I'll ever lose, and I've already lost one of the greatest things you can.

A dream.

Why not throw love on top of it?

Hurt myself even more.

A boom of thunder off in the distance tears my eyes to the sky. Gray clouds block the sun.

When I look back down, Audrey brushes her hair off her collar, her posture composed. Her chin tilted upward, her eyes hoisting like undying, eternal stars. "That wasn't good enough."

I still. "What?" I breathe out.

"You don't hate me enough for me to give up on you. I've hardly been convinced, but if this is really what your heart desires, for us to break apart—even though I'm not asking for more—then I'll grant you your wish, Haydn. I'll walk away right now, and this will be the last time I ever chase after you."

I'm motionless.

"Here I go," she says, walking backward, barefoot, heels in hand.

I don't move.

"Bye, bye, Birdie."

I love her.

Each step farther away from me, her features pinch in realization that I'm not going to stop her. The skies open up, raindrops splattering on my face. Audrey intakes a thin breath, her eyes downcast before she spins around, not letting me see her sudden sadness.

It's a blade to the chest. I can barely fucking bear it.

This is what I do. This is what I always do. Pushing wet hair out of my face, I fight to look at her through the pouring rain. Audrey isn't

CamScanner

shielding herself from the storm. She tucks her arms closer to her body, shivering—and my legs work before my mind does.

I run after her.

My lungs blazing, I'm running down the length of the reflecting pool, chasing after a wish I never tried to make come true. Until now.

"Virginia!"

She whirls around, her eyes surging with emotion. I catch her rain-drenched cheeks in my hands, and her gasp breathes life against my lips. Her fingers claw at my shoulders to pull me closer as I lift her against my chest. Her arm swoops around my neck.

I cup the back of her head. "I can't let you go," I breathe against her parted lips. "I won't let you go."

Her eyes pool, rain clinging to her lashes. "Even if you loathe this love?"

"Especially because I loathe it."

One of the things I'm proficient at is tormenting myself. I don't know how I'm going to make this work. All I know is I can't lose her. She's not going to be the thing I sacrifice.

She can't be.

We kiss and kiss and kiss while I carry her out of the rain. Really, I just carry her to a tree. Her back to the bark.

CamScanner

The thick branches of an old oak tree shelter us from the rain. A protective, dripping canopy. We're soaked. He's set my feet on the ground, but I cling to his waist. I'd be freezing if his body weren't up against mine, if my heart weren't beating like a thousand wings taking flight into the sky.

Birdie breathes just as hard, his hand still cupping my cheek with pulverizing affection. Then we kiss again and again.

He loves me. *He loves me.*

To be so tragically loved by the man that I wanted to love me. My heart won't stop swelling. It's going to erupt out of my chest. My lips tingle from the forceful meeting of his. I grip and cling. He pulls and dives deep.

When he draws back and I search for breath, he skates his fingers along my arm. Shivers ripple across my skin. He reaches my wrist and twists the pearl bracelet until he has a view of the dangling silver charm.

A charm that's snagged in my hair so many times before. A charm he's helped detach from my sweater. A charm in the shape of a dainty little bird.

His eyes redden at the turtle dove.

It balls something in my lungs I can't quite release.

"The romantic," he says, the word sticking to his throat.

Of course, he's known doves represent enduring, devoted *love.* I've always been upfront that I'm a hopeless romantic, as he's been upfront that he can't be that for me.

"You still don't think you are?" I wonder.

He holds my gaze, unable to speak.

CamScanner

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So I tell him, “Professing your love to me in the rain just might be one of the most romantic things in the world, Birdie.”

He lets out a laugh. “Unintentional.”

“Does that not make it more romantic?”

“Says the one who wanted to plan her romance.”

“Says the one who showed me it’s best when it comes naturally.” I’ve pushed closer to him, combatting.

He stares at my lips, then sighs. “*Virginia.*” He rakes his fingers through his wet hair. “I can’t—”

“I know what you can’t give me. I don’t want to be an added pressure on your life. If I didn’t believe you need me as much as I’ve needed you, I’d run so far away. I’d never allow you to drink the poison draught that is *me*, but I am not poison.”

He has a harder time not smiling. “You going to tell me you’re the best thing that ever happened to me, *fille arrogante*?”

“Éternellement,” I murmur. *Eternally.* “Mon barbare.” *My barbarian.*

He inhales what might be the most cutting, painful breath I’ve ever heard. “*Fuck.*” He holds my cheek stronger, but he tells me, “Let me be clear.”

“Please,” I whisper, hanging on a new edge.

“I love you, but I can’t be your boyfriend. I’m not your boyfriend.”

It plunges an ache into my heart. I’d be a liar if I thought this didn’t hurt, even a little.

“I understand, but you said you can’t let me go. So that means you’re still going to sleep with me?”

“Yes.”

Hope.

I clutch this like it’s a million balloons lifting me. “Only me?”

“It’s been only you. It will only be you.” He presses a tender kiss to my lips, then whispers, “I can’t meet your parents, the rest of your family. I need to go back to New York. I’m stressed and…” His face hardens, his eyes unblinking at a spot in the distance.

“I’m not asking you to stay. I don’t need you to stay.” He hasn’t looked at me. I cup his jaw. He flinches, and my heart catapults. “Birdie?”

CamScanner

"I'm not okay." He encases his hand over mine, holding there for more than three long beats, then he pries my fingers off his face.

"What do you need?"

He releases another breath. "For you to tell me how the invitational went before I go."

I cringe.

He cringes off mine. "*That* bad?" Guilt flashes in his eyes.

"Not because of you," I say quickly. "I'm glad you missed it, really."

He takes my shoes from my hand. "Why is that?" Birdie crouches at my bare feet. Using his shirt, he brushes wet bark and dirt off my sole.

My heart thumps deeper, faster. I clear my throat. "I got as many negs as I did powers."

"Were the questions harder here?"

"Not particularly." I clasp his shoulder and slip my foot into my high heel. The left, then the right. He buckles the straps at my ankles. Once he's standing upright again, I tell him, "I think I was more nervous with my parents in attendance."

He tracks his fingers through his hair a couple times, apprehensive. Then his eyes flit down to me. "Do they know you're sleeping with me?"

Heat scalds my cheek.

He goes still. "You're *red*." He growls out into a groan. "Virginia."

"I may've…insinuated it?"

He rubs his eyes, then drops his hand. "Did you or did you not tell your dad you're having sex with me?"

I press my hands to my breastbone. "Who would tell their parents they're having sex with their tutor who happens to be their brother's boyfriend's brother?" I made him smile. "That'd be…juvenile."

"No, that'd be weird." He raises brows. "Very fucking weird."

"I've known you find me strange," I counter hotly. "I take no offense."

"Good. It wasn't meant as an insult." He shakes his head to himself in thought while my pulse speeds. I'm realizing how much Birdie plays off my wit, how much he understands me, even if I'm peculiar to him. He likes the parts of me that I've grown deeper into.

No, he…he loves these parts. *He loves me.*

CamScanner

He asks, “Did the whole team do bad?” He’s back to quiz bowl, invested in what matters so much to me.

“I tied with Guy for last. He did *awful*.” I try to smile. “One step closer to crushing his ego.”

Birdie sweeps my flatlining lips. “No gloating? Where’s the cartwheels and backflips?”

“It’s just…Charlie. He threw so many questions this invitational and buzzed in late. The audience seemed disappointed in him. They were expecting a genius-level performance.”

“Were your parents upset?”

“Oh no, they’re not putting pressure on either of us to win. Just to do our personal best.” I glance back toward the building. “I don’t think Charlie wanted to do well at Penn. Not at our father’s alma mater. He hates being compared to him.”

“Yeah…” Birdie contemplates a deep thought. “Legacies can be a lot to live up to. There’s something to say about the Phoenixes and Charlies who revolt and rebel.”

“There is as much to say about the Birdies who give in.”

“Don’t say good things about me,” he warns, then backs off the tree. The rain has stopped.

I eye him. “Are you being serious?”

He laughs hard. “You can’t tell?”

“No, I cannot.”

He smiles wider. “Figure it out.”

“Give me a context clue.”

“No.”

I gasp, my eyes widened. “You have to tell me if you’re being facetious.” I march after him. “Right now.”

“Demand, demand, demand.” He looks like he wants to lift me back in his arms again.

“You will deny me?”

“*Yes*.” His nose suddenly flares, emotion pushing against him and me. “Are you sure you want me? I still don’t know when or if I can ever be in a relationship. Are you *sure*, Virginia?”

I recognize that hasn’t changed, and I force myself not to dig for more.

So I say the truth.

CamScanner

“I’m in no hurry.”

He hikes his brows. “You’re in no hurry? The princess is going to wait for the barbarian?”

“Yes, the princess is going to wait for her barbarian.” I inhale a sharp breath. “And I haven’t broken my promise to you.”

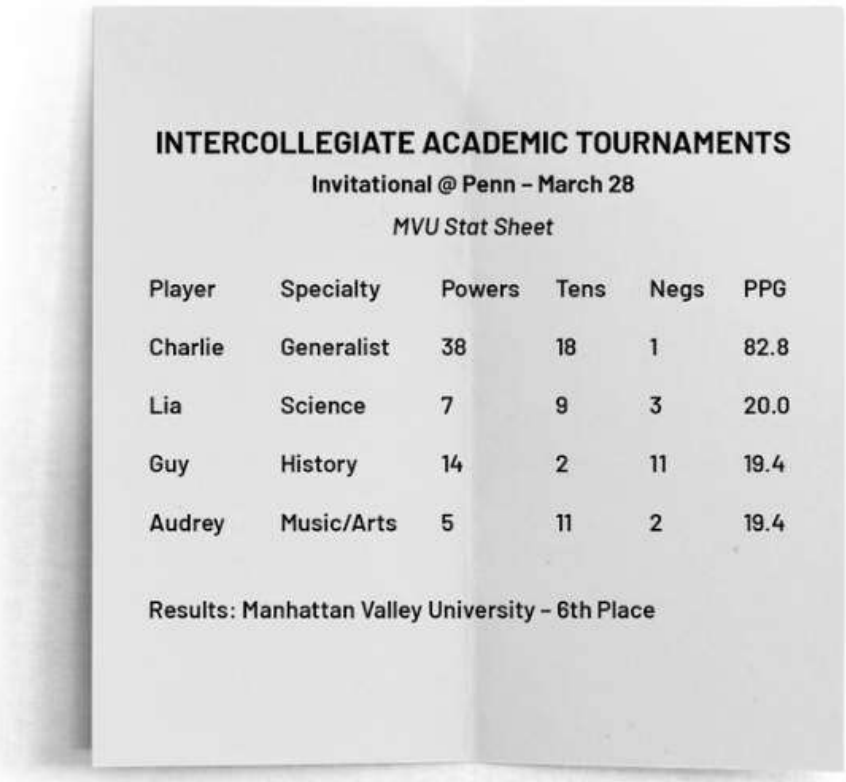
His chest heaves, but he nods as if this is good.

So I remind him, “I do not love you, Birdie St. Pierre. What I wield for you is infatuation. I will never love you how you love me.”

It’s the first time it deeply hurts when I say it.

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INTERCOLLEGIATE ACADEMIC TOURNAMENTS



INTERCOLLEGIATE ACADEMIC TOURNAMENTS

Invitational @ Penn – March 28

MVU Stat Sheet

Player	Specialty	Powers	Tens	Negs	PPG
Charlie	Generalist	38	18	1	82.8
Lia	Science	7	9	3	20.0
Guy	History	14	2	11	19.4
Audrey	Music/Arts	5	11	2	19.4

Results: Manhattan Valley University – 6th Place

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

I grip my phone to my ear. "Man, I don't have time," I rasp in frustration, which only gets worse when I see the 1 train is packed to the brim. I have this personal rule about not being nutsack-to-ass with people. My worst nightmare is getting the flu when I'm this stretched thin. I let the doors shut without moving a foot.

"What's wrong?" Phoenix asks.

"No one in this city decided to stay home on this fucking Wednesday." I exit onto the street. "I have to take a cab home."

"Bird, just walk here."

"I told you, I don't have time for your dinner party."

"Did I call it a dinner party?"

"Whatever it is—I don't have time. Dad said he'd heard the judges don't prefer the *Piatti Caprice No. 12* this year, so now I have to practice *No. 7*."

"The fuck." He growls and lets out an exasperated breath.

I hear Harriet ask in background, "Is that hard to play? Piatti Caprice something?"

"Uh, yeah," Phoenix tells her. "To master it on a competitive level, it'd take an elite cellist several months."

As if my ribs weren't constricting my lungs enough. "Exactly why I'm not hanging out with you two."

"*No. 7* is easier, Bird."

"Barely. The competition is only one month away."

"That's doable," he says. "If you really want to go through with it."

I laugh. Want? *No.* Need? *Yes.* But I say nothing.

Phoenix sighs out, "You have to eat, don't you?"

"I'm just going to grab some pizza—"

CamScanner

"Good news, asshole, we're having pizza. We're also ten minutes away by foot. You're going to be stuck in traffic if you go home right now. Come grab some food. Then you can practice in Tom's room. He has acoustic panels on his walls."

I'm walking in the right direction already.

Phoenix adds, "And I'm sure Audrey would love if you spent the night with her."

It's a bonus—but I haven't slept with Audrey since before the Penn Invitational this past weekend. She doesn't know I burned myself that day, and it's been weighing on me. I don't know how to tell her. I don't know if I want to see her reaction, but there's no hiding it once we're in bed together.

Maybe I just need to rip off the fucking Band-Aid.

"Fine," I tell him. "Be there soon." I pick up my pace.

Phoenix meets me in the swanky lobby of the Cobalts' building. Security doesn't give me shit anymore now that I'm a frequent guest, but I'm guessing my brother wanted to ensure I wouldn't bail at the elevator.

We're riding up to the twenty-first floor when he studies the length of me. He has central heterochromia—his eyes brown near the pupils, bleeding into light blue. I hang on to that abnormality, so I don't freak out like *he knows.*

He knows I burned.

He can't know.

His brown-blue eyes stop on my bookbag by my thighs. I'm holding it by the top strap while my cello is on my back. "How's school?" he asks.

I shrug. "To be honest, I'm doing the bare minimum. I'm just trying to focus on the competition. It's more important."

"Why?" Phoenix scowls.

"For Papi," I say, tightly. *For you.*

Phoenix grinds his teeth. I'm grateful when he doesn't harp on about it.

"How's the second album coming?" I ask.

Phoenix makes another face. "We're finding it a little fucking difficult to concentrate these days."

"Too much dick," I grin.

CamScanner

He slides me a look. “Too much drama, you idiot.”

I laugh. All I can hear is Audrey’s voice in my head. *What possibly can you mean?* I miss her. Last time I saw her was early this morning for tutoring, but I’ve been pretty much out of communication since then.

“You’re in good spirits,” Phoenix says, surprised. “Over the phone, you sounded like you wanted to jump on the subway tracks.”

“Considered it. But I can’t die before I see Guy’s stupid fucking face again.”

Audrey informed her brothers about my scholarship being revoked. They had a “Cobalt meeting” that I was happy not to be a part of. I thought they’d make me their charity pet project and try to give me money for my scholarship—and I was prepared to fight them on it.

But they didn’t offer money.

Instead, they found a way to take a swing at that quiz bowl prick.

Eliot apparently has pull around the city. He somehow got Guy’s membership to a luxury invite-only gym *revoked.* For a status-driven person like Guy, it’s a big deal. Only two hundred people are members of The Halcyon. But Eliot didn’t stop there. He also pulled strings and got Guy kicked out of the exclusive Manhattan Young Gentlemen’s Club *and* the Racquet and Tennis League.

I hope this fucker is crying himself to sleep.

It feels *good.*

Despite the mountain of stress I’m under, I have a lot to be happy about. I’m grinning more as I say, “He’s probably shedding a thousand tears now that he doesn’t get to use his cryotherapy and hyperbaric oxygen chamber after working out.”

Phoenix shares my smile. “Are you and Eliot okay now?”

“If by *okay*, you mean he still texts threats to end my life, then *yeah*, we’re great. Real best friend material.”

His scowl wipes out his smile. “I’ll talk to him—”

“No, you won’t.” I cringe. “You think *texts* are getting to me? Really? Most are funny, but I’d rather give myself a swirlie than tell him he made me laugh for real.”

Phoenix eases a little.

We get off the elevator, and I add, “Eliot didn’t do that shit to Guy to avenge me. I’m not stupid. It was for Audrey.” My phone buzzes with a

CamScanner

new message.

Speaking of Virginia.

AUDREY

I want you to fuck me without a condom.

Jesus.

Did not expect that at all, considering we haven't talked about protection in depth.

"I wish he wasn't still this hard on you," Phoenix says, drawing part of my attention back to our conversation.

I don't have time to reply to Audrey right away. We've reached the door at the end of the hall. It's not her apartment or Tom's.

Phoenix raps a fist against the wood.

It swings open to reveal Joana Oliveira, striking as ever, as she unravels her braid into loose curls. This is a girl whose entire personality fills a doorway.

First night I met her, I ran my tongue across the skin between her thumb and index finger, licking the salt off her hand. Then I threw back a tequila shot and sucked the lime pinched between her teeth. That was back in January, when Phoenix invited a handful of his friends to a bar.

After the salt-and-lime shot, Phoenix gripped my shirt, wrenching me aside to say, "You can't fuck Jo."

"I can't fuck Jo," I repeated. "She said she's single."

"She's the little sister of the Cobalts' security team."

A laugh caught in my throat. "All of security?"

"Oscar Oliveira. Charlie's bodyguard. *Hey.*" He side-stepped so I'd look him in the eyes. I knew he was dead fucking serious at that point. "And two—"

"There's a second reason?"

"Yeah. Beckett Cobalt will murder you."

I laughed harder. I didn't know Beckett. Did not fucking care about him.

"*Bird.* I'm friends with Beckett."

I nodded, getting that at least. "Joana and Beckett have a thing?" I asked.

CamScanner

"*Something.* I don't know what the fuck it is, but just don't get in the way."

"Got it," I said. "She looks like she'd want to have breakfast in the morning anyway, so I'm probably saving myself that headache. Joana!" I called out to her across the bar. "Want to be non-fucking friends?!"

She surfaced from her conversation with Steffi and Harriet and gave me two thumbs up.

That night I learned she's twenty-three, Brazilian American, a professional boxer, and so outgoing that she's an easy friend to keep. You call her for a night out with a group, and she folds herself into it with ease.

It's April 1, and not much has changed between now and then, other than I've declined several invites to these Wednesday get-togethers at her place. They're not "large" gatherings when it's just Phoenix, Harriet, and Joana who formed this counterparty to the Cobalts' secretive and exclusive Wednesday Night Dinners.

Oh, but something *else* has changed.

Looking at Joana in her doorway, the brief thought of hooking up with her nauseates me, and I know it's not because I'm afraid of Beckett.

The image of putting my hands on anyone who isn't *Virginia* sends a distress signal from my brain to my body. I'm starting to believe I might only be able to get hard for Audrey. I think that's all I really want too.

Fuck.

She won't care that I burned.

It was one time.

We'll be fine.

Jo shakes out her loose curls, her brows catapulting at the sight of me. "Whoa, you actually showed up." She turns to Phoenix. "What'd you promise him?"

"That I could grab a slice and go," I tell her. "Can't stay long. You know how it is." I'm sliding past her into the studio apartment.

It's a basic upscale bachelor pad with industrial lighting and dark woods. This is technically Oscar Oliveira's studio apartment paid for by the Cobalts' security team, but Joana has been crashing here for years.

CamScanner

Harriet has a slice of pizza dangling from her mouth. Probably plain cheese since she's vegetarian. She rips a bite off. "Dude, you're not allowed to just steal food and bail."

"Is it stealing, if freely given, Fisher?" I start to pile up two, three, *four* slices on a paper plate. When I rotate, Phoenix is blocking the exit. Arms crossed, he gives me a look like *chill the fuck out*.

I take a breath, trying to dispel some stress. "Maybe I can stay for five minutes." I want to text Audrey back anyway.

Not leaving the kitchen, I rest against the counter near a liter of Fizz Life. Texting.

BIRDIE

Did something change, Virginia? Last you told me, you weren't on the pill.

She's fast.

AUDREY

I'm considering an alternative. IUDs are 99% effective. The pullout method is around 96% effective, I've read.

That can't be accurate.

While Phoenix hands me a beer, I ask, "Is the pullout method ninety-six percent effective?"

He blinks. "I'm *gay*."

Fuck. "Forgot."

He rolls his eyes. I smile.

Joana is quick to answer, "If done perfectly, it's probably that effective, but how many guys do you know have that control?"

I shrug. "I could probably make it ninety-percent effective, at least." Am I really considering this?

Harriet scowls at me. "Don't tempt fate with the Cobalts. Rose had *seven* children."

Joana hops up on the island. "You're sleeping with Audrey." She doesn't say it like a question.

"How do you know that?" I ask.

"Beckett threw out the word *FWB* in passing—with hostility by the way." She chews a slice of pepperoni.

CamScanner

Audrey and I aren't friends with benefits. We never have been, but I don't get into labels. "You're having meetings with Beckett in the hall?" I toss it back on her.

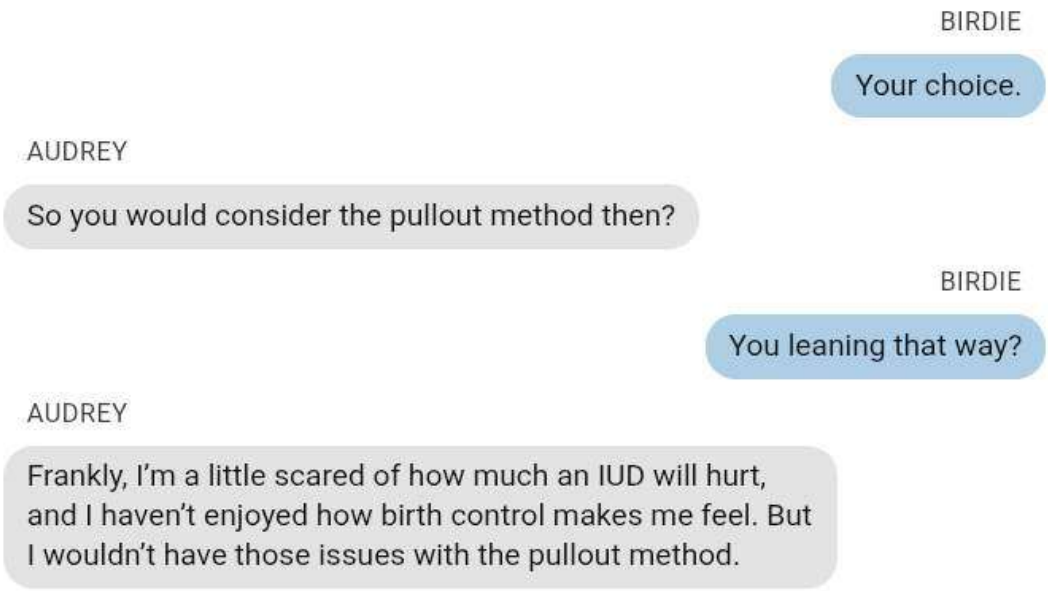
"*In passing*," Joana says. "These are run-ins. *Involuntary* run-ins. I get my intel in tiny little shards from security and whatever you all give me."

"Plus Beckett," Phoenix adds.

"*Briefly* Beckett," Joana retorts. "*Barely* Beckett. I'd rather inhale volcanic ash—and I have *asthma*—than be anywhere near his dick."

I smile into a swig of beer. "Bringing up his dick involuntarily too?"

Joana tosses a pepperoni at me. I dodge it and laugh, then glance down at my phone. I text Audrey back.



Side effects from medication, I understand all too well. It took me forever to find an antianxiety med that doesn't make me feel like a shadow version of myself.

Harriet pours a soda into a glass next to me. "Audrey has already asked me about the pullout method. I told her it might be better to try an IUD or the patch or something that doesn't rely on a dude."

I get that, but I've always thought of myself as extremely reliable. Professionally, at least, and in bed, with her, *always*.

"I have an IUD," Joana says.

"Did it hurt getting it?" I ask her.

"For me? *Excruciating*."

My brows hike. "Ouch." And *fuck*.

CamScanner

Phoenix frowns. “Worse than being punched in the face?”

“And the ribs,” says the pro boxer. “I have a high pain tolerance, but this knocked me out.” She wipes her hands on a napkin. “Oscar had to pick me up from the doctor’s office. I could barely walk after getting it inserted. Then I had debilitating cramps for the next week.”

“To be a woman,” Harriet says, pantomiming a *rah-rah* cheer.

I grimace at the thought of putting Audrey through that just to fuck her without a condom. I really don’t mind using condoms. At all. But when she has her mind set on something…

My lips rise.

I text her back.

BIRDIE

We can try pulling out, Virginia. I’ll be careful with you.

She replies with confetti and heart emojis.

I shove half a slice of pizza in my mouth.

Harriet’s eyes grow. “I know the Heimlich, St. Pierre, but I don’t want to do it.” As her phone rings, her brows furrow behind her blonde bangs. She caps the liter of soda before answering. “Hey, Kiki —” She frowns deeper, then slowly backs away from the counter like the Fizz Life is a bomb.

Joana slides off the island.

I hurriedly wash down my pizza with my beer.

Phoenix straightens up like he’s about to go shove someone into a wall.

We’re all quiet for a good minute.

Something is going on…I take a breath when Harriet lets out a soft laugh. “April Fools’, right? This is an April Fools’ joke…? It has to be…?”

Her face sobers instantly. “Now?” Her voice cracks.

“Harriet?” Phoenix says.

I’m frozen.

She has a vacant stare as her arm drops to her side with the phone.

“*Harriet*,” Phoenix forces out. “The fuck was that?”

Joana tries to comfort Harriet with a hand on her back, but Harriet flinches, which alarms Joana, who looks ready to shove Harriet’s enemies into a wall too. “You said Kiki?” Jo asks. “Isn’t she the president of the Honors House at MVU this year?”

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"Yeah," Harriet says.

The Honors House.

Where Harriet lives.

I abandon my beer, my chest on fire. The only other person I know from the Honors House moved out of it last year.

Guy Abernathy.

If he has anything to do with this…my teeth clench.

Harriet's eyes suddenly redden and fill with tears. "I-I have to go… go…um…" She spins toward the door, forgets her black bookbag, and rotates to grab it.

Phoenix picks it up. "Just wait."

"I can't, dude." Her face fractures, and she lets Joana pull her into a hug this time. She sobs into her chest for a second.

Phoenix and I exchange a hard look. "What the fuck?" I whisper to him.

"I have to go. I have to go," she says to Jo, pushing away. Harriet doesn't like bothering people or burdening them. I fucking know the feeling. Too well.

I breathe through my nose, my muscles so flexed, it's hard to move.

"We're coming with you," Phoenix tells her. "Or we can call Ben—"

"*No*," she gasps, taking in a panicked lungful. "Not Ben. I can't ruin his dinner."

I grimace. "Fuck the dinner."

"I second that," Joana says. "We don't even know what they do there."

"It's special enough that Ben doesn't like to miss it." Harriet wipes her splotchy cheeks with two hands, then takes her backpack from Phoenix.

"You don't need a Cobalt tonight," Jo says. "You have two St. Pierres and an Oliveira. That's more than enough to take on whatever this is."

Harriet looks around at us, her eyes beginning to water more. "I need to go to campus. This isn't a quick thing. You don't have to—"

"We're not *asking*," Phoenix growls. "You're getting our fucking help whether you want it or not, Harriet." Classic Phoenix.

That's my big brother.

"Yeah, we're annoying that way." Joana snatches her leather purse off the counter and starts stuffing her feet into sneakers.

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Harriet slings her backpack on her shoulder. "You don't have to help me, Birdie. Don't, actually. I know you're really busy."

I swallow, remembering the competition. Practice. *Fuck.* "Not too busy to help a friend," I say, sucking down the sudden panicked stress. Phoenix eyes me, watching.

I'm fine.

Harriet takes another breath, closing her eyes, opening them. And she says, "We're going to need boxes."



HARRIET HAS BEEN KICKED OUT OF THE HONORS HOUSE.

The eleven members took a vote: nine to two.

We all ride together in Harriet's beat-up Honda, which she named Harold. Phoenix drives after Harriet admits she might not be in the right headspace to be behind the wheel.

We make a pit stop to buy boxes and tape, then we pull up to a massive marble building. I've jogged past it a few times on campus, the stately columns and wraparound porch lending to its grandeur.

The Honors House is akin to a scholarship *and* an academic society. Free room and board. Plus, professional connections to their chosen career fields.

It's prestigious.

What's not prestigious—being kicked out of it.

Harriet wants to be a doctor, so I'm currently witnessing someone who thinks their dream just got decimated. Whether that's true, or just fear, it doesn't really matter. The panic and agony are very real on her face.

Kiki is overly apologetic as she lets us into the house. "I didn't want you gone, Harriet. You have to understand that. It's just Guy has so many friends here. It was really, *really* out of my hands."

Harriet can't form any words. She's just nodding over and over. Guy's name injects napalm in my bloodstream. My hand clamps down on one of the flattened boxes, denting the cardboard beneath my grip.

They didn't even try to concoct some pathetic excuse as to why they kicked her out. Guy Abernathy called and requested a vote to have her removed.

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Fuck him.

We climb the grand staircase to Harriet's bedroom, then she opens the door to what resembles a mini greenhouse.

So many fucking plants.

Fifteen, twenty?

They line her dresser, the windowsills, the small bookshelf. Ceramic pots frame her bed with elephant ear leaves and ivy spilling out.

Joana is laughing. "No one is going to question who you're dating."

Harriet's lips twitch like she wants to smile. "Ben has the green thumb. He helps me keep them alive."

I toss Phoenix a roll of tape from the shopping bag, then one to Harriet. When she catches it, our eyes meet in a heavy beat. "I know this sucks," I tell her. "Welcome to the collateral damage club."

"I just wish they did this last December. It would've been easier. It feels like I'm going through this humiliation all over again."

Yeah, last December her shitty mom showed up at the Honors House and told her dormmates that Harriet is a whore. *Was* a whore, I guess.

When I'd heard all about the incident, it just reminded me that for as much pressure my parents put on me, they are so far from being bad people. My mom would never—not in a million years—intentionally hurt me or my brother. She would sooner jump off a cliff.

One box made up, I start carefully placing her hefty textbooks inside it. "They didn't kick you out last December because what happened back then wasn't a big deal," I tell Harriet. "Guy's the one who convinced them it is now."

"*Yeah*," Phoenix says sharply. "He's retaliating after Eliot got him blacklisted around the city. Fucking crybaby." He passes a lamp to Joana. She's manning the bubble wrap.

"He's a clown." I wedge an Organic Chemistry textbook in the corner of the box. "Kicking Harriet out of where she lives when he can't go jump in his luxury cold plunge is fucking loser behavior." I can't think about how badly he's affected Audrey without losing sense of space and time. I will go into a fog of fury.

While I'm crouched, I dig my elbow into my inner thigh, but I can't feel the pain anymore. The burn has healed too much. A pit wedges in

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my stomach just thinking about wanting more.

I'm not going to burn again, I tell myself, casting a quick glance over at Phoenix. He's busy making up another box. *I won't.*

Joana carefully wraps the lamp. "What do you think the Cobalts will do?"

"Nothing, I hope," Harriet says, tossing her pillows and bedding into a trash bag for easier transport.

"They're going to do something," Phoenix sighs into a heavy breath. "Tom's not going to drop this, and maybe he shouldn't."

I laugh. "Yeah, and we're the ones who are going to get *fucked*. We're easy pickings, here on the ground."

"Mere mortals." Harriet shrugs. "Cobalts are the gods. Just because we're with them doesn't make us one."

Joana points the lamp at her. "You are godly. Do you know how smart you are? For fuck's sake, we are all godly. Birdie is a *prodigy.* Phoenix is a Grammy award winner. I am a boxing champion." She has a stink face. "They are not all that. Enough said."

"Yeah, we're awesome," I say dryly. "But unless your bank account looks like theirs and you have a surname that carries prestige, you don't have that kind of influence or power, Jo. It doesn't matter how we view ourselves. We're fucking *food* to people like them."

"Not to the Cobalts," Phoenix snaps. "They aren't pushing us into a slaughter, and we aren't *bait.* Tom would not do that to me. They'd all rather protect us, but here's the thing, Bird—you have to let them try."

I glare at him.

"You get that?" he asks.

I can't process for long.

Harriet's phone beeps.

We're all quiet, watching as she checks it.

She exhales. "It's Ben."

"Breaking the *No Phones* policy again?" Joana smiles.

"There's a *No Phones* policy?" I frown, thinking about Audrey's texts from earlier.

Joana tears off a piece of bubble wrap. "Yeah, it's one of the very few things we know about Wednesday Night Dinners, but Ben will break the rule to check in with Harriet."

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Harriet blows out a harder breath that lifts her bangs. “If I tell him the truth, he’s going to end dinner early.” She surveys the three of us. “What should I do?”

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I resist the urge to check my phone for another text from Birdie.

It is safely tucked away in the pocket of my pirate-inspired outfit. For dinner, Jane and I are beautiful swashbuckling scoundrels in off-the-shoulder linen dresses with ruffled sleeves and leather corsets—hers baby blue, mine truer to theme: a deep moody red.

The roasted goose has been eaten, green beans cleaned off my plate, and dessert already passed around. We are in the thick of the competitive portion of Wednesday Night Dinner where trivia questions are asked from memory and the victor answers the quickest.

Tonight, I'm barely paying attention to the questions.

Jane has a pencil in one hand, spoon in the other as she dips into her crème brûlée.

I lean closer to whisper, "If I wrote a pick-me-up letter for a man, do you think that feels casual?"

"What is a pick-me-up letter?" she whispers back, the two of us seated in the middle of the table where one can go unnoticed. The ends near our mother and father tend to take the spotlight.

"Not a love letter. More like...a letter to make someone feel better. But not a get-well-soon card. He isn't ill. I would just write all the attributes I find endearing about him to make him feel good. That can be casual, right?"

She scribbles on a pad but looks at me. "Is this for Birdie?"

"Yes. What's the probability he'd find my letter to be relationship material? Even though my intent would be the opposite." I scoot closer. "You have experience in casual hookups and you're excellent at math, so you should know."

She's even the scorekeeper at dinner.

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Jane smiles, whispering slyly, "I didn't graduate with a degree in statistics."

"Still, you have a math degree from Princeton." She is an Ivy League alumna and quite literally one of the smartest in our family. Often overlooked due to Charlie's tortured-genius conduct and her humility, but I would never dismiss my sister's intelligence—even if I have fewer memories of being with Jane, given that she moved out when I was just *nine* (so awful).

I would glue myself to her like a little duckling whenever she visited, desperate for attention and guidance. She gives support in abundance because she's *Jane*.

The firstborn.

Our five brothers are sandwiched between us, but if I needed anything, she'd be there, no questions asked.

For all of us, really.

"And you love probabilities," I remind her.

Freckles dust her lovely face that pulls in a sweet smile. "Yes, but I also haven't met Birdie yet. I wouldn't know if he'd find a pick-me-up letter to be too sappy."

"I won't write anything too sappy," I assure. "It'd make him smile. That's the goal."

I want to cheer him up while he's wading in so much stress. To take a little weight off him, even if for a moment while he's reading the letter. I know sex helps Birdie, but I want to do…*more*.

He's done so much for me.

Jane leaves her spoon in her dessert. "You wouldn't rather discuss the probability of Birdie wanting a serious relationship?"

"No, I respect that he's not ready for one. I would rather be the very best casual sex partner—"

"What Canadian bay is famous for its extreme tidal fluctuations?" Ben asks the table.

I barely hear my father answer, "The Bay of Fundy," as Jane whispers to me, "Unless the letter is humorous, it might get taken the wrong way."

The plan was not a funny letter.

I'm not a comedian. "Does it *have* to be funny?" I ask my sister.

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"Jane, I can keep score," Charlie offers, bare-chested in only a black suit jacket. Wednesday Night Dinner is about coming as you are, choosing whatever clothes or costume you wish, and for Charlie, that is often disregarding the importance of a shirt.

"No, no." Jane waves him off. "I haven't missed a single one. Last point went to Ben. Answer was the Orchid Mantis. Correct?"

"Yep," Ben says, peeling off his burgundy MVU sweatshirt. The scattering of waxy candles cranks up the temperature in the lavish dining room.

Charlie asks, "What is the term for cheating in competitive online quiz bowl?"

I perk up. "Biking," I answer first.

Beckett claps for me. *Swan Lake* doesn't begin until tomorrow, so he was able to make this dinner.

I smile at Beckett while Tom says, "Boooo." His sneakers are kicked up on the table, precariously close to a candelabra. "We don't like colluding, Charlie Keating."

Charlie teeters back in his chair. "You really want to go down this road, *brother*? What about every Poe question you blatantly ask for Eliot?" He motions to Eliot, who's pouring more wine into his goblet.

Tom drops his feet. "Whatever, dude, everyone at this table knows Poe. That is the opposite of colluding. That's giving *everyone* an easy get."

They start bickering, which I am thankful for as I whirl back to Jane.

I move my chair even closer, our ruffled sleeves brushing. "About Birdie," I say.

"I believe you should just be yourself," she whispers, her chin on her knuckles. "Write the letter that comes from the heart. See what happens."

I blink. "No, I mustn't."

"Why not?" She squints, staring into me.

My cheeks roast. "Because it might be a little too sappy then, Jane. But not a love letter—I do not love Birdie. I'm trying to be casual."

We catch the ice-cold loving eyes of our mother, whose lips lift as she sees us whispering like we're young again and gossiping about our

CamScanner

irritating brothers. My problems feel far greater than Prince Snuggleton drowning in the pool.

I add more hushed to Jane, "I want to be *casual*, and you understand what that means better than Mother, even."

Jane had friends with benefits before she fell madly in love.

Her eyes drift a little to her husband on her other side. Thatcher Moretti is a six-foot-seven, rugged man. All brawn, a Marine, and a doting father to their sleepy baby. Maeve is conked out against his chest in her own little pirate dress. He draws circles against her back.

They've been trying for months to get pregnant with their second, but it's taking a little longer than it did when they tried for Maeve. I'll be thrilled to have another niece or nephew and even more thrilled for my sister and brother-in-law. I've already planned out "baby on the way" cookies to congratulate them.

Jane focuses back on me. "Are you afraid of running Birdie away if you show more affection?"

No.

I'm more terrified of breaking my promise to him.

Off my silence, she whispers, "Are you afraid of getting your heart broken?"

He's almost broken it already. At Penn, he'd been close. The tremendous hurt followed by the tremendous high was nothing I'd ever felt before. My heart must've shot out of my body altogether, but I would go through every impassioned second again and again with him.

"I'm not afraid," I whisper. "He's worth the risk of a broken heart, and I would *not* say this about everyone." I don't want to speak of Guy at this sacred table. His name doesn't deserve to be uttered at another Wednesday Night Dinner.

Jane wears more sisterly concern. She knows I lost my virginity to that repulsive human. "It is a great feeling…" She considers her words carefully. "To find someone you trust in bed, but you don't have to hang on to Birdie just because you trust him. There'll be other men."

Pain blooms behind my ribs. "I don't want other casual sex partners, and I'm not with Birdie just because of what happened with…"

Jane reaches over and silently hands Charlie her pen and pad.

He doesn't ask questions when he takes it.

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I sip my wine, gathering my thoughts to whisper, "Maybe it started that way, to rewrite what happened, but it's not why I'm still with Birdie now."

"You'd feel safe to date someone else?"

"*Yes*. I'd just get to know them better first. To avoid…" I fix the sleeve of my dress. "To be more aware of a situation I might not be ready for." My heart tugs. "But I don't want anyone else. Even knowing there's a probability he may never want a relationship, I am waiting for Birdie."

"You would wait forever?" Jane does not love this for me.

"A life of yearning," I muse into my wine. "It could be romantic?"

"It sounds terribly painful." She places her hand on mine. "Do not be Charlie—"

We both startle as Ben jumps out of his chair, shaking several goblets and tipping over three candles.

Eliot and our mother smother any fire with water and cloth napkins.

Ben isn't paying much attention to anything but his phone. "I have to go," he says, pushing his chair back with such abrupt force that it clatters to the floor. "Sorry, I need to go home."

Everyone is on their feet, Ben's panic ringing alarm through us all. I'm already sliding my chair into the table.

Tom grips the arm of his chair, half-risen. "Ben Pirrip, Dad said no April Fools' jokes at the table."

"It's not one, Tom," Ben chokes out with heat. Is he angry? "It's not."

Beckett puts a comforting hand on Ben's shoulder.

"We'll all go, brother," Eliot says.

"Is it Harriet?" our mother asks, her sharp black nails snatching her phone.

Harriet might be in trouble? I hear my sharp gasp, but I have no new texts from anyone still in Hell's Kitchen. Including Birdie.

Ben struggles to speak. His anger flames his eyes. He passes his phone to Charlie, of all people, who has no reaction other than blowing out a couple more candles on the table. "No one has died," he assures our parents. "But we do need to go back to New York."

As we all say quick goodbyes to our parents, Beckett promises to keep our mother informed about Ben and Harriet.

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"*Please*," she says tightly.

"Be safe going back to the city," our father says. "If you need us, we're here."

"At all hours," our mother adds.

"Not just the witching hour?" Eliot feigns surprise. "Has my childhood been a lie?"

"You hear that, Ben Pirrip? Mom is extending her office hours for you," Tom jokes.

It's the only levity between us as we leave the Cobalt Estate together.



We're only thirty minutes into the limo ride home, and my brain has been set to *chop* and *mince* three times. Harriet being kicked out of the Honors House because of Guy Abernathy is *abhorrent*.

And all my fault.

"We'll get her reinstated," I announce, my heart in a flutter pattern I greatly dislike. "Let's send gifts to the Honors House members to reinstate her."

"Bribery?" Eliot arches his brows.

"No," Charlie states. "That's incredibly stupid, and it'll backfire."

Ben has his head in his hands, fuming. "Harriet isn't going to want to live with them after they just voted her out." He straightens up with a hard exhale. "And I don't want her living there if it takes gifting these assholes Rolexes."

"We must do *something*." I'm whining.

All my brothers stare at me as if I'm the one who's been stabbed in the chest. I am in severe pain for the ones I care about. "What if he goes after Birdie again? He's still a student at MVU."

We've already discussed how Guy's connections revolve around Manhattan Valley University. His late mother was unfortunately very, very good friends with the dean. To the point where Guy considers Dean Ferreira his godmother.

"You're a student too," Beckett reminds me.

"I don't care what happens to me—"

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"No, no, no," Eliot cuts in, wagging a finger. "We care about what happens to ourselves."

My goals feel rather silly now. Quiz bowl? It's nothing in comparison to Harriet's and Birdie's education.

Tom has his arms crossed too tightly. "We have to retaliate."

"This is going to escalate," Beckett warns, more to Charlie.

"It won't if no one does anything stupid," Charlie says. "Don't get baited by him. He doesn't have as much influence as he thinks. Ben is about to bring home MVU's *second* Frozen Four championship. What is Guy doing for the college?"

Ben nods. "I'll talk to Dean Ferreira and make sure nothing else happens to Harriet's and Birdie's tuition, but she might...she might know I'm considering leaving next semester for the NHL. But I can lie."

"We know," Charlie says dryly, which actually makes Ben laugh into a contorted, pained expression.

I wince a little, and I hope Ben isn't contemplating ditching an NHL career to protect everyone on campus. I don't want him to feel as if he needs to stay at MVU for us.

The limo bumps along the rougher road.

"This is my fault," I whisper. "If I'd just never slept with Guy—"

"Yes," Charlie says at the same time Beckett says, "No."

They give each other a look.

My throat dries.

Across from me, Eliot extends an arm over the limo seat behind Beckett. "It might be time for *lex talionis*," he decrees. "An eye for an eye."

"Guy has no sister you can fuck mercilessly," Charlie says, his voice callous. My ears ring.

Eliot has a brutal look directed at our eldest brother. "You know that is *not* what I fucking meant."

Charlie doesn't reply.

"Cat got your tongue? Or would you like me to rip it out?" Eliot sneers.

The tension in the car is excruciating and frigid. I do...not know what is happening. I have never seen Eliot's fury directed at Charlie. There is something so uncomfortable about my peacemaking brother drawing a sword against one of us.

CamScanner

Even Beckett is quiet.

Tom's eyes are wide.

Ben is checking on me. My smile is unsteady.

Charlie takes a small breath. "Eliot, you play with fire—"

"I do *not* fuck women until they bleed as an act of fucking revenge. The insinuation is not fire, it's a hydrogen bomb. Take it back. Apologize."

Charlie rolls his eyes.

My chest is tight. *Apologize*, I want to scream at him, but Beckett isn't even urging Charlie.

Charlie grinds down. "I know you're incapable of harming a woman, Eliot."

Eliot is still glaring when he says, "Watch your words, Charlie. For once in your fucking life."

"You think I don't?" Charlie stretches out his bad leg. "I know what I'm saying is *hurtful*. I've never pretended to be nice."

Ben jumps in with heat, "Why don't you try?"

Charlie forces a tight half smile. "Is what I said about Guy wrong?"

No. "You weren't wrong," I mutter, all eyes veering to me. "The sex was unkind. I don't want to pretend it wasn't."

Charlie is trying to toughen me. I know that now, but I'm not sure it's working.

I feel more fragile than I did. I inhale a thin breath, then lean into the brother sitting closest to me. It happens to be...Tom. He pats the top of my head like I'm a poodle.

I'm in a daze for a few minutes, losing track of the conversation.

Beckett switches seats with Tom, and I rest my head on Beckett's shoulder. He wraps an arm around me.

"I'm getting Guy evicted," Eliot says. "He's renting. I can buy the apartment out from under him."

Beckett frowns. "Isn't his family home on Central Park West? He'll just go live there, or he'll stay at a hotel. Then he'll feel entitled to take another shot."

My brain spins. "He called himself a Cobalt Empire loyalist," I tell my brothers. "Does he truly believe that?"

"Yes," Charlie says.

"Is he delusional?"

CamScanner

"Debatable." Charlie uncorks an expensive brut. "He's a *narcissist*."

"Clinically diagnosed by Charlie," Ben tells me, which means they've all discussed Guy quite a bit without me present. I try not to feel left out, not when they're looping me in now.

"We've found he's not tied to our enemies," Eliot explains to me. "He has no allegiance to the Rochesters." He names an affluent family that has wronged ours in the past. They own a media corporation that essentially profits by slinging our family name through the mud.

Charlie hands the bottle over to Eliot.

He accepts it, taking a harsh swig of brut, then adds, "All of his friends happen to be in our social circle. We've been playing far too nice since Valentine's."

"Ditto," Tom says.

"I will end that," Beckett confirms. "Very quickly."

Eliot begins to grin. "Shutting the gilded gates, brother?"

"Slamming them on him."

I don't know what that entails, but I want to protect Birdie just as much. And I know exactly what I can do.

CamScanner

56
AUDREY COBALT

It's late when we make it back home. Harriet has already gathered all her things and moved them into Ben's bedroom. I don't linger in apartment 2166, but I see her splotchy face and swollen eyes. My gut sinks.

It'd feel much better if Guy just ruined *my* reputation. I wish he had.

Now I'm in my apartment next door.

Birdie props his cello in the corner of my bedroom. He didn't get a chance to practice tonight, and I can see the stress written on his body. Muscles flexed. Tighter breaths. I'm starting to recognize when it looks unbearable.

"I might not have soundproofed walls, but I doubt Eliot would mind if you played," I tell him.

Birdie lowers on the edge of my pink comforter, running two hands through his hair. "It's past midnight, Virginia." He skims my pirate dress, the leather corset cinched against my breasts. "I'd rather just fuck you."

I slip off my heeled boots. "As long as it's not a distraction from your goals—"

He laughs dryly, his thumb rubbing his lip piercing. "It's a distraction. Everything is a distraction. Breathing, eating, fucking. I should be doing *nothing* but playing—"

"That is quite unhealthy, Haydn."

"My life is not healthy, Virginia." He places his hands on his thighs. "I don't want to talk about it. I'd rather do anything than talk about the competition."

I bridge the distance. "*Anything*?"

CamScanner

"Sure, yeah." He nods, his nose flaring as he watches me approach. I land in front of him and clutch his shoulders. He tilts his chin up to seize my gaze. Then he spreads his legs, bringing me closer so I fit between them. His fingers tighten on the backs of my thighs beneath my dress. Strong hands clutching me.

I skim my fingertips against his jawline.

His eyes flutter a little, his chest lowering and lifting in deeper breath. "Audrey."

"I'm quitting quiz bowl," I whisper.

Birdie's face splinters. "*No*." He blinks hard out of the glazed look he had. "If anyone is quitting quiz bowl, it's that fucking prick. Not you."

"Wilcox and Lia would never allow Guy to quit. They've all been friends for too long, and they like him too much. Maybe this will be a sufficient surrender in his eyes so that he'll leave everyone I care about alone."

"You don't know that he will. What happens if he doesn't?"

I wince. "How am I supposed to keep going? It's not so important, anyway. It's a silly extracurricular."

Now he winces. "It's not *silly*. I'm sorry if I made it seem trivial when it's mattered to you. It is important, and the last thing I want is for you to lose something you've dedicated *hours and hours* pursuing." His hands slide up and down the backs of my thighs. "Keep your dream, Virginia. He doesn't get to take that from you."

My eyes well. His touch and words meld together in a supercharge. He is right. Guy shouldn't get to take my aspirations. There will be no satisfaction in the end, just horrible, awful, gutting *defeat*.

"I won't let him defeat me," I murmur. "I just wanted to protect you."

"That will hurt *me*, Virginia. I'd rather watch you crush his fucking ego."

"I will. I'm going to," I say strongly, opening my palm against his hard jaw. "You make good points. I've been swayed." I crawl onto his lap, my legs wrapping around his waist.

He skates his hands beneath the ruffles of my linen dress. "Look at that, I didn't even have to make a PowerPoint."

"Still, I should show you how—"

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He flips me onto my back, taking my words with him. I let out a soft gasping breath.

"Teach me later, Virginia." His voice is deep and husky. "How do you want me to take you? Without a condom?"

"Yes." My heart thrums, arousal blooming. "And—"

"And?"

"Yes, I want more and more and more."

He lets out a laugh with a shake of his head. "Of course you do. Greedy girl." He locks his eyes on mine. "How many deadly sins are you going to go through?"

"All of them with you. I would like to circle *lust* tonight." I lace my hands behind his head.

"What else does that entail?"

My cheeks heat at the question. Blow jobs were checked off at his birthday. I decided to swallow, even though his cum was much thicker than anticipated. I only gagged a little. I would do it again, if my pulse wasn't already between my legs, thumping harder with need.

He's also eaten me out before.

The first time, I saw literal stars and blacked out when I came. It was an astonishing experience that I needed to replicate the next night.

"Something we haven't done yet," I tell him. "We can do it before we copulate without a condom."

"Copulate?"

"Fornicate."

"Jesus," he mutters, then smiles as my lips rise playfully. His steel-gray eyes never break from mine. "Tell me what you want."

"Anal."

His brows hike. "Virginia—"

"Haydn, I can handle it. Trust that I can take you anywhere, anytime. I am wholly capable." I lift my chin in resolute confidence.

His lips twitch in another smile. "Unless you have a butt plug lying around so I can work you up to it, I'm not taking you in the ass tonight."

My face flames. "We can go to the store—"

"It's *midnight*." He laughs harder. "You really want me in your ass that bad?"

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I glare. “It’s not so much the location as it is the experience. I want to experience everything with your aggravating, infuriating barbaric self. Yes.”

His eyes are on my lips. “Pick another position.”

“No,” I snap.

He laughs again, this one deeper from his core. “*Yes*.”

“No.”

“You pick another position, Virginia, or I’m picking for you.”

I rock my hips against his waist, his hands on my bottom already. “I demand anal.”

A mix between a groan and a growl rumble through his throat. He rips open my corset with two hands, and I dizzy, even before his kisses ghost over the base of my neck. I tremble at his sensual movements. I hurry to undo his buckle with a heady, needy feeling rushing over me.

Birdie steps back to take off the rest of his clothes. He only pauses to slip my panties down my legs from beneath my dress. The linen is bunched at my hips, my breasts exposed, and as my feet hit the fuzzy rug, I lean over the bed for him. My forearms on the mattress.

“Turn around, Virginia,” he says.

I do, just as Birdie chucks his boxer-briefs on his pile of clothes. He’s buck naked, and my gaze descends to his hard cock that I want inside me. My pulse skips, but my breath is stolen by something else. A vivid red streak, almost the color of the birthmark on his neck, mars his thigh.

The bottom of my stomach drops out.

My eyes immediately scald.

“Birdie?” I choke on air.

He moves closer to me while I fall to the edge of my bed. His consoling hand cups my cheek, but I want to console him. And still, my eyes can’t detach from the burn mark.

“*Birdie*.”

“I’m okay now. I’m okay now.” He sounds hoarse. “Eyes on mine. *Please*.”

I raise my gaze to his.

He holds my face with both hands. “I burned myself after I got the news about my scholarship.” His voice is even but low. “I promise, it was just one time. I’m better now.”

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He's better now, I repeat in my head. "Have you told Phoenix?" I think aloud, "Is this a secret I should be keeping?"

I have trouble discerning that on a normal occasion…so I just… don't know.

"He's unaware," he says. "Do not tell him. I'm not going to make you keep this in for long. Just until after the Stravinsky Competition. Then I'll tell my brother. Okay?"

I struggle to speak. "How…how do I know you're better now?"

"I only did it once. I'm taking my medicine."

"What medicine?"

"An antianxiety med. I go off it periodically because it's addictive. I take it when needed, and obviously…"

"You need it now," I finish.

He nods. "Yeah."

I clutch onto his forearms, then I run my fingers up to his hands against my cheeks. He releases a deeper breath, and I whisper, "You promise? It was just once. You're better now?"

"I promise."

"In French."

"Je le promets," Birdie says, bending down to press his lips to mine. "Je le promets. *Je le promets.*" These passionate, fervent kisses solidify each promise, easing the panicked, worried pieces inside me. It draws my body into his body, and our arms wrap and hold. I stand on my tiptoes.

The second he loosens his clutch of me—and I sit back down—I'm about to flip around again. He catches my thighs to stop me.

"*Birdie*," I complain.

"I never agreed to fucking you in the ass, Virginia." He backs up and pulls my desk chair in front of the bed. Far enough away our knees don't knock, but close enough that I could reach out with my toes to touch his. When he's seated, his legs casually break apart, and he begins stroking his cock.

My brows furrow. "You don't hunger for me?"

His eyes are all over me, telling me differently. "You wanted a *new* experience, Virginia. This is it." He looks down at my lap.

I hike up my dress even more to taunt him as much as he's taunting me. I drop both feet to the floor, uncrossing my legs. But my thighs still

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press tightly together.

I watch him rub himself. It's impossible not to see the fresh burn mark too. He's truly not bothered by me seeing it if he's choosing to do this tonight.

"What do you call this position?" I wonder, drinking in every motion and naked inch of him. I'm so wet, I can't stop aching for him to be closer, nearer. He seems too far.

His brows rise. "Mutual masturbation…*if* you will start masturbating, Virginia." I don't move. He lets out an impatient, "*Fuck*," and he drops his hand off himself, stands up and leans over me.

Firmly, he grabs my knees and pushes them apart. Then he takes my hand, guiding it between my thighs. His steel-gray eyes intensify on mine. He doesn't break them as he moves my fingers for me, swirling them against my clit. I moan and arch up to try to meet his lips. He instantly backs off, leaving me for the desk chair again.

"*Please* come back," I whine.

"No." He starts rubbing himself faster, his eyes descending to my heat. He inhales deeply, his nose flared. "Keep going, Virginia."

My fingers are slick, my clit achingly swollen, but I rub it. My legs twitch. With his free hand, he clutches the arm of the chair tightly. Tendons create mountains down the top of his hand. Our gazes rise and meet, and suddenly we're both just watching each other's labored breaths, pleasured eyes, parted lips.

It is so sensual, the visual. The sounds. I'm a mess, and he's not even touching me.

But I want him to touch me.

I want.

I want.

And want.

"I can't do this…" I pant. My knees jerk as I climb toward a peak. I cannot keep them open.

"You can't do something?" He grunts out in surprise.

"*Please,*" I whimper, pulling my hand away from my sensitive flesh. "*Please.*"

"Virginia." Birdie reaches forward and clasps my wrist. I think he'll bring it back down, but he stands up and raises it above my head. He's so quick with desire. He positions my legs up against his chest. My an-

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kles dangle over his shoulders. He presses a kiss to me at the same time I feel him drive his length inside me.

It's new warmth and unbridled pleasure. The fullness of him inside me—it conquers my senses. I want his mouth.

I want his body.

I want this to last forever and ever.

He rocks, and in this folded position, he is so tantalizingly deep. "Birdie," I moan. "*Please. Please*." I hang on to him.

He holds on to me. His groans and husky grunts are against my ear. His body slick with sweat. He presses a kiss to my neck and demands, "Let go."

I'm not touching myself this time when I come. It's a haze when he pulls out, and off my confused expression, he assures, "I didn't come inside you."

"Did you come at all?"

"Yes, Virginia. That's what the towel is for." He's wiping his hands on a cloth towel. "I'll be back—"

"Don't go. I don't care if it's messy. I just want…" I don't have to tell him. He's already crawling onto the bed and scooping me in his arms.

I want him. Like this.

Always.

And always.

I shut my eyes and make a silent bedtime wish.

CamScanner

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Always.

And always.

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57

AUDREY COBALT

I wake up after our second round of sensual sex, Birdie asleep beside me. He came on my abdomen, just above my pelvis. It was so mind-bogglingly hot. Even more so when he used a warm washcloth to clean me.

My lips lift remembering. He ended the whole loving ordeal by burying his face between my thighs, licking my clit. Sucking. Teasing.

I had a fistful of his hair, trying to understand exactly what he was doing with his tongue, but it was impossible to see. I collapsed backward into the mind-altering sensation.

His tongue entering me shall always make me ascend to a blackout bliss.

Now that I'm awake, I can't stop thinking. About more than just sex. The clock tells me I should probably go back to bed, but this isn't something I can keep in any longer. I nudge Birdie's shoulder.

He groans. "Virginia."

"I have an idea," I whisper-hiss, keeping my voice low only to not shellshock him awake. I'd rather he rise gently to hear my sudden epiphany.

"About what?" Birdie is already facing me, but he keeps his eyes closed.

I smile. "I know how to beat Guy. Truly beat him."

He lets out a more annoyed groan. "I thought Beckett was handling that."

"Yes, but I don't know what Beckett is doing," I say. "I have my own idea. A *good* one. Would you like to hear it?"

He opens one eye just to check the clock. He shuts it. "In three hours."

CamScanner

I pout. “Haydn.”

“Three hours.”

“Two.”

“*Three*.”

“One.”

His eyes open completely into an annoyed grimace. “That’s not how bargains work.”

“Well, then it’s good you’re coming to realize that you cannot bargain with me.”

His gaze falls to my lips in a husky, “*Fuck*.” Before he pulls me closer into his body. I can feel him hardening up against me. “All right, Virginia. Tell me the plan.”

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58
AUDREY COBALT

Every seat in the auditorium is filled. Granted, there are only sixty-eight of them in the modestly sized space, but there's no denying *this* semifinal game at the Yale Invitational has generated the most buzz.

My pulse is going haywire, and my nerves have nothing to do with the audience. The opposing table sits empty.

"Are they going to forfeit?" I frown, uncapping my water bottle on the table. My back aches from the stage's hard metal chair. It reminds me of the ones I sit on every morning in Delaney Music Hall with Birdie.

Charlie is slouched, his expression equal parts irritable and bored. "He might be attempting to get us disqualified."

My brows knit. "Impossible. I've checked the rulebook ten times. We're allowed to start our own team."

It's exactly what we did. Ten days ago, when I concocted this brilliant plan, we defected from Guy's abomination and created our own quiz bowl team.

Officially, we are Manhattan Valley University Team B.

This is a massive gamble because not only did we have to find two new teammates, we will be competing *against* Guy's team. And if we lose to him…my mouth dries. I can't think about it.

All I want to do is crush and destroy.

But it looks like I may not even get that opportunity if they don't show up at all.

"I said *attempt* to disqualify us," Charlie clarifies for me. "It won't work." He slips me an assured look that hushes my nerves.

It won't work.

CamScanner

I nod repeatedly to him.

He nods back just once.

"Coward," Harriet says beside me, biting on a Jolly Rancher. Her scowl sharpens on the empty table. "If they don't show up, is that an automatic win for us?" I hear her tinge of hope.

Our newest recruit has been the most worried about bombing.

It has nothing to do with her lack of knowledge and everything to do with how the questions are framed.

"I swear these are intentionally confusing," Harriet said after a practice in my apartment. She'd just finished reading a tossup. "Someone should tell them to take notes from *Jeopardy!* and *The Weakest Link*. No, we get ten sentences for one question that sound like Satan's love child playing a game of MASH."

Despite her own nerves, Harriet showed up at the Yale Invitational. This will be our ninth game today, and her competitiveness is a sight to behold. She's been locked in and nailing all the bio and chem questions.

If we win against MVU Team A, we go on to the final round at today's invitational, and without Harriet's expertise in science, we wouldn't stand a chance against Guy's team at all. That is notably Charlie's weakest field.

"If they forfeit, it's a win for us," I tell her. "But an unsatisfying one."

"True, yeah." Harriet nods, sinking back in her chair and swishing her candy in her mouth. Beside her, Ben threads his arm around her shoulder in quiet comfort.

"You've got this, Fisher." He smiles.

"Thanks, Friend." They give each other the most adoring, smitten look.

I beam.

Charlie scrapes his chair closer to the table to avoid seeing *that.* I squeeze my eyes knowingly at him, and he rolls his eyes at me.

Jane is right (I never doubted her). I do not want to be *Charlie.* I do not want a lifetime of yearning—not if it means growing to detest the romances happening around me. That sounds *miserable.*

I am not miserable.

I am resilient.

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Optimistic.

Ready.

Ben noticeably checks the clock on the wall. The Frozen Four championship—MVU vs. Boston College—is *tonight*. It's being held in New York, and Ben can't miss it.

To make it back on time, we'll all be flying in our parents' private helicopter.

Something I know Ben is not looking forward to, as his environmental heart would prefer not to fly "private" anything, but I'm grateful he's here.

I'd told him, "You don't have to," but he said, "I want to. I'm going to be there for you." Just seeing his presence at this table swells my heart beyond the confines of my body.

Ben is an integral part of the plan, since we need four students from MVU on the team to compete. It doesn't matter that he's missed every practice this week. Or that he's only ever used a buzzer twice.

It doesn't matter.

We still can do this.

Suddenly, the auditorium hums with whispers as the time ticks by—and then they die out all at once as the double doors whoosh open.

My breath stills, then releases when the moderator struts in alone.

She delivers the news on the stage. "MVU Team A has had a medical emergency. They have declined to make a substitution"—*more like they don't have any extra players to sub in*—"and will forfeit the match. MVU Team B advances to the final game for the invitational."

I'm stunned, disoriented. My vision blurs.

This is *not* how this was supposed to go. I envisioned triumph and decimation. The sad, pathetic, unfulfilling end drives a knife through my gut.

"Prick," Charlie says under his breath.

Ben leans forward, toward the moderator. "Is everyone okay from the MVU team?" he asks, concerned.

Yes, we should be more concerned about their health. *Thank you, Ben.*

The moderator glances up from her binder. "It was a minor asthma attack. They're fine, but they won't be able to compete." She's being gestured toward the door. "Excuse me." She exits the stage.

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"Is it bullshit?" Harriet asks us in a whisper. "Who would fake an asthma attack? That's low."

"So is getting you kicked out of your dorm," Ben says, his eyes flashing hot. "I wouldn't put it past him."

My frown deepens. "He's terrified of us. Surely." My words are meant to comfort, but they barely mend. It's hard to believe Guy, who loves to win, would purposely come in...*fourth.*

"He's not scared," Charlie says with a hand through his hair. "He just knows this will get under your skin more." He gives me a look like, *and it has*.

Obviously, I am not happy.

I'm now wondering if creating a second team was the right choice at all. How am I supposed to have my victory lap if Guy won't face me? At least when we were on a team together, Charlie could antagonize him by stealing his questions.

Now...there's nothing.

"He always wins, even when he loses," I grumble under my breath. It hurts more than it should. I hate that he still has this strange, unshakeable hold over me.

"Won't this hurt his PPG, at least?" Harriet offers. "There's still that."

My stomach knots. "It won't. Individual stats aren't affected by a forfeit."

Harriet winces.

Charlie scoots back from his chair, his harsh eyes pausing on me. "He can forfeit as many invitationals as he wants. What he can't forfeit? The IAT National Championship. It counts. He knows it's what matters. You'll get your chance, even if it's not right now."

I inhale the big dose of reassurance.

Every team is anticipating the Championship. Invitationals are good for practice, improving stats, and building reputation, but winning one doesn't carry the same weight as winning Nationals.

I take a deeper breath. That means I only have one opportunity to beat him. One shot that I can't miss.

CamScanner

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INTERCOLLEGIATE ACADEMIC TOURNAMENTS

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INTERCOLLEGIATE ACADEMIC TOURNAMENTS

Invitational @ Yale – April 11

MVU Team A Stat Sheet

Player	Specialty	Powers	Tens	Negs	PPG
Guy	History	34	19	5	84.4
Lia	Science	17	20	5	53.8
Wilcox	Literature	8	16	4	32.5
Venus	Linguistics	3	7	3	12.5

Results: Manhattan Valley University Team A – 4th Place

MVU Team B Stat Sheet

Player	Specialty	Powers	Tens	Negs	PPG
Charlie	Generalist	80	2	0	122.0
Audrey	Generalist	34	17	2	67.0
Harriet	Science	12	12	3	28.5
Ben	Sports	0	0	0	0.0

Results: Manhattan Valley University Team B – 1st Place

CamScanner

Over the next two weeks, Birdie makes so much time to tutor me, as my goal to beat Guy at Nationals becomes imperative. My guilt piles higher in fear that I'm stealing minutes and hours from him. I want to return each second so he can practice.

Something moves Birdie to stay longer each morning and to linger with me each night. *I am not poison*, I've repeated to myself. *I am not hurting him.*

Poison does not make one *laugh.*

Poison does not make one *smile.*

Poison does not cause one to want to *hug* and *kiss* and *fuck.*

Unless...I am fucking him to the death, but no, I am not. We are not.

But I recognize he doesn't need money from tutoring as much as he needs the windfall from winning the International Stravinsky Competition, which is on the same day as my IAT National Championship. Only *five* days from now.

Thankfully, Chase, that heinous human, agreed to the extension and to wait until after the competition to get paid.

But Birdie is neither tutoring me nor practicing tonight. We were both individually invited to a black-tie gala at the Met, and neither of us rejected it.

This is not a date.

Made very clear by the fact that we didn't arrive together and I have yet to see him.

Still, I find myself scoping the Met for Birdie. Anticipation races my heart.

The grand glass-covered courtyard of the American Wing is one of my favorite places in the museum. It feels more like an indoor city

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square. Green-patinated bronze torchlike lamps rise among mingling guests. They're salvaged from New York's Gilded Age, and I love to pretend it's the late 19th century every time I strut through here.

It's harder to pretend when it's positively *packed.*

I lower on my heels. Unable to see.

"You looking for my brother?" Phoenix asks, waiting in the long line at an open bar with me. He exudes *rockstar* with his dark hair, the countless tattoos along his drummer biceps, and the loose unbuttoned black shirt, sleeves rolled.

I hope I exude *hopeless romantic* with my ivory puff-sleeved dress.

I shift my hair off my shoulder. "The better question is whether Birdie wants to be found by me."

"Wow, you really have to question that?" Phoenix narrows his brown-blue eyes.

I shake my head a little, smiling to myself. "No, I don't question how much he enjoys being with me. Not anymore." My lungs fill in a deeper breath.

"Good. Because I was about to kick my brother's ass." His moody scowl veers across the donors, influencers, and socialites deep in conversation, all here for the Arts Education Gala.

It's a fundraiser to support young artists in New York, which includes a showcase from NYBC dancers, Manhattan Symphony musicians, Manhattan Opera singers, and students and alumni from Juilliard and the American Ballet Conservatory.

It's a beautiful cross-pollination of art tonight.

And typically, I'd be most excited to see Beckett dance a pas de deux from *Swan Lake* with Beth Anne. Only four principal dancers from NYBC were even invited to this gala. But the main show for me is happening after the ballet performance.

At cocktail hour.

I recheck the program, just to be certain.

Then my phone beeps in my purse.

GUY

I'm at the arts gala tonight. Haven't been able to find you. I'd like to talk.

CamScanner

We all knew he'd be invited, which is precisely why Phoenix has been glued to my side. Especially after Eliot and Tom left to appease our grandmother, who's in attendance with her old socialite friends. I did not want to endure that stuffy, fake conversation.

I reread the text.

Blood drains from my face. I wish he made me angrier than scared. My mother would rip out his vocal cords. Part of me just wants to erase him from existence.

After I tear off his smug smile.

I still want that. Terribly.

"You good?" Phoenix asks me. "Audrey?"

Yes. I swallow the lie. "There's just a bottom-feeding carp trying to swim toward me." I hand him my phone.

"*Shit.*" Phoenix peers up from the text to scan the guests. "Where's Charlie?" He seems antsy. I often see Phoenix do laps with Tom at these kinds of events. Hardly ever standing in one place for long.

"Should we go find him?" I adjust my purse on my shoulder.

"No, let's stay in line—*the fuck.*" His brows knit together at my phone.

I freeze. "Did he text again?"

"No." Phoenix gives me the oddest look. "Who's DMing you dick pics?"

My eyes enlarge. "Oh that." I muster a polite smile.

"Yeah, *that.*" Phoenix flashes me the photo of a man's naked torso and unpleasant girthy dick that looks nowhere near as beautiful as Birdie's. I snatch the phone quickly before anyone around us sees the *erect* penis.

"That is hardly appropriate," I whisper-hiss.

"You think?" Phoenix grinds his jaw. He can't look at me—he seems momentarily upset, nearly *crushed.* For Birdie?

My heart tanks. "No, I—"

"Bird didn't say you two were exclusive," he cuts in. "Tom and I just assumed—but I do know he hasn't been with anyone else, and that would *hurt* him, Audrey. How he feels about you is unlike anything he's ever felt for anyone. I don't know if he's told you that."

I reinflate, nearly rising on my tiptoes. "He told me he loves me. That he's fallen in love with me."

CamScanner

Phoenix lets out a little laugh, as if proud of his younger brother, then that morphs into a pained grimace.

I deflate. "He doesn't want me to love him back. I do not love him. What I feel is infatuation." It sounds more rehearsed than true. *I need it to be true.* "I do not love him," I repeat.

Phoenix looks queasy. "Great, so you're driving this home by sexting someone else."

"No, no," I say hurriedly. "I couldn't bear to engage in an erotic back-and-forth with another man. That is *revolting*." I pause, realizing I sort of am in one. My face is on fire. "It's not what you think. He's not DMing me. Look at the account."

I hand Phoenix my phone while we move up in the sluggish bar line. I have absolutely nothing to hide.

His dark gaze zeroes in on the screen. "This is Beckett's account?"

"Yes. He thinks I'm Beckett. I run my brother's social media." Phoenix must've forgotten. I swear I've mentioned it. While he thumbs through the long DM thread, my gaze drifts.

I easily spot Beckett at the gala. He's currently on an elevated stage, being photographed standing beside Leo Valavanis, a golden-haired Greek Adonis and principal dancer.

Both are bare-chested in tights—Beckett tattooed, Leo clearly not. Dark eyeliner is streaked under their lower lashes, and Leo's smile dazzles with charm, whereas Beckett offers none.

Patrons *love* their rivalry, especially since they're the two best male dancers in NYBC.

Seeing them side by side, a study in contrasts, it's hard not to be swept into the buzz.

I'm drawn back to Phoenix as he says, "He's sending you dick pics sitting on the fucking toilet?"

"Sending *Beckett* dick pics, yes." I lift my chin to peek at the phone. "See my response? Right there, you should read that." I point at my reply, needing to be absolved of any crime right this instant.

Phoenix reads, "'It is unbecoming, among other things, to send unsolicited dick pics. Never do this again, please. And if you do so consensually, I advise you pick a better place than where you shit.'" He stares down at me like I am very peculiar.

I smile. "What would Birdie say to that?"

CamScanner

"He would laugh his ass off."

"See. I wouldn't hurt him." I lift my shoulders triumphantly, then think aloud, "Now I wish I had filled him in on my DM battle. Kinney told me to block all of these men."

"These men?" His brows spike. "More than one is sending you pictures of his erection?'

"Sending *Beckett*," I correct again. "Some are flaccid. I've seen more penises in the past twenty-four hours than I have in my entire lifetime."

Phoenix is still scrolling.

We move up in line, at least six or seven bodies away from the bartender.

I whisper to him, "It's quite interesting that Beckett gets far fewer boobs. Many just assume his sexuality because he's a ballet dancer. I think that's always peeved him. But maybe there's a stat about men sending more nudes than women." I reach for my phone to search for the facts, but Phoenix holds it away from me.

I glare. "That is mine."

He's motioning for…Beckett, who's finished taking photos.

"No, *Phoenix*. We do not need to tell Beckett. Let this be our secret. Don't you want one with me? Your boyfriend's sister? Also, your one true love's sister? *Tom's* sister."

Phoenix is ignoring me any way I phrase it. I thought we were having a moment!

"*Phoenix*."

"Beckett needs to know his little sister is being sent dick pics," he growls lowly. At least he's whispering. The lady behind him was giving us looks.

I furrow my brows. "Do you not listen? This is not my account—"

"They're still being sent *to you*. You're the one looking at them, and if you were Bird, I would hope Beckett or Charlie would tell me my brother is interacting with a bunch of fucking pervs on my behalf."

It suddenly dawns on me. There is an older sibling *alliance* that Birdie and I are not a part of. "This is…this is…" I have no words because Beckett has reached us.

"Qu'est-ce qui se passe?" Beckett asks me. *What's going on?* Then Phoenix hands him my phone.

CamScanner

"Wait, before you look." I wave my program at him. "You will be so elated to know the most recent photo I posted of you went *viral* last night. Who knew your abs would attract such attention?" Beth Anne had sent me a photo of Beckett at one of their rehearsals. He was shirtless, wearing only tights. The comments are practically all eggplant emojis.

"It wasn't my abs that caused it to go viral," Beckett says plainly.

"So you saw the photo, which means you saw the *likes.* Over four million. Isn't that wonderful?" That will surely help soften this... situation.

As he checks my phone, his yellow-green eyes go from calm to piercing in under five seconds. I watch his fingers fly over the screen.

I reach for the phone. "Okay, that's enough—"

He hoists it high above my head. With the stretch of his arm, more inky-black floral tattoos come into view. "You're engaging with men who are sending me dick pics?"

"Firstly, they think I am you when I reply, and secondly, they deserve to be lectured, do they not? Do you want me to tell them you're straight? Maybe they'll stop if they know you're only attracted to women."

Phoenix's arms are crossed. He's searching for Tom or maybe Charlie, or worse, Guy.

Beckett's eyes seem darker with the eyeliner under them. "I don't want you replying to anyone who'd send me nudes. Do not respond. And turn off my DMs."

"What if there's a brand deal you might be interested in? I know you rejected the razors and that luxury car campaign, but there must be *one* you will like one day."

"There won't be," he says more gently. "You can turn off my DMs. I'll do it for you." He taps into the privacy settings and starts swiping and locking. He even removes the comment feature. No one can reply to his posts anymore.

My shoulders sink when he returns my phone. Beckett frowns at my gutted reaction. I don't think he expected me to be this pulverized over something so minuscule.

So I admit, "I feel as though I failed my most important role in your life."

CamScanner

His confusion tightens his features into hurt. “Your most important role in my life is being my little sister. Nothing will ever supersede that, nothing could.”

Emotion stings my eyes. “Really?”

“Really.” He softens his gaze on me. “Your existence here in New York with us is what matters to me. Not how many *likes* you can get. That might matter to my company, but not to me. Compris?” *Understood?*

My heart swells. “You really want me here?”

“Toujours,” he says deeply.

Always.

I hug him before he hugs me. Eliot might give the fiercest hugs, but Beckett’s are so warm, it’s hard to even pull away from the embrace.

When we break apart, Charlie has suddenly materialized beside us in a black satin shirt. I inform him, “Beckett wants me in New York always.”

He’s more agitated than surprised. “He’s wanted you here. He’s already told you this.”

“Yes.” I refold the program. “But I didn’t believe it fully until this moment.”

Charlie has a “get me out of here” expression. It has become his normal face these days, so I take no offense.

It dawns on me that we are...out of the bar line. How did we shift out of it? “I don’t think we’re getting drinks anytime soon,” I say, but the thought vanishes between the four of us as Guy Abernathy comes into view from across the museum.

His toffee-brown hair is perfectly coifed, his mossy-green eyes seemingly *kind,* and his dapper navy suit the hallmark of a Wall Street ace with great business acumen. Everything I believed I wanted is striding toward me.

I stand straighter.

“Don’t pull her behind you, Beckett,” Charlie warns under his breath.

“Elle a peur,” Beckett whispers. *She’s afraid.*

“Only a little,” I say, which is more of an admission than usual. “I’m okay.” I draw back my shoulders again. “You do not need to defend me.”

CamScanner

"*Great.* Because he's more interested in you when we fucking do," Charlie says irritably.

"Is that why you showed up late to our first quiz bowl practice together?" I wonder. "To show disinterest in me so he would also be disinterested?"

"No, I have no real interest or care for you. I haven't enrolled in college for you or competed in something that makes me want to bang my head against every brick wall I see *for you.*"

He's being sarcastic, of course.

Charlie cares about me greatly.

It is a fact. Written in the Cobalt stars.

"Is he actually coming over here?" Phoenix asks Beckett as Guy is a mere fifteen feet from us.

"No, they should stop him right...now," Beckett says, and we watch several event staff and the fundraiser's own security (not ours) intercept Guy's trajectory.

The gala guests rotate to look at the sudden congregation near a white marble statue and beneath the watchful gazes of gilded goddesses. Behind Guy is a stone exterior facade of the Branch Bank, Wall Street in the 1820s. I can't help but smile the second his confidence flickers into apprehension.

"There must be a mistake." He tries to placate the event staff with two unthreatening hands, but he keeps an eye on the unwanted attention.

"You're Guy Abernathy?" I hear the event staff.

"*Yes*. I know McArthur. Williams. Stevens—"

"I don't care who you know. I'm the gala director. This is the head of security. Your name is *specifically* on a ban list—"

"A ban list?" Guy chokes out, aghast.

The entire American Wing grows more hushed. "Yes, sir, you're banned from all functions or events involving the New York Ballet Company, the Whitney Theater, the Manhattan Symphony, ABC, the Opera, the list goes on and on."

"Then how did I get in here?"

"It was overlooked. A mistake we're remedying now."

"*Overlooked*," he repeats, then casts a nasty glare at Charlie, but this was actually Beckett's doing. No one has pull around the New York art

CamScanner

scene like he does, and he intentionally asked them to remove Guy mid-gala.

Guy lets out a breathy laugh. "Unbelievable. I'd like to talk to whoever put me on this list."

"You can do that outside of the Met."

Guy's eyes might be pissed, but his neck is beet-red against his pale skin. The neck does not lie. He is *embarrassed.* Mortified, even, as influential patrons witness his disgrace.

I grin and toss my hair off my shoulder.

Guy tries to recoup some dignity. He forces an amiable smile at the gala director. "I'll do that." He smooths a hand through his hair, strutting tensely out of the Met. We all hear his footsteps in the quiet.

As chatter escalates, I press the program to my chest and twirl three-sixty. "We've defeated him. He's *deceased*. And he will die once more when I nail his coffin shut at Nationals."

"Is he going to try to take a stab back?" Phoenix asks my brothers.

"He'll try," Charlie says.

"Unsuccessfully," I add. "We will stab him again and again." My lungs contract. "He won't survive for long." I believe this.

Together, we will win.

Gala staff begin to bring chairs toward the center of the indoor courtyard. It's nearly cocktail hour. My smile lifts with my pulse, and I search rapidly for Birdie.

"There is a chance if this doesn't get resolved with Guy, Ben won't commit to the NHL," Beckett whispers to Charlie and Phoenix, but just loud enough that I can hear if I strain my ears.

MVU beat Boston College in the Frozen Four championship game, 4–1, with Ben scoring three of the goals, including the game-winning one. He'd even finally introduced me to his teammates after the game. His happiness radiated through me tenfold.

Sports analysts were so confident he'd sign with a pro team following the win.

But he hasn't yet. Even after the New York Rooks offered him a three-year contract. Ben grew up rooting for the Philadelphia Flyers and the New York Rooks, the way people in those cities love them. Unconditionally.

CamScanner

This is a dream team for him. He'd be able to *stay* in the city with us and Harriet. There's no reason he should reject it, but he asked the Rooks if he could wait until his junior year ends to decide.

Ben wants the dean to believe he'll be at MVU in the fall.

Hearing Beckett now, I'm worried Ben actually *will* be there come August.

I tilt my head a little more to hear Beckett add, "If Ben feels like he's the only reason Guy isn't hurting Audrey, then he's going to stay on campus. He's going to be too afraid of the consequences if he leaves for the NHL, and that outcome is starting to build more and more irrationally in his mind."

"She's listening to you," Charlie says.

I pretend not to, my stomach in knots, my throat swelling. I truly hate Ben's mental illness. Truly. I want to stomp on it with my heel and kick it into the sun.

"Audrey," Beckett calls out to me. "You aren't bad for Ben."

"I know. I do not blame myself. I am not poisonous."

Beckett eases, and I swear Charlie smiles as he says, "Eliot is good for something."

I understand who's nurtured my confidence and self-worth most in my life, who's built my armor, who's softened my heart, who's tried to harden it. My love for my brothers, all of them in all their differences, begins to bloom in my chest.

It's a swelling feeling as I turn toward the assembly of white folding chairs and music stands. "I'm going to find a better spot," I tell them, not waiting for anyone to follow.

I hurry between clusters of guests, securing a place up front with the Roman goddess Diana behind me. A poised, graceful huntress. The golden statue towers on a pedestal—her bow drawn and arrow aimed over the crowd. The original once stood atop Madison Square Garden as a weathervane, turning with the wind above Manhattan.

It's my last thought before musicians stream over to the chairs. Guests gather closer to the orchestra. No one blocks me. I do not let them steal my view.

Chandelier lights begin to dim. Candles, lit and flickering, are strewn around the Symphony musicians. I breathe in sharply as Birdie

CamScanner

appears in an all-black tux, not scouring the audience. He's in his own world, of course.

The thought tugs something deep and delicate in me with too much force. Yet I can't look away from him.

Birdie sits in the center. Not with a cello, but a violin. The conductor requested him to play *violin*. He wouldn't tell me why.

They even let him keep his lip piercings in, I realize. His brown hair is mostly tamed, pieces tucked behind his ears, but rebellious strands tease against his forehead and focused brows.

At first, I wonder if he has a solo, and then the strings begin their stormy, unmistakable refrain of Joseph Haydn's *Farewell Symphony*.

My eyes glass. I know the meaning of this piece.

He taught it to me.

CamScanner

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

As the story goes, Haydn was employed as a royal conductor for a Hungarian prince and depended on his patronage. He'd taken temporary residence at the prince's summer castle with a handful of musicians, and after a long, tiring season in Hungary, they were ready to go home to their families in Austria.

But the prince demanded they extend their stay.

Haydn, despite his absolute brilliance, was considered a servant. Figure that. He quietly resented class hierarchy while being subjected to the whims of the aristocracy.

Though, he wasn't against challenging his elite patrons. Not through a belligerent, hostile appeal—but through what he loved.

His music.

So, even being sympathetic to the exhausted musicians under his charge, he couldn't dismiss the orchestra himself, but he could compose a symphony to send a message. To tell the prince it was time for them to return home.

It happens now at the Met, during the final Adagio.

I sense all eyes on me and the orchestra as the dramatic first movement transitions into the wistful melancholy of the final one. I cradle my violin between my shoulder and jaw, drawing and lifting the bow in a rhythm I recalled from memory after an hour of practice earlier this morning.

Picking up this piece again felt like tying my shoes. I don't need the sheet music, which is why the conductor asked me to play violin.

One by one, musicians rise around me as they stop playing. They each snuff out a candle before leaving the orchestra. Just like Haydn's musicians did in Hungary.

CamScanner

I keep playing.

The melody softens as more instruments go silent. It becomes poignant, bittersweet…longing, and without me really meaning to, without me trying, I lift my gaze while I play, and I see Audrey.

Right there.

Only several feet from me.

Standing beneath Diana with misted eyes and sharp breath, her overflowing emotion barrels into me, and I almost miss a beat as my fingers crawl along the strings and my head tilts with the music. *Audrey.* My gaze fuses to hers. My eyes try to fill. My nose flares. My chest constricts, then heaves.

I'm playing the violin for her, to her, looking at her—what I never thought I'd do.

For anyone.

A tear streams down her cheek as she deeply, *deeply* feels this piece with me. Another candle is extinguished. It grows darker around me.

I fight to see her features.

She looks afraid for the moment when she won't see mine.

It'll come.

She knows it's coming.

Sheet music is obscured in the darkness. The heat of the last pillar candle warms my face. I stand from my chair and play soft, gentle notes to her.

I'm the last musician remaining.

I watch her lips lift in a reverent smile. I watch her fingers touch her breastbone as if her heart is escaping from her body. I watch the love in her eyes refract against the love in mine.

Fuck.

Some things, you can't stop.

Some things might just be meant to be.

The subtle defiance of the *Farewell Symphony* was met with respect by the prince. He understood the message, admired Haydn more, and let the musicians go.

I always saw it as a middle finger to the elite. Virginia has taught me a new meaning. As I play to her, I understand this symphony more as a bridge between two worlds.

Maybe hers isn't so far from mine.

CamScanner

Maybe.

Maybe.

One more note. My bow slides off the strings.

After a shared breath between me and her, I pinch the flame, and she goes dark into thunderous applause.

The harsh chandelier light turns on again. I squint into the glare, trying to see her, but she's—she's turning around, away from me.

"Audrey." I rush toward her, but she's weaving quickly and running...running away. "*Virginia.*"

Several patrons cut into my path.

I'm stuck sucking in air and trying not to be a complete asshole to older ladies asking questions. Then I'm being introduced to young Juilliard students, to offer advice, and I don't even know what the fuck I'm saying.

I don't understand why she ran from me.

I don't understand.

I don't.

I—"*Phoenix*," I say, finding my brother. I catch his arm. "Where is she?"

My brother isn't asking questions. He's giving me a look like I'm a dumb fuck, and that might be deserved. "She left with Eliot. We're all meeting them at a cocktail bar down the street. You going to say you can't come with us?"

Fuck practicing.

Fuck my pride. Fuck my resistance to their world.

"I'll go with you," I tell him.

He's startled. "What?"

"Don't make it a thing, man. I'm going with you."

Phoenix shoves my chest—I shove his back just as lovingly, then he curves an arm over my shoulders, and he guides me in the direction I want to go.

CamScanner

Maybe.

Maybe.

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AUDREY COBALT

This can't be happening. *This can't be happening.*

The phrase has been on loop along with my shortened breath and jittery pulse, even after arriving at the Athenaeum Library Bar. Under normal circumstances, I'd marvel at the floor-to-ceiling dark academia bookcases and the experimental cocktails of this upscale Manhattan treasure, but I am not marveling.

I feel on the verge of passing out.

Faint.

Eliot has been trying to coax details from me, but I can't do more than shake my head and ask for a cocktail. He supplies me with a foamy spin on a Cosmo, but I ditch the drink as soon as Tom, Beckett, and Charlie appear…with the St. Pierres.

Birdie…Birdie is here.

As soon as I see him, I bolt toward the wooden staircase.

His chest collapses. "Audrey!" He chases after me, hot on my heels.

Tom says, "Eliot, let him talk to her, dude." It's all I hear as I fly up the stairs, past two different landings as they curve and ascend. I reach the rooftop balcony on this balmy April night, not even giving the hostess time to unlatch the velvet rope barricade.

I simply step over it, saying, "I'm Audrey Cobalt."

Behind me, Birdie tells the hostess, "And I'm the King of England."

Why is that so endearing?! Why am I so *endeared* toward him? Enamored, infatuated, besotted, in…in…

This can't be happening.

He steps over the velvet rope too, not waiting for permission, and the hostess tells us we can sit anywhere we'd like. It's rather empty up here with glitzy torches, couches, and old steamer trunks as tables.

CamScanner

New York sparkles, but I'm not paying attention to the lights. I'm storming as far away from him as the roof will allow.

"Why are you running?" Birdie asks. "*Virginia*. Slow down."

"Oh, so you are the only one who can run?"

"Speak to me and not to the city."

I whirl around, his chest crashing into my body, but he catches my hips, steadying me. He's always steadying me.

"This can't be happening," I mutter in one unnerved breath.

"What can't?"

I squeak out a panicky noise that has Birdie hovering his hand near my cheek and whispering, "Take a breath. Go sit down."

"Do not tell me what to do—" I am being swept into his strong arms. "*Haydn.*" I nearly melt against him, being cradled to his firm chest, feeling the *thump, thump, thump* of his heartbeat as he carries me to a couch nestled in the balcony corner.

My mind is buzzing after he places me gently on the cushion. I'm fixing my dress, trying to make sense of how to tell him...how I'm going to...how to end everything.

I must.

The server tentatively comes over, sensing drama, most likely. "Do you know what you'd like to drink? Need a minute?"

Birdie sits adjacent to me. "I'll take a Jack and Fizz." Then he asks me, "Princess?"

"Espresso martini. Thank you."

Once she dips out, I turn more toward him. Our knees knock, and I retract my legs. "I apologize."

"For what? I've been inside you, Virginia. I don't care if your legs caress mine."

I can hardly breathe.

Wind whips across the rooftop, and I shiver. He's already shrugging off his tux jacket. I should reject the offer, but I find myself slipping my arms through his big sleeves and burying myself in his roasted-hazelnut scent.

Birdie's bow tie is undone at his collar. He grips the cushion on either side of him. "This might come as a shock, but I'm a musical savant—not a mind-reading savant. You're going to have to scrounge for a few words here."

CamScanner

"I…"

He captures my gaze. "What happened?" He frowns. "What'd I do?"

I blink away the sting against my eyes, then I jolt to a stance.

He rises with me. "Coyotes can't fly, so think about that before you contemplate running off the balcony."

I laugh a little, which reminds me…I dig into my purse and pull out a crisp floral envelope, giving it to him. "This is for you."

He's even more confused. "You wrote me a letter or is this a gift card?"

"A letter. It's not a funny letter."

"Okay…"

"I wrote it before…before I knew, before I realized that I can't wait for you." It crushes my lungs.

He shies away from me for a second. I've never seen him shy away from me like this. He rubs the back of his head, staring at the envelope. His muscles look unbearably flexed. "Why? What changed?" He peers up from the letter. His eyes begin to redden on mine. "Can you tell me?" His voice breaks. He clears a knot out of his throat. "*Fuck*."

My chin quakes. "I'm afraid I'm in love with you. Tonight, when you played and looked at me, I knew that I've fallen absolutely, madly in love with you."

His chest rises. He blinks, then waits and waits. "Is there a *but* coming?"

I put a hand to my heart. "I don't want to break my promise—"

"This is about the promise?" He laughs, then outstretches his arms. "I absolve you of the fucking promise. You can love me without sin." He makes a sign of the cross over my body.

I nearly smile. "I'm not Catholic."

"Well, I am, and shouldn't there be a Cobalt rule somewhere about the promise-giver being able to rescind a promise made in French?"

"No."

"Then make one up. You have the power to create your own rules, Virginia, and then light them on fire."

I step farther away from him, away from the couch. "It's not just about a broken promise."

"Then what?" He follows my footsteps, inches from me but not touching.

CamScanner

"I was perfectly happy being *infatuated* with a man who might never want a relationship." My voice rises with tension. "But to be *in love* with you and know you may never be with me in full unbridled capacity? You would have me pine over you forever?" I press my hands to my chest. "I will wither away into misery. I will begin to resent all the love surrounding me. I will be sad and joyless."

Birdie can't speak. He tries, but nothing comes out. His gaze holds mine, unblinking.

"You know, don't you?" I breathe. "You must understand." Emotion wets my lashes as I quote, "'To want and not to have, sent up all her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain. And then to want and not to have—to want and want—how that wrung the heart, and wrung it again and again!'"

Tears spill out of his eyes, as I quote Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse.*

"You will turn me to hard, unfeeling stone," I tell him. "So I will end this before it goes too far." I try to steel myself. "This isn't an ultimatum. I do not want to pressure you into a relationship. This is a goodbye."

He wipes his face with his wrist. "Tell me what I need to do to keep you."

Pain bears on my body. "I can't give you those answers, Birdie. That's something, I suppose, you've always been trying to understand yourself."

The inked words on his wrist—*play on*—rub at the wet corner of his eye again. I try not to be ground into sawdust, but this feeling inside me is new and excruciating. Hurting him is eviscerating me. I'm not sure how much longer I can face him without my knees buckling.

"It's better this way, anyway," I manage to say, a tiny tremor in my voice. "You don't need to tutor me anymore. We're only five days from our respective competitions, and it gives you more time to dedicate to yours."

"Sure, sure," he rasps out. He tries to breathe, running his tongue over his lip piercing. Tension coils his neck and shoulders. "And then after that?" He inhales. "You want to be friends, Virginia?" He sees me shaking my head. His face splinters, eyes suddenly flooding. He blinks, tears dripping. "*Fuck.*"

CamScanner

"I don't want to be your friend—"

"I got that," he chokes out, staring into the New York lights and using the bottom of his shirt to wipe his face this time.

The only reason I haven't collapsed is because I haven't moved an inch. "You've never wanted to be my friend."

He nods tightly. "Because I've wanted *more* than a friendship with you."

"And yet and yet and yet," I breathe out. "You want and deny." My heart is being shredded seeing his pain. "I'm not doing this to torture you. I cannot be friends with you when I'm in love with you, Birdie. It's too difficult and doesn't serve the purpose—"

"What purpose?"

"To fall *out* of love with you," I say with so much passion, my entire throat blazes. "I must fall out of love because I cannot bear to be in love with a man who will never be with me. *I cannot*." I rub at my runny nose with my sleeve. *His* sleeve of his tux. "I will get this cleaned. I apologize—"

"Stop apologizing. Fuck the jacket. I—"

"Audrey?"

I petrify at the sudden sound of *his* voice. My eyes shift but not the rest of my body. Birdie swings his head toward Guy...Guy Abernathy is here. I stare frozenly at this nightmare, but he seems surprised to see me too.

He says a few words to his group of male friends before they desert him for the other side of the rooftop.

"Virginia?" Birdie sounds concerned, even after I just slammed a gavel on his heart.

I inhale a jagged breath.

Birdie whispers swiftly, "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I won't leave you alone with him. Je le promets." *I promise you.*

The thought thaws some parts of me before Guy strides over to us. Birdie peels away from my side to meet him several feet away from my iced stance.

Birdie grits out, "You stalking her now?"

Guy looks disinterested in him. "I have more important things to do than stalk a girl. I'm here with friends." He gestures back toward them.

"Yeah, how much did those cost?"

CamScanner

Guy forces a smile, then pauses on Birdie's face. "Your eyes—have you been crying?" He laughs.

It detonates *ire* inside my veins. "Excuse you." I storm forward. "How did you get past my security?"

Without looking, Birdie extends an arm behind him, pushing me back so he remains a barrier, and frankly...I am glad he does so. I do not want to be in breathing distance of that *carp.*

Guy glances between us. "You must've come from the Athenaeum. This rooftop bar is also connected to The Starlight on Park, the hotel—it's where I've been after the stunt your brother pulled at the gala." He pins an aggravated look on me. "Nice to know you've also instructed your security to turn me away from any bar you're in now. A little *drastic*, don't you think?"

"Drastic?" I boil. "I did nothing to you until you got Birdie's scholarship *revoked.*"

"Was that me?" Guy feigns innocence.

Birdie thrusts his hands at his chest. Guy stumbles two steps back but acts like the forceful shove was nothing. He laughs backward at his friends, playing off the aggression as *funny.*

He is awful.

Guy slides a cool hand through his hair, then looks to me. "You were the one who ended things with me to your regret—"

"I do not regret it—"

"—then your brother joins the quiz bowl team and contacts *every* girl I've ever dated, trying to kick up dirt on me that doesn't exist. Spreading *lies* about me to them."

My pulse begins to speed. *Charlie did...what?*

Birdie glances back at me.

Guy also sees my shock. "You didn't know." He wears fake concern for me. "This is what I've wanted to talk to you about, Audrey. Charlie keeps secrets from you. Who knows what else he's done? You shouldn't trust him."

"But I should trust you?" I recoil. "What about Harriet? What about what you did to her?"

"Like I told Ben, it was a mistake to vote her into the Honors House to begin with. She didn't belong there. I did her a favor."

CamScanner

My lungs are on fire. "She belongs where people love her and value her, and if that's not at the Honors House, then maybe you are right on that account, but only that one." I ball my hands into my oversized sleeves.

Guy notices me hugging the men's suit jacket around my frame. "And as far as the musician goes"—his eyes briefly flit to Birdie—"I did you a favor, *Cobalt.* Dating Big Bird is beneath your status."

"I don't care about status as much as you do. Maybe if you knew me at all, you'd know that." I hoist my chin. "And Birdie has more talent in one toenail than you do in your entire short stature. Whoever he is with…should feel so proud to be with him." I try not to cry. I will not cry. "Whoever is with you should feel utter *disgust.* You couldn't even show an ounce of care toward me." I'm not breathing as words rip out of me. "You hurt me. It *hurt.* It was the worst sex I've had by far."

Birdie is grinding his jaw, staring down Guy, and I'm surprised to see Guy is more focused on him than on me.

"It wasn't great for me either," Guy says to Birdie. "When I imagined fucking Audrey Cobalt, I didn't think it'd be like fucking a log."

I gasp. And then Birdie swings a hard fist into his jaw. I glance down *once* to hurriedly open my purse, and when I look up, Guy is bloody-mouthed and shoving Birdie off him.

Birdie fists his shirt and throws him toward the hostess stand.

Is this considered a brawl? Am I witnessing a *brawl* between the man I hate and the man I love? I fumble for my phone and my pepper spray. None of Guy's so-called friends come to his aid, but the bartenders are yelling at him and Birdie to stop fighting.

Birdie launches another pair of knuckles into Guy's face.

"Haydn!" I shout, because *his hands.*

He immediately flinches back at my voice, as if I electrocuted him. He lets go of Guy, who picks himself off the hostess stand, smoothing down his shirt. Then he massages his jaw.

"Virginia." Birdie points at the exit.

Yes. I want to get out of here. "I'm so sorry," I tell our server on my way out. I also slip her several hundred dollars for the two drinks and the trouble.

My collarbone is constricted as I head quickly down the stairs, signs saying *The Athenaeum This Way*. Birdie is right behind me, thankfully

CamScanner

so close. I sense his hands hovering against my waist in case I trip. But when I glance backward, my lungs eject—why is Guy following us?

"Keep going, Virginia."

I'm frozen.

"Go to your brothers."

I can't even decide what to do next.

Eliot is at the landing of the wooden staircase, framed by bookshelves lined with apothecary bottles. "Sister." He motions me down the stairs. Like he's bewitched me, my feet naturally move toward Eliot.

I reach the landing, and Eliot leaves my side to ascend the steps. With another flight of stairs below me, it's all so cramped and tight.

Birdie presses his back into the banister so Eliot can pass him, but Eliot stops on the stair below Birdie while Guy has stopped on the one above.

I cage my breath.

"The thespian," Guy says as if it's a lowly title. He thumbs his split lip. "I'm guessing I'm barred from the playhouse. Thank you for doing me a solid. The intermission was always the highlight."

Eliot has a foot braced on the stair above him. "The only solid I've done you is not tearing you limb from fucking limb."

"I'm shaking." Guy acts unimpressed. "Tell your sister she owes me a new set of sheets. I took her virginity so hard, she bled through them—"

Eliot slams a brutal punch into his gut. It knocks the wind out of Guy. *Justly so.* Then my brother brings him by the shirt down the stairs. I back up a little, my hand tightening around my pepper spray.

Birdie rushes down behind them just as Eliot rams Guy into the bookcase on the landing. Apothecary bottles wobble off, then shatter at their feet.

"Audrey, get back!" Birdie shouts.

I step down onto the next flight of stairs, too scared of being caught in the crossfire. Fists are flying, and Guy is clearly *losing.* Eliot hammers him across the face, and I hear a *crack* before blood spews from his nostrils and splatters the opposite wall.

Guy purposely spits a wad of bloody saliva at Birdie, splattering his shirt. Eliot tries to shove Birdie out of the fight.

CamScanner

It allows Guy to land a fist into Eliot's jaw. But Eliot returns it, then unleashes a blow into his ribs, another in his face.

My pulse is in my throat.

I hoist my pepper spray and squirt...the wall. Things are moving far too quickly, and—and I do not want to accidentally hurt Birdie or Eliot.

"Holy shit," Tom says, coming up behind me. "We have to work on your aim."

I flinch at another punch, even though I am *overjoyed* Guy was the recipient.

"Get her out of here, Tom!" Birdie shouts at my brother.

I'm being tugged backward by more than just Tom. Suddenly hands swoop around me, and I'm drawn into a mass of private security. They're leading me quickly down the staircase into the Athenaeum Library Bar.

"Where's my brother?" I hear Phoenix somewhere. Then catch a glimpse near the restrooms. He's being restrained by more than one person, I think. "The fuck—get off me! Where's Birdie?! Tom!!" My brother hears his boyfriend's plea and rushes over.

I'm still in a swarm of bodies in this amber lit bar.

Beckett has a protective hand on my back. I don't see who he's talking to. I'm being bumped.

I just hear, "There were witnesses to the fight on the roof." That sounds like Oscar, Charlie's bodyguard.

My brain is spinning. "What's happening?" I feel as if I missed a key component to this chaos, but should I even be surprised? I am by far the *last* to receive information.

Charlie draws me toward a leather booth and eases me down on the cushion.

"He is deplorable," I tell Charlie. "*Vile.*" I pick up a glass. "Is this your water?"

"No." He tears it out of my hand.

Beckett places a water bottle in mine. I struggle to pry off the cap, and Charlie steals it, just to untwist it for me.

"At least Ben is at home tonight," Beckett says to Charlie.

I sip water. I'm the only one sitting. The strength to stand will come to me in a moment, I'm sure of it. "Where's Eliot and Birdie? Is the fight over?" Just as I say it, Beckett is telling me we need to go.

CamScanner

"Go where?"

"We're going home."

"Without them?" I feel sick. "No, we—"

"Unless you'd like to go to jail," Charlie says, "you're leaving with us."

Jail.

Jail?

"Did—did Eliot kill him?" I ask quietly in fear.

Beckett has a *what the fuck* expression, so I exhale in relief, even before Charlie says, "*No*."

"They can't go to jail then." I spring out of the booth. "They can't. They were defending me."

Tom suddenly reaches the booth, out of breath. "They can, Audrey Virginia. The cops are here. They're arresting all three of them."

CamScanner

62

BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

I'm put in a holding cell with Eliot Alice Cobalt.

So much adrenaline courses through me that I'm unsure how badly beat up my hand is, other than the skin is busted open on my knuckles.

Never in your life, Bird. Never did I think I'd be in this situation. Never did I think I'd be more torn up over what a girl said to me on a balcony than being booked into jail with fingerprints and a mugshot.

I can't even blame Virginia.

If I really look inward—and I can, and I do—I know it made me love her even more. I fell for the girl who's unwilling to take scraps. I don't want to starve her of a relationship.

The thought of her falling out of love with me is so painful. My eyes feel raw. It hurts every time I blink.

Let her go isn't in my vocabulary tonight.

Do everything you can to keep her is.

I glance over at Eliot, both of us seated on the hard metal bench. Blood splatter stains his white button-down. It's harder to notice the blood on mine since I'm wearing black. His lip is split in the corner, and he licks at the dried blood.

Eliot turns his head to me, looking me over in the strained silence.

He hasn't said a word. Neither have I. Not when we were handcuffed. Not in the back of the cop car together. Not now. The third participant in this bar fight got a ride to the hospital. We've been told that motherfucker will be booked afterward and will have to make bail like us.

I stare off into a livid void, hearing what Guy said about fucking her.

CamScanner

I pray he has more than a broken nose. Broken *hands*, broken *ribs*, broken *ego*. You don't get to say shit like that, let alone *do it*, without some consequence.

That's usually what happens where I come from. Seeing as how Eliot beat him to shit, I'm guessing our worlds really aren't too far apart in the end.

It's still way too quiet.

I can't shake the confrontation on the rooftop bar. I hear Guy saying, *When I imagined fucking Audrey Cobalt, I didn't think it'd be like fucking a log.* Then the sound she made—the sound she made is rooted inside my ears like a scream in a horror movie. Only it wasn't a scream. It was a wounded, razor-thin breath like she'd been shot.

I clench my teeth until pain blooms in my jaw.

I open and close my right hand. We were uncuffed when they brought us into holding. I flex my fingers again, and I break the silence. "When my brother got arrested, I had to post his bail. Went through all the hoops. Had to go get a bail bond for fifty grand."

Eliot holds my gaze. "That much?"

I raise my brows. "*You* think fifty grand is a lot?" He had on a Piguet watch that likely nears half a million. They took it, along with the rest of our possessions.

"For assault charges, yes."

I frown. "You've been charged before?"

"Never. This is my first time in jail. I usually skate out of situations with minor repercussions, thanks to my wit and charisma." He unveils a roguish smile that winks out, replaced by a glare. Eliot has never liked me, and laying into the same scumbag hasn't changed that.

"Must be nice," I mutter.

"It is. Until it isn't." He stares over at the camera in the corner. "Fifty grand isn't a lot to me. I just know the price of things."

I nod and explain, "My brother was initially booked for *felony* assault, not just simple assault or misdemeanor battery. It got dropped later since the guy didn't press charges." I laugh to myself. "I told Phoenix he was such a dumbass. Can't wait for him to dish it back."

"Will he call your parents?"

I shake my head. "Not unless he wants to have a migraine on top of getting me out of here." I flex my hand again. "They're in Boston. They

CamScanner

won't be able to do anything but worry."

My abs contract. My shoulders constrict.

It's good they're not here. And like my parents, Eliot's are in another city. *Philly*. I can at least be glad I don't have to deal with any of that tonight.

Tom. Tom Carraway Cobalt will be the saving grace today. I bet he'll join my brother and post bail for both Eliot and me.

Guilt fists my rib cage. I hear my suffocating breath in the echoing cell. Before Eliot says something about it, I ask, "You're left-handed?"

He's been trying to extend the fingers of his swollen left hand, knuckles ripped up compared to his right. "Couldn't damage the other one. Too valuable."

"Don't you need both for *Amadeus*?" He plays the piano onstage.

"I jerk off with my right."

I release a laugh, and normally, I'd hate that I laughed at his fucking joke. But I'm done trying to wedge a boulder between me and her brothers. I can't dig my own grave with Eliot anymore. I can't live underneath the dirt—no matter how good I am at it.

I have to reach air.

Somehow.

Somehow.

It feels impossible, but what do I have to lose? Oh, just the only person I've ever romantically loved to the fucking core.

Just her.

I need to try.

After the next wave of silence, I tell him, "I'm going to make things right with your sister."

"*Little* sister." Eliot glares.

I work my jaw so I don't say something stupid. "Little sister. Glad I don't have one." Heat scalds my eyes again, remembering tonight. "I am glad she has brothers, especially ones ready to fight for her. I'm not asking you to go easy on me, man." Pressure compresses on my chest. "Because if somehow I can't fix this with her, I hope you give the next guy hell."

Fuck.

I stare up at the flickering fluorescent lights, so I don't break down in front of *Eliot.* I didn't think I could break down in front of anyone

CamScanner

who wasn't Phoenix, and then Audrey came along, and now what? The dam is fucking ruptured?

I hear her wounded breath again, and I'd kill for a pair of headphones with hard-rock vocals. Cracks in the voice. Yelps and shouts to drown out that sound. *Please fuck.* Or give me post-grunge with jangly guitars, delayed reverb, and loose timing. I want something that sounds like a group of friends were crammed in a room and jammed out together.

Maybe Bloc Party. TV on the Radio. We Were Promised Jetpacks. Santigold?

"What happened on the rooftop with my little sister?" Eliot suddenly asks, and I'm thankful for his forceful tone. Though, his face carries more dark confusion than threat.

"Guy showed up—"

"Not with him. With you and her," he clarifies. "She was almost hyperventilating before you showed up at the bar. I had to calm her down, then she ran from you."

Yeah, that looks...not great. "And you didn't tackle me?"

"Thank Tom. He stopped me from putting action to the thought."

Add another tally in the *I owe Tom Cobalt a compliment.* I press the back of my skull to the cinderblock wall. "She ended things with me. Because I can't give her what she wants—what we both want."

"If you really want to make a serious commitment to my little sister, then why haven't you yet?" Eliot finishes with a venomous stare.

I realize abruptly, "You don't believe I actually want one with her."

"You just lost your 'casual sex partner.' You enjoyed getting laid any time you wanted. Now that it's ended, you want her back."

"No," I grit between my teeth, fire flaming my insides. "I'm not thinking with my dick here, but thanks for the reminder that you believe all I care about is getting laid."

"Is that not all you've done?" Eliot counters. "I live with my sister. I have eyes and ears. She let you into her bed whenever you wanted, at any hour. She was eager to say *yes* because she's enamored by you."

"I didn't take advantage of—"

"You shouldn't have let her get attached to you," he cuts in with heat. "One week tops, then you should've ended it, but you care more about fucking my sister than not wounding her—"

CamScanner

"She means more to me than sex!" I shout more in frustration. "*Jesus fuck.*" I breathe hard. "I haven't wanted to hurt her. I set boundaries she agreed to, and as soon as she realized she caught feelings, she bailed." I wince as I accidentally squeeze my busted fist. "Man, the truth is, I've had feelings for her all the way back when she fucking *hated* me. But as much as I've wanted it, a relationship has felt...impossible for me." I let out a scratchy laugh at myself. "Still feels like it, but I'm trying to do the impossible for Virginia."

Maybe for myself too.

I can't keep drowning.

Eliot has a contemplative look. "Say I believe you truly want a relationship with Audrey. Then what's stopping you?"

I stare at him, not shying away. "I have so much going on in my life. Tethering someone to me right now feels like pulling them under a bottomless ocean. I'm used to the feeling of going under, but I haven't wanted to drown *her*. Adding a relationship to my life has felt irresponsible. I don't overpromise and underdeliver. I am fucking *reliable*, and to commit as her boyfriend...I would take that title more fucking seriously than the one of *student* or *musician* or *son*."

"And you can't do it," he concludes.

I have to.

"I have to find a way, man." My eyes burn, so I look away from him. Then I scrape my busted-knuckled hands through my hair and leave my laced fingers on top of my head. "I have to win this competition. Three rounds. Three days. I need the money from first place. I've needed so much *fucking* money."

Eliot has known this. "The running theory is you're saving for an apartment near MVU."

I laugh. "I wish."

He pulls his foot up against the edge of the bench, angling himself toward me, his arm draped over a knee. "Bad with finances?"

"No. I've budgeted my whole life. I'm also way better at managing money than my brother." I see us in Quincy. "He made a deal with some sketchy burnout when he was sixteen so he could buy a motorcycle off him. Blew every single penny he'd made from summer jobs mowing lawns, fixing fences, cleaning pools. My dad flipped out."

Eliot nods over and over. "Then you're in trouble."

CamScanner

Thinking about Phoenix, about what I'm trying to prevent, twists my face. "Yeah, maybe. I haven't wanted anyone's help. Not even your sister's. I didn't want to owe anyone. I guess Virginia doesn't have a monopoly on *pride*."

Yeah. Fuck my pride. What I thought I shelved this whole time.

"I just don't understand why you wouldn't go to Phoenix for help." Eliot frowns. "He's your own brother."

"I couldn't really do this *with* Phoenix. Not when I've been trying to take care of this thing for him." I push my hands through my hair again. *Fuck it.* "I've been paying off Phoenix's ex-boyfriend."

Eliot drops his foot to the ground. "Chase Tierney? Tom told me about him. Unless there's another ex."

"No. It's Chase." I explain the nudes—basically everything I spilled to Audrey, I tell Eliot in under a minute. His posture becomes less combative, like he's withdrawing all his weapons in the same sixty seconds.

Eliot lets out a deep sigh. "You should've told me sooner."

"*Again*. Did not want to give you an IOU."

"We can fix this."

"I don't want your money—"

"We won't be paying him off." He pauses, tipping his head. "Actually, we're going to need Charlie."

I dig my skull backward. "Why do we have to involve more people?"

"Because I have a habit of drawing attention to myself." He gestures around the jail cell. "Charlie doesn't, and he'll make sure this goes away quietly. It's not like we haven't had to deal with nudes before."

I frown. "What?"

Eliot starts to grin. "See, this is why you should go to the fourth-born and not the seventh with these issues. My little sister has never been in situations where she'd have nudes floating around." He points two fingers at me. "Unless you took them of her—"

"Fucking *never*. I've been more paranoid someone would take them of *me*."

"It's happened to me before," he admits. "Some unconsented. I don't care if they end up online, but this all comes with the territory of being children of icons."

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CamScanner

I nod a couple times.

"So, Birdie." He rotates fully to me. "Do you want my help?"

"I have a choice?"

"No, I'll take care of this for Tom regardless. But I want to hear you say it."

I roll my eyes, but I nod. "I want your help. I'm not kissing your feet."

His grin widens. "We'll get there."

"No, we won't."

Footsteps suddenly patter along the concrete floor. We both spin forward as a police officer arrives at our cell. "You two can go. You've been bailed out."

Thank you, Tom.

Eliot and I grab plastic bags filled with our possessions at the release window, and we don't waste any time leaving the police station.

A sleek black Range Rover idles at the curb, exhaust billowing out. Manhattan traffic fills the lane behind it, horns honking and lights flashing.

"You're riding with us," Eliot says, not asks, but he glances back at me as if to ensure I'm all in on the Cobalt Empire.

I inhale, and I hear the melodies I played at the Met, the strings from a symphony. "Yeah. I am."

"Then we'll do this tonight."

"This?"

"Chase." He's taken his phone out of the plastic bag and uses voice-to-text to say, "*Charlie. Clear your plans tonight, brother. We have an issue.* Send."

Eliot loves ripping off Band-Aids, I discover in two fucking seconds. He motions for me to go ahead while he pins the phone to his ear with his shoulder.

I jerk open the car door and slide onto one of the two facing bench seats in a limo-style cabin.

When I look up, I nearly drop the plastic bag between my knees as the wind gets knocked out of me.

Holy fucking shit.

Tom and Phoenix aren't here. My pulse kicks into high gear as deep-blue, unflinching eyes latch onto mine.

CamScanner

I'm in a car with Audrey's dad.
Connor Cobalt is facing me.
And what's worse, he just bailed me out of jail.

CamScanner

63

BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

I contain the urge to jump out of the Range Rover.

Kinney Hale was right. I make objectively *the worst* first impressions. Outside of Audrey's parents walking in on us having sex, I literally can't think of a worse way to meet her dad.

This stinks of karma. For all the times I *could've* met him. All the times I dodged and avoided.

I'm internally beating myself up with a battering ram.

"Birdie," Connor greets, and I can't gauge the temperature from her dad at all. Threatening? Nonthreatening?

He's polished with styled brown hair and a face untouched by age. My father has a neatly groomed salt-and-pepper beard, but Connor looks so much younger. I'm not sure if it's just because he's cleanshaven and has zero grays.

His tailored navy-blue suit fits him like a second skin, one ankle crossed over his knee in a relaxed position.

Yet nothing about this situation feels casual.

I find myself shifting higher against the seat. To sit straighter when he hasn't said anything but my fucking name.

"Mr. Cobalt," I say, waiting for the friendly *you can call me Connor* response—what Phoenix said he was graced with. My brain goes into overdrive when it doesn't come.

What do I say?

Thanks for bailing my ass out of jail. Oh, by the way, I know that you know I've been fucking your daughter. And she just dumped me tonight. Nice to meet you.

Hell no.

CamScanner

Thankfully I don't have to speak at all. Eliot enters, and I slide stiffly over as he climbs in on my side. He shuts the door, and I dig my phone out of the plastic bag, hoping the spotlight is on Audrey's attention-stealing brother.

"Dividing and conquering?" Eliot asks. "No Mom?"

"She's on a flight to Monaco with her sisters. Which you know and remember. Don't evade." Connor doesn't raise his voice, but the intensity strains my muscles.

Eliot looks untroubled. "Me? Evade? I'd never." He winces while snapping in the buckle.

"You broke your dominant hand," Connor says with a sigh.

So Eliot is actually left-handed.

"Not broken. No X-rays to confirm. Unless you're finally admitting to having X-ray vision." He waves his swollen hand toward Connor's eyes.

"You would downplay the injury if you could, and if you couldn't hide a physical sign of pain—which you didn't—then it's likely broken. But I'm not wasting time tonight telling you how I know things, so that's the *last* time you hear an explanation."

I am intimidated.

Officially.

The car starts moving. I check my phone. No missed calls from my parents. No texts. They're still uninformed. Guess I'm not shit out of luck tonight.

"No concern for Birdie's appendages?" Eliot says, rebounding this onto *me*. "Those hands make your daughter—"

"Hey," I cut in with wide, pissed eyes. "Where's the bus driver so I can tell him to back this up on you, Judas."

He's in a staring contest with his dad. Connor's stoic expression hasn't changed shape. Then Eliot tells him, "Before you really zero in on the consequences of my actions, let's shine a light on the justice that was finally served."

"Your mother and I didn't raise a vigilante."

"You would rather raise a villain?" Eliot counters. "Truthfully. You can't tell me what I did was *wrong*."

"In a court of law you are, Eliot." Connor passes his son a folded tissue.

CamScanner

Eliot uses it to wipe the dried blood from the corner of his lip. "What about the court of Connor Cobalt?"

"You're looking for my approval? The ends justifying the means is a moral principle. I'm immoral. You don't follow the same doctrine I do. In my court, you aren't wrong or right. You are, for lack of a better word, *fucked*."

Eliot expels a breath. "I'll be fine." He can't even ball up the tissue without wincing.

I hesitate to open the plastic bag again and make noise.

"As I've told you countless times, revenge is rarely beneficial," Connor says. "It makes you feel good. That's all."

"Beating him bloody—what my little sister *physically* cannot do herself but wants to do—will make her feel good too."

I get that. Seeing as that's half of why I pounded my fist in his face.

"Momentarily," Connor tells him. "I'm not saying I haven't punched someone for your mother. But what matters to me is how much this is going to cost you, Eliot. I can't stop them from posting your mugshot. It's public record. Your employers will see it, probably by tomorrow. It'll be all over the internet."

Fuck.

Will my mugshot spread online by association? I start thinking about the orchestra. Then my parents' reaction. I stare off at the A/C vent. Barely breathing.

"I'm aware," Eliot says, his voice flat. "I'll be doing my best to save my job tomorrow. But tonight, I revel in the pain that bastard felt. The police are pulling the security footage of the stairwell if you care to watch."

I want to disintegrate into the fucking seat. Her dad is going to see me in a bar fight. *Fuuuck.* My constricted muscles won't allow me to slouch and relax, especially not in panic.

"I've seen it," Connor says.

He's already watched it. *Awesome.*

Connor collects something from the car door. "I had to ensure the owner of the bar wouldn't sell the footage to a tabloid."

"Thank you," Eliot says more deeply, then grabs an uncapped pill bottle that Connor hands him. It's Tylenol. Eliot offers me some.

CamScanner

I shake my head, digging in the bag. I shove my things into my pocket: wallet, lighter, and a floral envelope…Audrey's letter to me.

I almost forget my fede ring. It should probably hurt more slipping it on my finger, but it doesn't hurt enough. I'm trying not to intensify the pain, but the urge arises every time I think about my mom's reaction. Her distress over this.

"Do you want ice?" Connor asks.

I unconsciously twist my ring against my knuckle.

"Birdie."

I snap out of it, realizing that was directed at me. That question was pleasant enough. Maybe her dad isn't envisioning my head on a guillotine. "No thanks," I say. "My hands aren't that bad. Eliot, over here, did most of the damage."

"My forte," Eliot says, lighthearted. Acting like I didn't just try to throw him under a pair of tires. I have a feeling backing a bus over him would take full throttle and expert steering.

Connor is staring through me.

It's unsettling. I used to wonder if the rumors were true. If *the* Rose Calloway and Connor Cobalt were automatons, more machinery than human. But I don't see how you raise a girl like Audrey while being made of nuts and bolts, feeling *nothing*, when she's so passionate about so much of the world.

Sometimes I want to see everything through her eyes, even if it's all rose-colored.

The extended silence, I don't like.

I hear her wounded breath. "Can we put on some music?" I ask him.

Connor examines me, excavating. "Does the quiet bother you?"

I struggle to pull in air. "At certain times. I start hearing other sounds in my head. Chords. Melodies." I watch Eliot pin the phone to his ear with his shoulder again.

"Of instruments?" Connor asks, appearing genuinely interested.

"Not always." Can Eliot please rejoin this conversation and take it off me?

"What sound is bothering you tonight?" He asks what most people would not even root out in five years, let alone within two seconds of meeting me.

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"Everything on the rooftop bar," I answer generically, then I freeze at a thought. "Were there security cameras up there?"

"There were."

"You watched those too?" I wonder.

"I did." He's staring through me again. "There was no audio."

Still, I can't relax. I'm replaying how his daughter stormed away from me, how I chased after her, how I picked her up in my arms, how she kept drawing away, and I kept following. Until we were both crying. Then all I can hear is that breath, *her breath.* I can't blink. "Music?" I ask, my voice too thick. "Yes, no?"

"What sound?" he asks again.

Am I in a torture chamber? Fucking *fuck.* I worry he'll know if I lie, and then he'll classify me as a liar. "I don't know if I can talk about it," I admit, more honestly.

"Was it the violence? The sounds of physical fighting?"

"No."

That seems to be enough for him. Connor drops it, and I wonder if he's found the answer by deduction. He lowers his foot to the floor and extends an arm over the back of the seat. "What's the status of you and Audrey?"

I force down a dry laugh. "You saw the security footage. That was our last interaction. You probably already know."

"I can make inferences, but I'd like to hear your perspective."

"My perspective?" I hold my thighs. "She dumped me tonight."

"Were you ever really together?" he asks, his fingers to his jaw, his eyes unyielding on mine.

Is this a test? Is he trying to get me to admit to sleeping with his daughter? I did not sign up for a professional chess match.

Oh, but I did.

I've known what the Cobalts are like. "We weren't together in any sense that would warrant me meeting you. The way this is happening is unfortunate." *To put it fucking mildly.* "I can pay the bail back—"

"Phoenix paid for your bail. I didn't want to insult you by paying for you."

I start to relax. "Thank you."

Connor slides a hand through his wavy hair. "There are very few times I've cared who my children are sleeping with. That's their

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business."

Shit, here we go.

I wait for the *but* on no oxygen.

Connor takes too long of a pregnant pause while exhuming my reaction. So I ask, "Am I one of those times?"

"She's my youngest child. What do you think?"

"I would never hurt Audrey," I say from somewhere so deep, I'm releasing all the remnants of air to profess it.

"She was hurt on the rooftop. Was that not because of you?" It's rhetorical. He saw her crying.

My nose flares. "I meant physically hurt her." I run my fingers over my lip piercings. "I would never—I could never. I'm really careful with Audrey. I've been careful. I know I'm older. I know she's eighteen."

I'm currently the same age as two of his sons: Tom and Eliot. But I'm positive Eliot has a birthday soon because Tom can't shut up about it. I have no clue if Connor cares that I'm twenty-three.

I care if he cares.

I care so much about turning things around tonight, I'm on my best behavior like Connor is all the musicians and conductors I've ever worked with and respected.

He gives nothing away, though.

Eliot, still on the phone, removes champagne from a bucket and sticks his hand in the ice.

I ask Connor outright, "Does it bother you how old I am?"

"Bothers me, no. I care more about your maturity level, which I can only gauge by being around you for longer than a thirty-minute car ride." He leans backward more coolly. "I'd like to get to know you better."

I frown since I just told him Audrey ended things with me. "Because I'm Phoenix's brother."

"Because you've made a very big impact on my daughter, and I want to know who you are and what influence you've had on her, if any."

I nod stiffly. "Bar fights aren't a typical thing for me."

"Your parents have said verbatim that you aren't aggressive."

I let out a laugh. "Aggressive like Phoenix, they mean." Pain suddenly stings like hell in my hand, and I glance down, realizing I'm

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squeezing the fuck out of my fist.

I let go.

When I train my gaze on Connor, cold suddenly washes over my face. His invasive stare feels less prying and more all-knowing.

I don't move a muscle, and I remember out loud, "You're friends with my parents."

"I am," he says unconfrontationally. "They're well-meaning. One thing Rose and I have never questioned is how much they love you and Phoenix."

"They talk a lot about us?"

"All the time."

My mouth goes dry. "Like how much about my childhood?"

"It depends on what you'd like Eliot to hear."

Eliot is partially paying attention while whispering on the phone, but I wonder if there's a chance Tom told him already. *Probably.* I haven't asked. Ignorance is fucking bliss sometimes.

I swallow hard. "They told you I've been on antianxiety meds since I was fifteen?"

"They did," he nods.

"Did they tell you why, other than I obviously have anxiety?"

"They explained what happened."

I start laughing in disbelief. My parents did not tell *Phoenix's* boyfriend's parents about how I burned myself when I was a teenager. In what context would that ever need to be brought up? "Why are they talking to you about me?"

"You're the most important person in Phoenix's life and in theirs. It'd be nearly impossible for them not to talk about you."

"Tom is the most important person in my brother's life."

"That will be true one day, just like Phoenix will be the most important person in Tom's life, but right now, they place their siblings higher."

Fucking dumb, Phoenix.

I have to stare out the window. The word *burden* is shrill in my head.

"Rose was the same way with her sisters," Connor says, naming Tom's mom. "Love isn't binary. It's not as clear-cut as right or wrong.

CamScanner

It's complex to navigate. Take it from someone who believed they could never love anyone."

He's one of the more interesting people I've ever met in my life. I have a ton of guards, but I feel myself dropping some around him.

"The love you have for your parents is just as complex," Connor says. "At some point they're going to hear about this bar fight, jail, the mugshot. Can you tolerate their disappointment?"

"Yeah." It's the first time I lie to him.

He skates his fingers across his lips, eyeing me for a long second.

"It's not like I haven't dealt with their worry before. This is bread and butter." I wish I could roll out my neck. Every muscle aches in my body. I shake my head tightly. "How do you tolerate distressing people you love?"

"It's not your burden—"

"I am the burden." I stare at him like one of his bolts came loose. "You've known I burned myself as a teenager—what parent wants to deal with that? What big brother wants to find his kid brother in their shared bedroom with a five-inch *welt*?"

Eliot has no reaction, so either he's a Tony Award–winning actor or he knew.

"Self-harm doesn't happen out of nowhere," Connor tells me. "You aren't the burden. You've been carrying one since you were very young."

I hold his gaze, barely blinking.

So Audrey's dad now knows that I'm fucked up. My golden-son cred is shattered in one night, and I don't even care. I fucking don't. But I'd rather pick his brain for another twenty minutes than weed through mine. I've started seeing little things about Audrey that are like her father. The stream of heavy logic she uses being one.

The silence stretches.

I hear her wounded breath. "Hey, about the music—"

"We need to change the drop-off location," Eliot interjects, lowering his phone. He unbuckles, then sits beside Connor to speak to the driver over the back of their bench seat.

"Why are you going to Greenwich?" Connor asks his son.

I know the answer. That's where *Chase* lives. We're confronting my brother's slimy little ex face-to-face?

CamScanner

Eliot turns toward his dad. “That’s for you to find out. Us to never tell.”

“You need the lawyers?”

“Charlie already called them.”

“Don’t do anything that’ll land you back in jail,” Connor warns. “No one can be as smart as me, but I expect you not to be that stupid.”

Eliot salutes him with his broken hand and returns to the seat beside me, sticking his fingers in ice.

Connor pulls out his phone. “You want to pick out the song, or do you want me to?” His deep-blue eyes rise to mine.

“You choose.” I’m curious to see if Bach is going to blare over the car speakers. Or maybe Handel. And then I’m floored when the unmistakable congas and simple piano of a classic rock song fill the car. The confident, raspy vocals are a relief.

I relax back into the seat and exhale a long, long breath.

“How loud?” Connor asks me.

“However loud you can bear it.”

“He has bionic ears,” Eliot jokes about his dad. “He can bear undiscovered frequencies.”

“My son likes spouting tall tales,” Connor tells me. “I’d prefer to set it to your volume, Birdie.”

I keep giving a thumbs-up until it feels like I’m wearing headphones, then I hold out a hand for him to pause. He does and eases back against the seat.

I start to laugh at the music choice. “Sympathy for the Devil” by the Rolling Stones. It says a lot about him if I read into it. Maybe he’s also like Audrey in that every little thing has meaning. The books, the music, the posters on my wall, the shirts I wear, the instruments I play, all the choices I make.

Every piece of my life says something deeper about me.

Or it could just be he likes Mick Jagger. How can I really know?

Connor grins.

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

It takes half an hour in Chase's dingy Greenwich apartment for that scumbag to not only *give* Charlie his phone, his laptop, and his extra hard drive—but literally *beg* on the floor for Charlie not to contact the record labels he works with and tarnish his reputation.

Charlie, Eliot, and I ride the elevator back down to the lobby in silence.

I'm embarrassed I let this weasel hold one over on me for months.

As I replay the torrential downpour Charlie just rained on Chase, I can't tell if my brother's ex was really that weak all along or if Charlie knows how to put the fear of God in people.

I'm still a little fucking disturbed.

Charlie taunted Chase to post the nudes right there so he could slap him with *revenge porn.* All the blood drained out of his ugly face. He was sweating profusely by the time Charlie mentioned extortion. He showed Chase some incriminating texts he had sent me, reminded him their lawyers are the best in New York, that there's nothing he could do to win.

Then he told him in graphic detail how he was going to dismantle his entire life.

Chase just wanted Charlie *gone*, I think. Like out of his life completely, as if he was a malevolent entity.

He's a part of mine, I realize. *Charlie.*

I just accepted *that* into my life. I'm not swimming in regret. Each floor we descend is another deep breath I take toward the surface.

I don't owe that scumbag a dime.

I don't need to win the competition for the money.

It's over.

CamScanner

Charlie tracks the floor numbers as we descend. “Next time, don’t wait so long to do the smart fucking thing. We have resources you don’t have.”

I let out a much rougher breath. “I didn’t want to owe you anything. Not a single one of you.”

“You don’t owe us,” Charlie retorts. “We protect each other the same way you tried to protect your brother, and if you feel indebted to us, that’s on you. We’re not coming to collect. So if we ever need your help, don’t feel obligated. In fact, forget it. Forget I was ever fucking here.”

“Forgotten,” Eliot says in a new clean shirt that Charlie brought him. “Already turning spectral.”

Charlie rolls his eyes. “Birdie, you don’t ever have to tell Phoenix. If you want to take this to your grave, you can.”

It is what I’ve wanted. For Phoenix to never have to know Chase crawled out from the painful place he’d finally put to rest.

I mull this over.

Charlie cringes at me, then Eliot. “And you two look like *shit*.”

I laugh. “We were in jail. What’s your excuse?”

Charlie looks like Phoenix on forty-eight hours of sleep deprivation. Dark circles under his eyes, unruly hair, and an expression that is so pissed off, I almost want to tranquilize him. Put him out of his fucking misery.

“My excuse?” He arches his brows. “*Living*.”

“Dark, brother,” Eliot says lightly as we step off the elevator into an underground parking deck. Charlie’s bodyguard waits near another luxury SUV. It’s the only security they brought with them.

Eliot goes ahead of us, clicking his heels together in midair like he’s on Broadway. It’s cutting through the severity with a hacksaw. My chest lightens. I start to miss Virginia and her absurd humor too.

I catch sight of Charlie’s smile as he watches his younger brother.

Then he calls out, “That’s a lot of pep for someone about to lose their job.”

“Rejoice now, cry tomorrow.” Eliot swings open the car door, then waves Charlie inside with his injured hand. “Brother.”

Charlie flips him off. “*Brother*.”

CamScanner

Eliot, surprisingly, keeps the door held open for me. "Sister's latest casualty." He holds my gaze for a long beat. "Resurrect thyself." It sounds like a demand.

This one, I definitely want to obey.



"It's not Phoenix's fault I got thrown in jail," I defend my brother at—I check the time on my phone—5 fucking a.m.

Which maybe wouldn't feel early to me anymore, considering all the moonlit mornings I tutored Audrey, but I *barely* slept. Phoenix insisted I crash at Tom's apartment on the pull-out, and to my brother's relief, I agreed with zero pushback.

It's been one of the longest nights of my life.

Pulverized heart.

Decked a motherfucker.

Handcuffed.

Met Connor Cobalt.

Threatened my brother's ex.

Yeah.

All in a New York minute.

Oh, and I have a final at 10 a.m. for my History of Chamber Music class—one I know I'll ace. I just need to *be there* to ace it.

I didn't think I'd wake up to *eight* missed calls from my parents before sleep could take hold. Plus, more texts than I wanted to count.

It shot me out of the pull-out, and I rushed to throw on the Paramore concert shirt Phoenix let me borrow after I'd showered.

I snuck out of the apartment and took the elevator to the fifteenth floor, where the five-star amenities are located.

Now I'm staring at the luxury indoor pool, sitting on a cushioned lounge chair, my bare feet on the cold black tile, and gripping a phone too tightly against my ear.

"No, no, no, no," I say in a rush, my voice echoing in the empty space. "He wasn't even on the rooftop, Dad. He did not *incite* this fight."

He heaves out a sigh. "You learned this from someone."

I can't speak for a second. Anger simmers so fast.

CamScanner

"We'll talk to Phoenix tomorrow," my mom says. "Get this cleared up."

"There's no need." I want to groan, but my throat is too tight. "My mistakes are mine. They don't belong to my brother. He doesn't need to apologize for this." Phoenix won't care. I know he won't care, but I fucking *care* that they are dragging him for this. "You can be pissed at me."

"We're not angry," she says gently. "We're just trying to understand. You were defending Tom's sister?"

"*Yes.*"

"She has *five* brothers. *Five.*" My dad's voice is sharper. "You don't need to get caught up in that. You will be the first one taking the fall."

"Your dad is right," she says. "It doesn't matter Phoenix is dating into their family. You need to look out for yourself, Bird."

I pinch my dry, burning eyes. How do I end this conversation? "This is just a lot."

My mom sucks in a breath. "If you're overwhelmed, maybe you shouldn't do another semester of grad school. We knew it'd be too much."

"I like grad school."

I chose it myself. And Audrey would've never run up to me had I not been sitting on that bench that day. I will never regret grad school or this past semester.

"You don't need a master's," my dad points out for the umpteenth time since I enrolled at MVU. "You can get a full-time position right now at the Symphony. You'll be a soloist—" He goes on and on and on.

I stare out at the rippling water, cool blue lights under the pool's surface. All the other lights are shut off. I listen to the soft hum of the pool machinery. The sun hasn't risen yet, the floor-length window revealing a dark, glittering Hell's Kitchen.

"Are you listening, Birdie?"

I blink out of a fog. "Are we talking about my career prospects or what happened tonight? Because I really need to sleep."

My mom's voice tightens in worry. "You said there's an ongoing investigation?"

"Yeah. They have to review all the security footage and get witness statements. They might reduce some of the charges afterward."

CamScanner

"But you got disorderly conduct?"

"Yeah."

"What else?" my dad asks.

"Criminal mischief and simple assault."

"Not felony assault," she says, sounding more like she's telling my dad.

"Where have we heard these charges before?" My dad's dry tone is sandpaper against my ears.

"Again, I'm not Phoenix." I stare at my feet on the black tile. "And he didn't influence me."

"You were in *jail*," my mom professes as if she'd been cuffed tonight. "It's not like you, Bird. We're really concerned." She's about to cry.

"Mom. *Mom*. I'm not in trouble." Guilt fists my insides. "Hey, there's no reason to get this upset over something that's been resolved. I'm okay. Dad, tell her I'm okay."

"He's okay, Miriam. Birdie knows better."

She sniffs. "Do you need us to come out there, honey?"

"*No*." I panic at the idea. "Don't waste your sick days seeing me. I'm *fine.* It was a dumb mistake." *One I'd make again.* I swallow a boulder in my throat. "If that's all—"

"Your hands—Philippe, his hands," she says. "He might've hurt them in the fight."

"They're fine," I cut in. "I'm gripping the phone now."

"Can you still play?" my dad asks, more apprehensively. They're holding their breath.

"Yeah, I can," I tell them the truth, flexing my right hand. The pain is more from split skin, not bone damage. I have great movement. "It won't affect playing at all." One miracle. I don't want to rehab my hands. I don't want to relearn how to use them to play the music I love.

Thankfully, I don't have to, but I pulled up the competition's website before bed. I had a suspicion that what happened tonight would nuke everything.

I was right.

Now I have to drop this bomb on my parents. What I hoped to do *tomorrow* with more sleep.

"But—" I start.

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"But what?" She's on the edge of dread, and I feel sick shoving her off.

Fuck. I sit so upright. "But I won't be able to compete on Saturday. There's an ethics policy, and I violated the code of conduct—"

"No, we've read through the competition rules," she says, her voice pitching higher. "You haven't violated anything. Just take a deep breath. You're okay."

I'm okay.

I stare off at the water.

My dad explains, "If you were charged with a felony, then you'd be ineligible."

"Your dad is even talking to one of the organizers Saturday morning when we get there. Just to put in a good word. He knows your grandfather—him and Papi are old friends from back home." From France, she means.

"You don't have to do that." I sound severely choked.

"We want to—"

"You don't need to."

"You should be doing whatever you can, especially after tonight," my dad chimes in. "This is important for your future."

I collapse backward onto the lounge chair, but it's like laying brick. My hand covers my stinging eyes while they keep going.

"We know it's not something you've been excited about," my dad says. "But this is good for you, son. You won't regret putting all your energy into this."

I should be so goddamn relieved.

I can still compete. All the months I've spent practicing aren't wasted. Where is the fucking relief?

"Just think," my mom says, "if you do well in the competition, it'll overshadow all the charges and be like they never even existed. You won't ever have to worry about them being on your record." She's trying to shovel optimism, but it feels more like she's shoveling dirt on top of me.

I can't breathe.

"This is good," my dad repeats.

"But no pressure, no pressure," she adds quickly in my silence. "Just do your best, Bird. There's no pressure at all. We know you'll do your

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best."

No pressure.

I want to laugh.

The act is impossible. My entire sternum feels caved in. I'm lucky I can reply more than monosyllables when my dad goes over the plan for Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. Because of course I will reach the final round. I've prepared *tirelessly* for all three fucking rounds already.

My dad has shown me videos of my competitors, and he's right when he says I have this in the bag.

It will be more shocking to my system if I don't win. Yet even with that unshakable confidence in myself, I'm buried beneath weight I can't pry off. My money issue is no more. Chase is dealt with. Why—why do I feel like I'm drowning?

Then I'm off the phone.

All I hear is my knifing, gasping breath. I sit back up, and I immediately pat at my thighs, digging in my drawstring pants for my lighter.

I just need...I can't...*fuck.*

Quickly, I draw out my lighter along with...I slow down at the sight of the floral envelope, folded into fours. Unopened. I blink out the cloudy haze in my eyes.

I breathe hard.

Harder.

All right, Virginia. I unfold it, then stare at the earthy green wax seal, a dove etched in the center. I gaze at it long enough for my chest to flood and for my eyes to fill.

Then I peel it open, pulling out and unfurling pink stationery paper, monogrammed with *Audrey Virginia Cobalt* at the top. Yeah. She would. She did.

She wrote in thin black pen.

I've seen her handwriting before. I initially thought, *prissy.* It still is. And I love every single whimsical loop and flourish and curl along the page as I read.

Dear Haydn,

CamScanner

I am about to do the very thing you hate. This will fill you with so much dread and misery. Prepare yourself. I am going to compliment you.

Starting with your laughter. It comes so dryly and frequently between our words. You will enjoy knowing I hate it. I hate how your laughs are firecrackers. Do you know dull seconds cannot survive when you laugh? I've yet to spend a dull second with you.

Then there is the way you appreciate art. So profoundly, so internally. I hate how the desire to crawl inside you has consumed me. It is not right to wish to unzip a human and step into their insides. It is ghastly!

You're so unique, a thousand paintings could not show every side of you. You're neither harsh nor soft. You move with purpose yet waywardness. I twist and turn trying to keep up with your direction and stride. It is maddening.

I've hated when you call me Virginia. You will be pleased to know you're the only one to ever do so. You've made me long to hear my name, knowing it's your voice speaking it into the air.

You are an excellent Road Runner.

Yet I've hated how the Road Runner teases Coyote into endless loops of demise, but then I remember, as you should too, I am not a coyote.

I have been and will always be a lion.

And this is not a love letter. I can't possibly know how to write those since I've never been in love before. I would never write one to a man who dines on a sandwich like a carcass. This is so you know how deeply, how tragically, I loathe all of who you are.

Éternellement,

Virginia

P.S. Your quick wit has nothing on me, barbarian.

CamScanner

I rub at my wet eyes, and I'm crying and laughing, my chest bucking with the noise and unspooling the tightness.

Not a funny letter, she said. Then she's *unintentionally* one of the only people who can make me smile through scalding tears.

I laugh to myself again and inhale a lungful of air, staring at her beautiful handwriting. She wrote this before she realized she'd fallen in love with me. "How long were you convincing yourself, Virginia?" I rasp out quietly.

All I feel is her love for me, and I reread each syllable and hear her cadence against my ears, the rhythm of her words like hands lifting me up above the surface. Music is the only thing that has ever made me feel this way in my life.

"Okay, Bird," I breathe out. *Okay.*

I fold up the letter, then stare at the lighter on the cushion for a full minute before I reach for my phone. The nighttime is shifting into dawn, the indigo-blue darkness thinning behind the high-rises, but I don't gaze out the window when I video call my brother.

Phoenix answers on the third ring.

He's lying in bed, disoriented and squinting into the light of his phone, hoisting it higher from his face instead of lowering the brightness. It gives me a view of Tom asleep against his tattooed chest.

"Bird?" Phoenix rubs at the corner of his eye. "Man, what time is it?"

"Early." I try not to croak out. "Too early to see you naked in bed with your little boyfriend."

Tom mumbles out of sleep, "Whatever, dude, you would die for me."

I laugh. It feels good to laugh, but it's too difficult to speak right away. My lack of comeback snaps Tom's eyes wide open, and Phoenix jerks forward at the screen, saying, "Wait—where the fuck are you?"

Not in the living room. I scrape a hand through my hair, trying to untense but I still can't. "Phoenix."

"Just tell me where." He's throwing himself out of the bed. His phone goes dark, probably in the mattress while he jumps into clothes.

"Indoor pool. Fifteenth floor." I hang up so he can't hear me gasp for air. I take several controlled, deep breaths before Phoenix arrives like a bullet train. The door bangs shut behind him.

CamScanner

I unbury my head from my hands and sit upright. He only has on black cotton pants. Didn't even throw on shoes. He goes from a forceful stride to a sprint. I jolt up from the lounge chair as he seizes the lighter off the cushion.

"Jesus Christ, Birdie—"

I shove his chest *hard*.

He anticipates it, barely staggering. We're hot, heavy breaths of pain and fury, and I want to unleash on my brother because I can't unleash on our parents.

Yet part of me resists using him like a punching bag. Phoenix wants me to, and not just selflessly. He is all pent-up rage that wants expelled too. So when he comes at me, it's with the intention to fight.

We slam into each other.

Wrenching, pulling, wrestling one another onto the black tile near the pool's edge. Never throwing fists. He's always been stronger than me, but since I've stopped drumming in a band, I've grown weaker. His strength is felt off the rip. I can't pin him down.

I knee him in the ribs. He has me close to a chokehold. Until I swing out, and I bring him into the pool with me. We splash into the warm water.

Dunking each other. Grunting, growling, yelling. We're letting off enough steam to power an engine. When my grip finally loosens and I let him hold me under for longer than a few seconds, he unclenches his hands. I fight to the surface, but he's already dragging me up.

I shove his chest one last time before we pull ourselves to the shallowest end with heavy, ragged, spent breath.

Exhaustedly, we fall back into the partially submerged stairs and sit in the pool.

Phoenix pushes his wet hair back. He stakes his concerned brown-blue eyes on me. I stare back at him, my chest heaving.

"I didn't," I say, still hauling in air. "I called you so I wouldn't."

Raw emotion reddens his gaze. "You're going to make me ask?"

"No." I push down my own emotion. "I'll tell you." I wipe water out of my face. "I'll tell you everything."

"Everything?" His brows shoot up. "As in—"

"My fun financial pickle. Yeah. Your world is about to get rocked, so maybe you should call Tom to hold you or something."

CamScanner

"Shut the fuck up."

"I'm serious," I say darkly.

He grinds his jaw. "Just tell me. Start with whether you've burned this year before I go out of my fucking mind."

I rest back on my elbows. "I did. Just once. After I lost my scholarship."

Phoenix looks torn up. He hides very little on his fucking face. "Your meds?"

"I'm taking them. I just got off the phone with Mom and Dad. It was…a lot. It's always a lot knowing what I want is never right and saying *no* to them is fucking impossible."

He nods and props back on his elbows too. "I just learned why I can't sleep." He snaps his gaze to me. "I have *anxiety*."

I start laughing.

He glares. "I'm glad this is fucking funny." He splashes water at me.

I splash back, my laughter softening. "Man, it's about time you copy me."

He has a shadowy smile. "I'd take better things from you if you could be imitated."

"My jawline."

"Fuck off."

"Just kidding, I know it's my dick. Tom would be hap—"

He pushes my side hard, and I fall into the water, laughing. We're both smiling when I sit back up, but it fades fast.

Phoenix stares out at the dawning sky. "Mom and Dad stress me the fuck out all the time. I constantly think about mitigating whatever reactions they're going to have to me, to you, to everything. I can't even shut my mind off at night."

I gaze out too.

His insomnia is rooted in the same place as my issues. My brain grinds against the realization. Especially knowing half of what he fights off is their hold on me.

My nose flares as I stare into our past. I see my brother finding me hurting myself in our youth. I see him walk around like a coked-out zombie.

"Same story, different day, right?" I say, then look over at his sharp, angst-ridden features. "I'm changing the story."

CamScanner

It breaks Phoenix open for a second because I've never had the courage to try. He buckles toward his knees, his fingers in his eyes. I put my arm around his back.

"Yeah, you're really going to need Tom for the next part."

Phoenix deserves to know about his ex, and whatever emotional fallout happens, he'll deal. I can't bury a secret this heavy in my grave.

CamScanner

65
AUDREY COBALT

There is no good logic in tiptoeing to my brothers' apartment before sunrise. Other than I know Birdie is sleeping over tonight, and my mangled heart wants to ensure he's okay after being released from jail.

Receiving texts that say, *Birdie is fine. Go to bed,* is not enough. Charlie could also embellish a little and learn to use adjectives.

My eyes are puffy, swollen. Still, I can see fine, even in the darkened bachelor pad. So when I come upon the abandoned pull-out sofa, sheets crumpled and no signs of Birdie, my shoulders deflate.

I made a mistake, didn't I?

I shouldn't have come here to check on him. I should've gone to bed. And why would he want to see me anyway? I...destroyed him. I am a *heartbreaker.* On two counts. I've been shattering my own tonight. It squeezes painfully now.

I spin around, about to leave. Instead, I go clean my brothers' fridge, which is well-organized, but I rearrange the apples and pears. I glance at the front door.

Walk through right this instant.

He does not.

I shut the fridge. Then I set the coffee pot to brew, taking my time scooping the grounds. I scrub down the counter with Lysol. I wipe fingerprints off wine glasses for Beckett. Anticipation balloons when I hear a creak, and then it pops when nothing happens.

Just when I consider sweeping the floors, the door opens.

I inhale.

Birdie comes inside. He turns and freezes at the sight of me.

My heart has stopped. Our eyes are wide on each other.

CamScanner

"You're wet," is all I can say.

"You're here." He checks over his shoulder, then closes the door. "Shouldn't you be princess-and-the-peaing it over in your own bed, Virginia?"

"This is my brothers' apartment," I defend. "I was just tidying." I snatch the Lysol bottle as evidence.

"Tidying, okay." He places the letter I gave him near the coffee pot. Then he squeezes his drenched shirt. He's dripping puddles.

"I'll get you a towel."

"Don't."

My heart pangs. "I will get the floor a towel," I rephrase.

"That's not what I meant." He peels off his wet Paramore tee, his abs and tattoos coming into view.

I wait in overgrown anticipation. "Are you going to say what you meant?"

He smiles a little. Just a little. But it's enough. "I meant *don't leave.*" He balls up his shirt and wrings it out in the sink.

"I can put it in the dryer." I step near to help.

He raises a hand for me to stop. We breathe harder in unison, and then he asks, "Are you okay?"

I blow backward and clutch the kitchen counter behind me. "You were the one thrown in jail." I study the tension threaded through his frame. "In all sincerity, I came here to ask you that."

"Let's rewind to why I was arrested. Your brother and I beat that loser to shit because of what he said about *you.* Not anything he did to us." He hasn't abandoned my gaze, even if this is a skin-piercing subject, maybe especially because of it.

I breathe. "I punctured his ego calling him a bad lay. He went on the attack and launched it back. Likely to incite you too." Guy was watching Birdie when he said those things about sleeping with me. "He wanted his words to hurt me. I'm more upset they did." I hold on to his gaze. "At least it confirms he knew I was a virgin. Even if I've hated admitting he was my first." It feels more cathartic baring my soul out loud, even more so to Birdie.

He scans my cotton nightgown but mostly my face. "You've been crying all night?"

"Not over Guy. I wouldn't shed another tear for him."

CamScanner

"Over me?"

"Over the loss of you," I say from a tender depth.

He scrapes his tongue against his molars. His eyes are as red-rimmed as mine. "You have no idea how badly I want to hold you right now."

My lungs expand. "Then why don't you? You can—"

"*Virginia*," he scolds, hoisting both palms as I've stepped forward again.

I retreat, digging my spine and fingers into the counter.

"You don't want to be with me until I can commit to you. As much as I hate it, I respect it." He rakes back his wet brown hair. "Not enough has changed in the past eight or nine hours since you laid down the gauntlet. I'm not pretending it did just so I can kiss you."

I lift my chin. "I will not grow weak and erase the boundary I've set, Haydn."

"It's okay if you do. I'll redraw it for you."

My eyes well. I didn't think I could cry anymore tonight. I'm afraid I'm falling more and more in love with him. This is the very inverse of what I need to do. "I should go." I push off the counter, then pause.

He's rigid against the sink. Not allowing himself to move closer to me.

My brain knows to leave, but my body doesn't listen. "Why are you wet?" I ask, hushed. Even from here, he smells faintly of chlorine.

He casts a quick look to the door. "Took a dip in the pool. Tom and Phoenix are still there. I just told them about Chase."

My lips part, and my head whirls with a thousand questions. "How are they handling it?"

"Better than I expected. Phoenix is still crushed as hell, but his ex being a fucking rat is different this time."

"How so?"

"He has your brother."

Now I smile a little. "They're a power couple, Phoenix and Tom."

Birdie grimaces. "Yeah, let's not tell your brother that. His ego still needs major weed whacking."

"I will put the fertilizer away."

He almost smiles, then he's rubbing the back of his head. His chest looks tight. "So painful honesty time, Virginia. I was very close to burn-

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ing myself tonight, but it had to do with a phone call to my parents—not anything you said to me, okay? In case you find out from our brothers, I need you to know it wasn't you."

I nod repeatedly, my pulse racing. "But you didn't?"

"I didn't," he confirms.

I fall back into the counter. The coffee beeps beside me, brewed on the timer. "I never really told you why I came to New York," I realize. "This early, I mean."

He grips the sink with one hand. "I just assumed you wanted to be with your brothers."

"You aren't wrong. The house was so quiet…" My eyes flicker to the hallway where Ben sleeps, then I lower my voice. "The night of the frat party, Ben went missing."

Birdie frowns. "Missing or kidnapped?"

"Missing. He'd thought he was the cause of my drug overdose, so he left thinking if he no longer existed, then no harm would come to me. His OCD is a little like the butterfly effect. It makes him believe he's the cause of all bad things, a natural disaster to his family, to me."

"Fuck," he breathes, skimming me up and down, then he stares off in thought. "Kinney—she said she knew someone who tried to take their life."

My brows crease in surprise. "She told you that? Kinney rarely tells strangers about Xander."

"Xander Hale," he nods. "Her older brother." The Hales crop up in the media more than my family, but also, Xander lives on the eighteenth floor of this high-rise.

I nod back. "She was likely referring to Xander. Both our brothers almost left the world. In such awful ways." I spin the necklace at my throat. "So when Ben came home, Kinney and I agreed I shouldn't waste time. I should be here with my brothers sooner than I planned, even if it meant being away from her." I try not to cry. "It's been hard. I miss her."

"You'll get her back before you know it," he reminds me. "The summer is right around the corner, and it'll be Audrey and Kinney in Hell's Kitchen together." He knows Kinney got accepted to MVU, and she's moving in with Xander in June.

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"It will be...marvelous," I agree, trying to ignore the heartache of losing Birdie in the same picture. I whirl around to the coffee pot. "Maybe we'll go on blind dates." I take out a mug. "To the Opera. Or to a superhero movie, Kinney likes those." I pour coffee as my throat tries to close. "She'll know if my date stinks." I wait for him to joke about Kinney being a bloodhound.

He's silent.

So I peer backward.

Birdie has a pained expression on the floor, but he lifts his steel-gray eyes up to mine. "I'm going to do something I've never done before, and if I come out of this, I would like if you'd give me a chance."

I draw in a breath, unable to look away. "Are you about to grovel, Haydn?"

"Maybe. Yeah." His gaze fastens so strongly to mine. He clutches the counter again, as if resisting a step toward me. "Hopefully I'll do it well."

"So far I'd rate it a solid B."

His lips quirk. "You're going to learn something soon."

"And what's that?"

"I've never gotten a B in my life. Whatever I need to do to improve a grade, I will."

My lungs swell. "How will I know if you've come out of this... thing?"

"You'll know." He pushes off the counter. "Okay, skedaddle." He motions to the door.

I huff. "This is my brothers' apartment." I try not to fluster as he lifts up his slipping waistband.

He catches me staring at his muscles and gives me a chastising look.

"I stand by what I said." I clutch my mug tighter between two hands. "Do not shoo me. I belong here as much as you do."

He grinds away a smile. "Beat it, Virginia. You aren't sleeping here tonight. I am. Take your coffee and your haughty attitude out the fucking door."

"I could dry the flo—"

"I know how to *tidy.* Go." He tosses a dish towel on the floor, using his foot to mop up the puddles. He groans when he sees I haven't budged. "You can't stay."

CamScanner

"One coffee. A coffee klatsch, if you will. We are just talking."

"If you stay around any longer, I'm going to have to call you my friend, and you made it clear you don't want to be friends with me. So fucking *go*." He points more harshly at the door.

"That is very mean," I note. "But I will go."

"Without delay."

"On my own accord," I counter. "And without delay. Watch me."

"Watching." His eyes redden a little more.

I walk backward with my coffee. Each footfall more strained, a tad bit more painful. It's unknown when I will see him again and in what capacity.

His chest expands and contracts.

"Bye, bye, Birdie," I whisper.

"Audrey," he calls out as I open the door. I wait and wait and wait, and he says, "Good luck."

"On my competition?" I swallow the rising lump and nod. "And you, on yours."

He nods back. "Good luck on falling out of love with me. You have less than a week to try and succeed."

His words gently push me out the door in a daze.

And I know...I hope I am destined to fail.

CamScanner

66
BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

The International Stravinsky Competition is held at Lincoln Center, one of the most prestigious performing arts complexes in the world. Right here in New York.

Today.

I've crossed this plaza so often, my feet have probably touched every inch of the pale granite surrounding the cluster of iconic performance halls. Not only does Lincoln Center's Whitney Theater house the New York Ballet Company, but you've also got the Metropolitan Opera House and a very famous music hall where the Manhattan Symphony resides.

Being here is as familiar as home.

Still, I'm anxious, even sitting down. I stay in the plaza, where at its center, water arcs out of the modern fountain, mist catching the afternoon light.

It feels like she's here.

Virginia.

I'm seated on the cool stone rim of the fountain, a book folded in my hand. I read a few pages of *Little Women* which has begun to remind me more and more of her before I hear, "Birdie?" in a high-pitched tone of worry.

My ribs instantly constrict.

I stuff the worn novel in my back pocket and stand.

My parents rush toward me as if I'm on fire and they need to find the nearest blanket to smother the life-threatening flames.

"I'm okay," I say, a knee-jerk response.

Starting off great.

CamScanner

My dad has a tight, apprehensive expression. The sharp lines of his face are visible beneath his trimmed beard. Besides the scruff, Phoenix looks so much like our dad. Very French. Very St. Pierre. Angular features, nearly black hair, and pale skin.

But not as pink and fair as my mom who is so Irish. Probably not shocking coming from Boston. I took after her side of the family. The O'Tooles. Warmer brown hair and squarer jawline.

Though she has a soft, delicate face.

Something I've tried to never break.

She's tall, close to five-ten, and when she greets me, I wrap an arm around her shoulder in a loving side hug. She hangs on to my waist for dear fucking life, then pats my chest with the tautest hand. "Why aren't you inside? Your start time is in half an hour?" She has to know by now...right?

My dad, I think, knows.

He's staring at my snake bite lip piercings. At the green long-sleeved tee tied around my waist. Sure, I have on formal slacks and a white button-down, but the leather jacket is a far cry from performance attire.

His silent disappointment is as loud and excruciating as a jackhammer chewing through concrete. I have never enjoyed hearing the sound.

My mom's is similar to helicopter rotors, a pounding, rhythmic noise that I can take for a few seconds, but it will make me go insane.

Until I've had enough and I relent.

I can't relent.

Not today. Not anymore. Not ever again.

"Where's your cello?" she asks, and I let her go. She backs up slowly to stand beside my dad. Tourists and New Yorkers mill around the plaza fountain, people everywhere doing their own thing, going their own way.

I want to go mine.

"I didn't bring it," I tell them.

She sucks in a breath. "We can borrow one. Maybe we can ask the organizers to switch your start time too." She catches onto my dad's hand. "Philippe?"

"Why are you doing this?" he asks me.

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"I—"

"Was this Phoenix's idea?"

"*No*," I growl. "This was my idea. You knew I didn't want—"

"But you told him you were going to drop out of the competition? He supported it?"

My mom takes out her phone. "There's still time, Philippe. You can borrow your dad's jacket, Bird."

"I'm not competing, Mom," I say in a controlled breath. "And this isn't about Phoenix. Did he support *me*? Yeah, he did. That's what he always does. Support me in what I want, and I'm not playing today."

My dad expels an indignant noise. "You're being a child."

"No, I'm being a grown fucking adult," I retort. "I can place boundaries everywhere in my life. *Everywhere*. Except when it comes to the two of you, because I love you and I'm afraid to hurt you and I appreciate everything you've done for me—"

"Have you?" Pain flares in his eyes. He works his jaw.

I work mine, already feeling like I might hurl.

"Your dad has put so much time into this," my mom informs me. "He's been—"

"I didn't ask him—"

"Don't cut your mother off," he says, something I've heard a thousand times. Toward Phoenix.

I drag my hands down the sides of my face.

"You've worked so hard," she says. "Don't throw it all away. What for? It might feel overwhelming now, but once it's over, you'll realize how worthwhile it was."

"You have to push yourself," my dad says, more consolingly. "Whatever is telling you that you *can't*, you have to remind yourself you can."

"You have to listen to me." I drop my hands, and before my dad talks, I shout, "Let me speak!"

He side-eyes a few heads that turn toward the fountain and us, then he surrenders with a nod.

The splash of the water calms my pulse, and I take a giant breath. "I don't know what I want to do with my future, but I do know I don't want you to decide it for me. I don't want your help anymore. I don't need it."

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My mom's chin quivers. "You don't mean that." Her fingers press against her trembling lips.

My eyes feel inflamed. I open my mouth, about to downplay what I meant so my mom's tears don't form, but for once, I'm glad my dad interjects. It stops me from caving.

"What's the plan, Birdie?" he asks with so much severity, you'd think we were under an EF5 tornado warning. "No plan at all? Really?"

"Yeah." I nod more and more strongly. "Maybe I'll go on tour with Phoenix. Maybe I'll help him and Tom with their second album. Maybe I'll be back in a rock band. Maybe I'll compose a score for another film and finish out grad school. I'm twenty-three." I point at my chest. "I don't have to have it all figured out right now. I don't want to figure it out anymore. I just want to live my life without feeling like I need to know who I'm going to be twenty years down the line. Let me fucking live, *please*."

"That's what we're doing," my mom says, a tremor in her voice. "We just want what's best for you. We love you so much."

"I know. I know." I clear a knot out of my scratchy throat. "This wouldn't be this hard if I wasn't grateful for everything you have done. You got me to a place where I have so many opportunities. But I also worked my ass off for them. I can decide which ones I want to take."

My dad can't stop shaking his head. "You don't want to flush everything down the drain, son. Trust me. You will regret this—"

"Then it's my regret. Not yours."

"Just hear us out," my mom starts again.

"I've heard you, Mom. I promise, I've heard you. You need to hear me." They will keep going on and on and on. I know this will never stop. I know what I have to do. And I say from somewhere too deep, "I'm telling you that all of this is hurting me. *You* are *hurting* me."

Her face contorts in agonized confusion. "We've only ever…*no*, we aren't. How could…?"

I barrel on. "I've started burning myself again, Mom. And I know the first time, I said it wasn't about you and Dad. Because I didn't want to hurt you both. But when I can't say *no* to you, when you push back like this and I have to give in, I can't fucking breathe. You have to stop

CamScanner

because I don't think I'll ever stop if I don't have control over my own life."

She sobs, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Birdie." I want to comfort her after hurting her, but I step back and remember she has my dad.

He brings her into his chest, rubbing her back. "It's okay, Miriam. He'll be okay." He is in severe pain. His eyes are turning bloodshot. He lets out one fragile breath. "Do what you need to do, Birdie. We want you to be healthy." It's a soft acceptance, followed with, "We love you. We'll talk later."

We will.

But this is the start.

On my way out of the plaza, I scrape my wet eyes with the heel of my palm. Overwhelmed. Fucking relieved.

This is about as good as I could've hoped for.

They let me go.

Guilt will try to run me over. I already sense it creeping up behind me. But I have good distractions today. I video call my brother while I skip stairs down into the subway station.

Yesterday, I had to practically *shove* Phoenix on the plane so he'd make his show in Santiago. The Carraways are on the South American leg of their tour, and like hell was I going to let him disappoint all those fans in Chile for this.

I push through the stainless-steel turnstile and follow the tiled corridor when Phoenix answers with his signature dark scowl.

I start to laugh. "So you're not going to believe this..." I smile even more seeing his smile rise faster and faster.

Phoenix nods to me with an indescribable amount of pride in his eyes. No competition win could ever beat that.

We talk for a short bit. He's going to put his phone on airplane mode so our parents don't disturb him tonight. I'll probably do the same. So this is the last chat I'll have with my brother today.

As soon as I reach the platform, I hear the intercom about a train being down. "*Fuck*," I curse.

"Is that yours?"

"Yeah. *Fuck, fuck, fuck*. I'm already late as it is." I fly back through the corridor and thrust through the turnstile.

Please let me not miss this.

CamScanner

I ascend the stairs out of the station, and I run.

CamScanner

67
AUDREY COBALT

"What are you doing?" I hiss at Charlie as we embark on another round in the collegiate tournament. Competitors have been zipping in and out of classrooms for new head-to-heads against dozens of teams.

Nationals are upon us, and the most fortuitous thing about today is the location.

It's held at MVU this year, and the national committee also reserved an entire academic building for the competition.

Delaney Music Hall. Where I've been countless mornings, being tutored by Birdie.

I've stopped taking so much stock in signs, but this one is too bright to ignore. Chasing my quiz bowl dreams this year was meant to be.

No regrets, only moments to triumph.

Except Charlie is buzzing in so *slowly* with every new match-up. "Are your fingers injured?" I ask him while we settle at a mahogany table in a new classroom. "Do you have sympathy pain for Eliot?"

"How would that make sense when Eliot didn't break his fingers and I can't feel sympathy?" He forces a tight smile at me.

Eliot broke two metacarpals, which are technically the bones in his hand. "Well, the only other reasonable explanation is that you are purposely sabotaging us." I gesture toward Ben and Harriet as they take their chairs at our team table.

We've yet to encounter MVU Team A. I know Guy is here since a few competitors in the halls were muttering about someone with a broken nose. I'd almost hoped he'd forfeit in shame, but knowing he's not defeated yet just makes me want to execute the fatal blow.

That said, Charlie *really* needs to pick up his game.

CamScanner

"I'm not sabotaging our team," Charlie says in annoyance. "Believe me when I say that, so I don't have to repeat myself ten hundred fucking times."

"Something must be wrong. Do you need water? A bathroom break?" I gasp. "Gingersnaps." I dig into my purse.

Charlie shuts his eyes and pops the button of his wrinkled white dress shirt.

On the other end, Ben angles toward us, his arm around Harriet. "How many rounds until we face off with him?" He's been on edge about seeing Guy, still protective of me and his girlfriend.

Yet he's made the tough choice already and signed with an NHL team. We'd all leapt when we heard he accepted the offer from the New York Rooks. Tom literally jumped on Ben, and I swear Beckett shed a little tear of pride. He so rarely cries.

Ben must've fought through his OCD to choose now, even before any resolutions with Guy.

I hope he feels even better once he realizes Guy is a nonthreat. We'll have him with his tail between his legs. Cowering in defeat.

I'm sure of it.

Harriet is also eager to crush Guy's ego in competitive combat.

We've looked forward to this moment together.

Last night, we drank homemade sangria and punctured his atrocious face repeatedly on Tom's dartboard. Stabbing it took the edge off the nerves of today. It made my no-contact with Birdie all week a little more bearable too. All my brothers have tried to keep me preoccupied so I don't wallow.

Charlie less so.

But he is here now.

Helping us *demolish*.

I bow toward Ben and explain, "The way we're stacked, there's a chance we're all knocked out before we even match up." I hand him my phone. I'd snapped a photo of the bracket when we passed tournament headquarters, stationed on the first floor.

"That might be a good thing," Ben says, returning my phone.

It's the last we speak. A team from Duke is at the opposing table, and the moderator begins announcing us.

CamScanner

Harriet and I scoot closer to our buzzers. The boys could really learn something from our form. We are excelling. Case in point, we dominate this preliminary round.

Onto the next one in the adjacent room.

MVU Team B vs. Stanford.

"A letter to the Tudor court described this figure as 'the nurse to all rebellions in the province for forty years,'" the moderator reads the tossup. Not a science or sports question, this one is up to me or Charlie, as the generalists on our team.

Stanford listens intently.

My fingers tingle.

"As a fierce defender of her clan and the region they ruled, this figure defended against encroaching English forces during the Tudor reconquest of Ireland. After her ships were seized and members of her family imprisoned—"

Charlie taps his buzzer. "Grace O'Malley."

"Correct to MVU Team B for fifteen points."

Charlie whispers near my ear, "You knew that one."

"I did not," I snap. This is not the time for a sibling quarrel! Though, I do know all about pirates—including Ireland's legendary "Pirate Queen"—more out of a theatrical fascination than a historical one.

The next tossup. "After a battle involving Baron Zemo's Adhesive X, this character became frozen in ice. This character's virtually indestructible shield is made from an accidental vibranium-steel alloy."

I buzz fast. "Captain America."

"Correct." *Kinney would be so proud.* "MVU for fifteen—"

"America's ass!" a boy heckles. I beam in delight. I know that pop culture reference. Light chuckles ripple through the sparse audience. Security has been turning spectators away every round, so we're not at an unfair disadvantage.

"The earliest known use of this instrument was in 1739 when Handel used one in a production of *Saul*—"

I buzz. "The glockenspiel."

"Correct to MVU."

The music tossups are my favorite, most of my confidence existing there. I wonder how Birdie's competition is go—I blink out of the thought.

CamScanner

Focus, Audrey.

Harriet answers, "Magnesium."

"Correct to MVU."

We beat Stanford and win the next four preliminary rounds this morning. Charlie is withdrawing more, even after eating three cookies, so I sharpen my concentration once our lunch break ends. Especially since we've moved on from the prelim games into the quarterfinals.

If we lose now, the tournament is over for our team.

My heart speeds, then flutters the moment I walk into the familiar practice room and see the stone fountain outside the window. More than just two metal chairs fill the intimate space. New tables are set out for the competition. Yet my eyes draw to the scuffed floorboards and the spot where Birdie and I shared our first kiss.

It's almost sacrilege to be here without him.

I settle at the table, nerves rocketing down my body. "He kissed me here," I whisper frantically to Charlie on my right. "*Birdie*."

Charlie cringes like I said Birdie fucked me against the table doggy-style. "It's a *room*. Not the living embodiment of your pitiable love life."

"It is a memory. I am sitting in a memory. *Many* memories, most of which I should be shelving so I can fall out of love—"

"I might take a backseat on this one."

"Pardon?" My eyes explode as Charlie rocks backward on two legs of his chair. His fingers threaded nonchalantly over his chest. There is nothing nonchalant about quarterfinals!

"No, you can't. *Charlie*," I whisper, more fiercely, and tug his arm. He falls forward. "I take it back. I will never bring up my pitiable love life ever again."

"*Sister*," Charlie says intensely.

"Yes?"

"You don't need me to win."

"Yes, I do, Charlie. Feel my pulse." I put my wrist in his hand. "Feel."

He humors me. "You're alive."

"I am going to *die. Please* don't put this all on me. Please. Not in this room," I whisper faster as Ben and Harriet race in together from lunch just in the nick of time.

They take their seats at our table as the moderator picks up the microphone.

CamScanner

Focus, Audrey.

Harriet answers, "Magnesium."

"Correct to MVU."

We beat Stanford and win the next four preliminary rounds this morning. Charlie is withdrawing more, even after eating three cookies, so I sharpen my concentration once our lunch break ends. Especially since we've moved on from the prelim games into the quarterfinals.

If we lose now, the tournament is over for our team.

My heart speeds, then flutters the moment I walk into the familiar practice room and see the stone fountain outside the window. More than just two metal chairs fill the intimate space. New tables are set out for the competition. Yet my eyes draw to the scuffed floorboards and the spot where Birdie and I shared our first kiss.

It's almost sacrilege to be here without him.

I settle at the table, nerves rocketing down my body. "He kissed me here," I whisper frantically to Charlie on my right. "*Birdie*."

Charlie cringes like I said Birdie fucked me against the table doggy-style. "It's a *room*. Not the living embodiment of your pitiable love life."

"It is a memory. I am sitting in a memory. *Many* memories, most of which I should be shelving so I can fall out of love—"

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CamScanner

MVU Team B vs. Harvard

Months ago, I played this exact team at an invitational and conquered, so there is no reason I shouldn't now. In fact, I am better than I was. More prepared, more—

I buzz. "Eleanor of Aquitaine." I do not wait for Charlie.

"Correct to MVU, fifteen points."

My spirits rise. *I can do this.*

"This composer's witty operettas satirized Wagner and Meyerbeer while capturing the hedonistic spirit of Second Empire Paris—"

I buzz. "Jacques Offenbach."

"Correct."

I smile to myself. I loved learning about Offenbach. Birdie and I watched videos of the "cancan" together since Offenbach's "Infernal Gallop" from *Orpheus in the Underworld* is most associated with the dance. He said he'd seen the Moulin Rouge in Paris when he was young, just like I had, and I started imagining us sitting in the theater together as the music—

"Correct to Harvard, fifteen points."

Charlie kicks my ankle, then glares.

My cheeks roast. Love will not distract me. *I will not let it.* I lock in for the remainder of the match, after I kick Charlie back. It's only fair since he's not pulling his weight.

We miss several. Harvard is an amazing team, and Charlie is still slacking. When we sneak a win, I bounce out of the chair. Politely.

I subdue my enthusiasm and shake their defeated hands. "Good match. Good game. You were wonderful."

Ben and Harriet do the same. Charlie does not touch them.

We're out the door and told the semifinals will be held in the concert hall. Same music building, just stadium seating. *Nothing we haven't done before*, I remind myself with a steadying breath.

The other quarterfinal rounds are still in session. We apparently ended early, so it's not crowded when we descend the gothic marble staircase.

I slide my hand against the dark banister. My heart tugs remembering all the times I chased after Birdie down these stairs. How he'd glance backward to see if I was still there.

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CamScanner

Sunlight pierces the stained glass depicting a lyre, casting jeweled tones across the white marble. This will be the last I think of him. This will be. *This will*, I assure myself.

"Virginia."

Or it won't.

I clench the banister and go still.

He's ascending the staircase with labored breath, his expectant, resolute eyes on mine. He only shifts his gaze as Charlie passes without a second glance. Ben and Harriet follow with smiles sent toward me and Birdie, which stirs more emotion in me than I care to explain.

Birdie stops one stair below, still taller than me by inches. "You're in prelims?"

"Quarterfinals," I say in a single breath.

His brows jut up. "Quarter—you made it through to semis?"

I'm in a trance, nodding. "How are you here? Your competition."

"How long do you have between games?" He clutches the railing beside my hand, our fingers nearly brushing. "I don't want to keep you."

My heart enlarges, then squeezes. "Let me check." I open the schedule on my phone.

"Actually," he says, drawing my gaze to his. "That's a lie. I do want to keep you, Virginia."

I try to breathe. "Fifteen minutes. I have fifteen minutes."

"Do you think that's enough time for you to introduce me to your mom?"

It crashes into me like sea water against a cliffside, mist spraying against my cheeks, waking me. I'm utterly speechless for a moment. "You…want to be introduced…to my mother?"

He nods, exhaling hard. "Yeah. Introduce me."

"As my brother's boyfriend's brother?"

"I know you love that, Virginia. But I was thinking more as your boyfriend." He searches my stunned eyes more rapidly. "If you still want that?" He pauses. "Unless you stopped loving me."

"You think I already did?"

He raises his brows. "You are a quick learner."

"I didn't learn that." My hand inches closer to his on the railing, eager and nervous. "I don't know how to fall out of love with you, Birdie. Truthfully, I hope to never learn how."

CamScanner

His eyes redden. “Me too.” He hooks his fingers over mine, and the warmth spreads through me.

“What’s changed?” I ask him.

“Everything. But I’m going to need more than fifteen minutes to tell you, and I’d rather most of that time go to meeting your mom.”

I don’t need the details, not when I trust him, body and soul. Love is like walking a plank, and I find the danger as riveting and galling as Birdie is.

So it should be no surprise that I say, “You can keep me, so long as I can keep you.”

His eyes speak only love. “Éternellement.” *Eternally.*

It swells inside me. My lips part in a wanting breath, and his expression comes undone at the sound. “*Audrey*,” he groans, then pries my hand off the railing.

He doesn’t let go of me. He’s holding my hand. “Where? *Where?*”

“The concert hall,” I snap into focus and gather myself. “I am not unraveled.”

“Definitely not.”

I smile off his. “Follow me, Haydn.” I tug him forward with an elegant descent, hand in hand, but he ends up leading, so I don’t dawdle.

I love his pace.

I love how he moves in the world.

And I love that when we enter the grandiose concert hall, he never falters toward the burgundy theater chairs where my mother chats with my father.

That’s not all. In the same row as my parents are so many family members, here to support. Not just Eliot and Beckett, but also Jane, Thatcher, and Baby Maeve. Plus, aunts and uncles and cousins. Like the Hales—Kinney and Xander and their two older siblings, along with their partners.

It would intimidate almost anyone. Add in the fact that they all carry notoriety, it should topple Birdie backward, or at least give him some pause.

Yet he hasn’t hesitated.

He truly wants to be my boyfriend.

He wants to be with me.

He wants me in full unbridled capacity.

CamScanner

Euphoria.

I am floating on a euphoric high. Barely even cognizant when Birdie leads me into the narrow row and my mother and father stand. Dressed impeccably, as always. Her in a classic formfitting black dress with heels. Him in a tailored suit.

Thankfully they're closest to the aisle. No one else to step over to reach them.

"Mother." I peer behind Birdie's back. It is all very cramped, but he curves an arm around my frame, bringing me forward, closer.

Her hawklike gaze shoots to our touch, then back up to my father. He appraises us, revealing far less on his face.

"You've yet to meet Birdie, I hear."

Her dark red lips don't arc in a smile. Birdie, hopefully, knows she's an ice queen. The frost isn't personal. *I don't believe.*

"You've heard correctly," my mother says, more to him. "The fact that I met you after Connor is going to haunt me for life, but we will overlook that." She raises a hand toward my father's winning grin, then swings her pointy matte black nail at Birdie's arm around me. "Explain this."

I smile. "You know him as Phoenix's brother, but Birdie is my boyfriend as well."

"We're together, officially," Birdie tells my parents. "I wanted to come over and say hi before the match starts."

"Where are you sitting?" my dad asks, very friendly.

"Probably..." He skims the theater.

"With us," my mother snaps. "There is plenty of room. Take a seat. But before you do." She presses the sharp end of her nail into his chest. "I am Rose Calloway Cobalt. Audrey's mother. And if you ever hurt her, I will rip your entrails out of your body and feed them to the real birds."

Birdie laughs.

"Not. Joking."

He still smiles. "Like mother, like daughter. Audrey has threatened to feed me to the rabbits."

My mother wields an adoring smile for me, then a more approving one for him. "Birds, rabbits, lions. We know them well."

"So I've heard."

CamScanner

The doors whoosh open as a heavy rush of people fills the concert hall. Birdie drops his arm from me. “Go blow them out of the water, Virginia.” He touches my cheek and kisses me, quick and molten, swiftly releasing me once more.

I’m floating again.

My fingers to my lips on my way out of the row, I barely hear Tom shouting from Eliot’s phone. “Demolish, Audrey Virginia! Be a menace!”

I bet he’s watching on video call and will tune in until the very last minute he has to pry himself away for The Carraways show.

That’s so very Tom.

Always here, even when he’s there. I love him for it more than maybe he knows. Seeing as we’re both now with a St. Pierre brother, I have a feeling I’ll be around him more than enough to tell him…and torment him, as little sisters should do to their older brothers, who tease relentlessly.

It’s only when I’m on the echoing concert stage and at the table between Harriet and Charlie that I realize I have no clue who passed through to semifinals.

“Harriet? Did they…?”

Her scowl pinches her lips. “Yeah, Guy’s team is in the semis playing Yale. They’re in the recital hall.”

“That’s good,” I say, encouraging her, and myself. “We want to play him.”

Ben does not.

Harriet nods. “Totally, we do. Murder on the dance floor.” She mimes pom-poms. “Go us.”

I clap more enthusiastically. “Go us. We are natural-born killers.” I find out we’re playing Columbia’s team. Taking a quick peek at the audience, I see Birdie is standing and chatting with Kinney. She snorts out what seems to be a laugh while he smiles. *Do not cry.* He sought out your best friend. *Do not cry.*

My heart is immeasurably full.

The next time I look, Birdie ends up seated between Kinney and Eliot in the long row of my family. Seeing all of them up there swells even greater emotion.

CamScanner

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CamScanner

The euphoria returns, and I fear it'll be squashed with a loss today. More than anything, I wish to extend this feeling, so I channel my focus into the match.

MVU Team B vs. Columbia

It begins with a hushed crowd and held breaths. The only time I cast a glance to the audience is after I answer, "Fanny Mendelssohn."

Birdie's smile blooms for me, so luminous. He mouths, *Good job.*

It's everything and more.

Yet I must concentrate. *I must.* Charlie is too lackadaisical. He only bends forward to the buzzer for a small handful of very obscure history and philosophy tossups. He answers those so quickly, the gasps in the room make me flinch. He rolls his eyes each time.

We win.

I freeze. *We win.* The semifinal round, of course. Still, what a triumph. What a… "We're playing MVU Team A?" I confirm with Charlie beside me. "They're moving on?" The moderator just announced they'd be joining us in the concert hall for the championship match.

I'm about to see Guy.

For the finals.

For the championship.

This is it.

"*Little sister*," Charlie forces, snapping my gaze up to his harsh yellow-green eyes.

"I did not space out," I retort, sitting straighter and trying to breathe. "He is not beneath my skin. But I need your best, Charlie, for the finals. I got lucky against Columbia."

"What about against Harvard? That was luck too?"

"Yes, yes, it was."

"And Rutgers?

"Good fortune as well."

"Stanford, Duke, Princeton, Penn, Yale, Northwestern, Berkeley, Brown—"

"You've made your point. I have been exceedingly *grateful* for the tossups being ones I knew, and that could end right now."

"It won't," Charlie says knowingly. As if he's seen the ending all along, exactly as he said he did.

CamScanner

I gasp, then lean close to whisper, "Charlie, did you rig the tossups?"

He rolls his eyes once more. His end-my-suffering expression is quite persistent when he's around me. Should I be taking offense at this point?

No, it's just Charlie.

Very quietly, he informs me, "We're not cheating." He glares down at me. "Did it not occur to you that you're fucking smart?"

"Yes, I know I'm smart."

"Smart enough to beat Guy's PPG?"

No. "I'm a freshman."

"You're very intelligent, especially for a freshman."

I elevate. "You think so? Like how intelligent?" I scoot closer. "Tell me."

"I just did."

Why must I always want more? Or is it that no one ever gives enough? I live in a state of starvation, so ravenous for knowledge and sensation. Against my ears and eyes and tongue. I wish to be completely sated, yet I love living on the edge...right where Birdie puts me.

I smile at the thought.

"Say it." Charlie suddenly captures my gaze.

"Say...?"

"You're going to beat Guy's PPG."

That feels...like a goal I've never set. Our team is supposed to beat his team. That's all. "Charlie, I..."

"You what?"

"I'm afraid to lose to him," I admit quietly. "There is a greater chance I lose if I make a goal *that* unattainable at the final hour."

"It's always been attainable. I have a good concept of what you know. What do you think I've been doing all fucking day?" He's been backing off tossups he's wanted me to answer, so I can rack up my personal points. So I can have the ultimate victory and defeat Guy myself.

I love my eldest brother.

"I'm very sorry I tried to feed you gingersnaps like you were a dog."

"*Ben*," Charlie calls out, and Ben unpockets a pack of travel tissues, handing them to me with a strong, reassuring smile. I am only slightly tearing up.

CamScanner

I dab at my eyes, then turn. "Thank you, Charlie—"

"I'm not here for your appreciation," he reminds me. "I'm here because you're my sister."

"And you love me." I don't need him to say it. I'm certain he does. Even more so now. With a deep breath, I tell Charlie, "I'm going to beat Guy's PPG."

I try to believe it.

Even as nerves swarm when he enters. The auditorium falls to murmuring whispers as Guy strides to the opposing table. Bruises beneath his eyes and a bandage on his nose, he acts as if he's wearing the latest fashion accessory and not the shame of losing a bar fight.

I bristle and lift my chin high. Shoulders drawn. He will never knock me down.

Never.

I pull my buzzer closer.

Guy sends most of his animosity toward Charlie. When Lia and Wilcox arrive right behind, I'm unsurprised to see their aggravation toward me. I abandoned their ship to form a rival battalion. I betrayed them, essentially.

But my loyalty lies elsewhere. So I never really betrayed myself.

Harriet stiffens as their team's newest member plops into her chair. Venus, an undergrad from the Honors House, is a champagne bottle about to explode. Her bubbly, overwhelmed energy is directed solely toward *Charlie.*

She has yet to look away from him.

Charlie releases a piercing sigh. His eyes go everywhere but to her. I wonder if Guy asked her to join, hoping she'd distract Charlie.

"Quiet down, please," the moderator says. "Everyone, take your seats. We're about to begin the final match. The winning team from Manhattan Valley University will be this year's national champions."

MVU Team B vs. MVU Team A

Chairs on the stage creak as we bow forward. I lift my gaze to Guy's. I am not afraid. *I am not afraid.* He's fixated on my brother.

Good.

He underestimates me. He's underestimated me as much as I've underestimated myself, and that—that is about to change.

CamScanner

"This form may feature a tonal rather than real answer when an exact transposition would distort the harmonic structure of its subject. The final movement of Beethoven's *Opus 133*—"

I buzz. "Fugue."

"Correct to Team B, fifteen points."

Guy shifts a little. *I can do this. I can do anything I set my mind to.* No one in the audience mutters as the moderator launches tossups at us.

"Haiku," I answer.

"Correct, Team B."

Harriet buzzes in for "apoptosis" and "Barr body" and "hippocampus" all correct, and she might be staring down Guy with each one—but no one is quite as proud of her as my brother. Ben is falling in love all over again, but I am not watching.

I am not being deterred at the beautiful sight of love.

I am in battle.

At war.

"This abbey's coat of arms consisted of three coiled snakes or 'snake-stones,' referring to a local legend that its founder transformed serpents into stone—"

I buzz. "Whitby Abbey."

"Correct, Team B for fifteen points."

My lips upturn. The ruins of this abbey inspired scenes in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

"German artist Wilhelm von Kaulbach depicts this ruler shooting arrows at a Greek fleet during the Battle of Salamis," the moderator reads, drawing Charlie toward the buzzer. He must know this one but waits for me.

Guy listens as intently as I do. "According to Herodotus, this ruler advised Xerxes I against engaging the Greeks in a naval battle at Salamis. During that battle, she escaped pursuit by destroying one of her own allies' ships—"

I buzz. "Artemisia I of Caria."

Guy huffs, then slides a brief but narrowed look at me.

I smile as the moderator announces, "Correct, Team B. Fifteen points."

CamScanner

Lia and Wilcox confer with whispers, and Venus's chair scrapes forward every time Charlie's gaze sweeps their table. She sends a flirty finger wag to him.

He ignores. He's keyed more in on Guy, observing his body language.

We miss "Seattle Seahawks" as Ben doesn't watch much football. I also buzz in too late on "Nile River" and "Ryan Gosling"—I've seen *The Notebook* and *Crazy, Stupid, Love* an absurd amount. I can't believe *Wilcox* beat me to that one, but it's no matter.

I will prevail.

"This structure houses the *Pala d'Oro*, an altarpiece decorated with Byzantine enamels. Following the Fourth Crusade, bronze horses—"

Charlie and Guy slap the buzzer nearly in unison, but Charlie's beeps first. *That's my brother.* Quick at the buzzer. I never doubted. "St. Mark's Basilica."

"Correct, Team B, fifteen points."

Guy outwardly glares between me and Charlie.

That's right. I am here. A worthy adversary. I have been here all along.

"This character guides Faust through Walpurgis Night and serves as his tempter and companion—"

I buzz. "Mephistopheles." *Specifically from Goethe's* Faust.

Guy arches his brows, as if believing I'm wrong. I am not wrong. I've known Goethe's *Faust*, as I've picked Eliot's brain about the tragic play. He's read the original in German.

"Correct, Team B, fifteen."

I soar. His ego deflates.

The music tossups excite me each time they arrive.

"In Gregorian chant, this technique may be represented by lengthy neumatic passages known as jubilus—"

I buzz. "Melisma."

"Correct, Team B, fifteen."

My heart races as I tap in for "Vivaldi" and "cittern"—both correct, both earning a power.

"This musician's violin, nicknamed *Il Cannone*—"

I buzz so fast, the audience gasps like they did for Charlie. "Niccolò Paganini," I answer.

CamScanner

"Correct, Team B."

I can practically feel Birdie grinning.

By the end, it becomes a duel between me and Guy. He no longer pays attention to my brother, only a handful of tossups remaining. His jaw tics. I've already known how well I've done. It's clear he does too by his rancid expression.

My lips rise and rise.

"The shepherd Silvius unsuccessfully pursues Phoebe in this play—"

I buzz. "*As You Like It*." One of my absolute favorites of Shakespeare's.

"Correct, Team B, fifteen."

And then the moderator announces, "Last tossup." I cage my breath. "Austrian bakers who arrived in Copenhagen during an 1850 labor dispute helped popularize an ancestor of this food. This food is produced by laminating yeast dough rather than using puff pastry. It's commonly known as wienerbrød—" I smack the buzzer right before Guy can.

"Danish," I say to a roar of applause and the moderator announcing, "MVU Team B are the IAT National Quiz Bowl Champions."

I'm in tears as I turn to Charlie, and my brother folds me into a hug.

CamScanner

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AUDREY COBALT

Right after squeezing Harriet and Ben in a celebratory embrace onstage, I'm still in the clouds, humming in a state of pure ecstasy. I can't wait to be with Birdie. I could twirl three-sixty in pursuit of him within the concert hall. I almost do, but then Guy Abernathy approaches me.

Not close enough to rattle me.

Though the idea there might be a "close enough to rattle" gives me slight pause. I sense Ben near my shoulder, which helps me stand a little straighter.

"Good game," Guy says, not a poor sport like I imagined. A pleasant surprise.

I lift my chin. "To you, as well."

"Luck was on your side."

His backhanded insult doesn't hurt when my joy has hoisted me far higher than his reach. "I'm smart enough not to need luck, but for you, it must be a necessity. I'm so sorry it wasn't there for you today. Tragic, really."

Guy pushes a hand through his hair. "There's always the fall." His gaze drips down me in crude assessment. "See you next semester, freshman."

I go very still.

Ben is about to follow him off the stage, but Harriet catches his hand. "Not worth it, Cobalt boy." My brother expels a taut breath.

It spins my mind for a moment.

Every part of me has desired to return to quiz bowl. Maybe I can beat my mother's and my father's four-year collegiate PPG record. Maybe I can do far greater things than I even believed, but I hadn't

CamScanner

considered how Guy would be back. I'll have to face him again and again and again until he's finished with grad school.

Is the only way to be rid of him to retreat?

Guy believes he owns MVU, being the "godson" of the dean. So I transfer to another college? Give up the early mornings on campus with Birdie? Change the course of my future because of *him*?

Bile rises to my throat, and I turn my gaze toward the auditorium seats. Birdie is on his feet, his steel-gray eyes on mine with steadiness and concern. He's making his way to me.

Quickly, I reach him at the edge of the stage, while he's on the ground. I'm about to jump down, too impatient to locate the stairs.

Before I can, Birdie reaches up and clasps my hips, lifting me off the stage, then gently setting me on my feet. His hand slips to the small of my back. "You okay, Virginia?"

"Better than okay." I nod, breathless. "Just one second. Then we'll celebrate." I rotate to hunt for my father.

He's already descending the auditorium stairs, his steadfast gaze pinned to me.

I leave Birdie's side to meet my father near the first row. I clearly cannot hide my distress because he asks, "What's wrong, ma petite?"

My heart pounds too hard. Am I doing this? I want to, so terribly, I want to. And all that's really stopping me is my monstrously sized pride.

"I know I told you I don't need your help," I say in a soft breath, trying not to be overheard. "That I'm no longer a little girl. But I think I was wrong. I think I really need you now."

His brows pinch in what I would call deeper concern. Then his gaze shifts around the room, sensing lingering eyes on us.

My father cannot go as unnoticed as me or my siblings. "Let's talk back at your apartment. I'll meet you there." He touches my shoulder in soft comfort.

Half an hour later, we're in my living room. Celebrations for the win are underway at my brothers' apartment. I'm eager to join everyone next door, but I can't fast-forward this brutal talk. My mother must've known it'd be easier for me to just speak to one of them, so she gives me one of her tight, cold hugs before heading to apartment 2166.

CamScanner

Now, seated at my chaise, I hold a steaming cup of nighttime tea between my hands, while my father claims the velvet chair.

I tell him everything.

How poorly my date with Guy went. How he hurt me. How I made a PowerPoint to tell all of my siblings and trusted them never to say anything to him or our mother. I tell him about things, I suspect, he already knows. Birdie's scholarship. Guy's club memberships. The tit-for-tat war we've been in all semester.

My father doesn't let many emotions through, but there are moments, I see him twitch and flinch. Just slightly. It's enough for my breath to catch.

But when I get to the end, I say, "And that brings me to today. Guy made a comment that I am ashamed to say unsettled me."

My father frowns, his fingers to his lips. "Did he threaten you?"

"Not really, no." I shift on the chaise, smoothing out my skirt with a hand. "He just said he'd see me next semester, which…" I take a sharp breath. "I should be perfectly fine with. I have moved past that horrible night and the awful things he's said. He has been beaten, literally and figuratively. Demolishing him at quiz bowl is the true victory. And I should learn to live around him. To be *strong*. I am strong."

Father bows forward, hands cupped at his knees. His tranquil blue eyes on mine. "That is not something you need to convince me of. You're not weak if you don't want to see him again."

"Normal people would have to choose to change schools then." My chest constricts at that thought.

"Well, you are not normal, ma petite," he says. "You know I can fix this for you."

Fix this. His words surge sudden emotion through me. My eyes burn. My heart clenches. I feel like a little girl again, running to her father who can mend any problem of mine.

My throat is swollen. Words come out choked. "But if I let you fix this, then I will just be a spoiled, entitled rich heiress."

His gaze strengthens mine. "That's not *all* of who you are, Audrey."

I think of my mother. How she never dispels the people who call her icy and cold, a bitch. She doesn't try to change those who view her that way—because she knows she's that and *more*.

I am more, too.

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I stare into my cup of tea. “You are a very good resource I have been trying not to use.”

He nods, understanding. “I won’t lie to you. It’s been hard watching you grow up. I’ve enjoyed you coming to me, needing me. Losing that this year has been difficult.”

I didn’t think…tears well in my eyes.

“I won’t talk you out of this,” he admits. “Selfishly, I want to intervene. I’ve wanted to intervene, but I can’t make these choices for you or any of your siblings. You have to make mistakes and wade through hard emotions yourselves, but I am here to help when it gets too challenging. You’re not waving a white flag by coming to me.”

“I think it’s too challenging now,” I say quietly. “I’m just struggling not to think of myself as…a child for making this choice.”

He smiles softly and changes seats, sitting beside me on the chaise. He puts an arm around me in a warm, affectionate side hug. “You are not a child. But you are *my* child, no matter how old you are.” His words almost unravel me.

I keep my posture poised, even when my eyes mist. “Then I know what I choose.”

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INTERCOLLEGIATE ACADEMIC TOURNAMENTS

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IAT National Championship – May 2

MVU Team A Stat Sheet

Player	Specialty	Powers	Tens	Negs	PPG
Guy	History	58	16	6	100.0
Lia	Science	34	21	6	69.0
Wilcox	Literature	20	18	5	45.5
Venus	Linguistics	2	6	5	6.5

Results: Manhattan Valley University Team A – 2nd Place

MVU Team B Stat Sheet

Player	Specialty	Powers	Tens	Negs	PPG
Audrey	Generalist	80	9	1	128.5
Charlie	Generalist	46	9	0	78.0
Harriet	Science	10	13	5	25.5
Ben	Sports	0	0	0	0.0

Results: Manhattan Valley University Team B – 1st Place

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BIRDIE ST. PIERRE

My last final was yesterday. Audrey's today, about a week after her epic quiz bowl victory. I've known she's quick, but her intelligence really is a thing of fucking beauty. My eyes stung watching her annihilate the competition and dominate her own team.

She even beat Guy's PPG.

Audrey is as over him as I am, not wanting to waste any energy on that prick. She finally burned the rest of her singed pink trench coat the night of Nationals. It involved lighter fluid and a 55-gallon steel drum near a loading dock in Brooklyn and a lot of the women in her family. Like Kinney. Her sister, Jane. Her mom.

Harriet said palms weren't sliced for blood pacts—like my brain was supposed to fucking leap there.

That night had been one of the best I've had. Riding a high with Audrey.

We haven't really come down. Even knowing the status surrounding Guy is a question mark. Connor has just said, very warmly, "It's for me to deal with. Focus on the things that make you happy."

Fortunately, I'm something that makes her happy.

I head toward my wall of instruments, feeling her watching my movements. I'm only wearing black boxer-briefs, sweat dripping down my chest. I wipe a bead from my forehead with my wrist. Summer is approaching, and it's already hot as fuck in my Chelsea apartment on this late Friday night.

Audrey has met all my roommates, even buttered them up with freshly baked oatmeal cookies. Steffi loved her before the sweets.

The two of us dipped from the hangout after a couple hours. Just in time since Scally lit a cigarette and he's notorious for chain-smoking

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past 3 a.m.—plus, he let in Kenny and Logan from 1A and they have ear-splitting laughs, which bother me more than I usually share.

I told Audrey though.

And to be sure, I asked if she'd rather crash at her place tonight, but she insisted she wanted to stay here, that my room reminded her of the Forest of Arden. A Shakespeare thing. I'm just glad I upgraded to a platform bed weeks ago. Still very low to the ground. But no more mattress directly on the floor.

Not for my girlfriend.

"Name a song you love," I tell Audrey while I pick up the case to my violin.

She's curled up on my bed. "Just one song?" She falls backward into my pillow. "But there are so many I love—how could I choose only one?" She rolls toward me, tangled in my fern-green sheets, her bare thigh peeking out and her glossy orange hair splayed over her shoulders.

"If you keep rolling in my bed like that, Virginia, I will be playing *no* songs for you."

I'll be inside her, making her come, *again*.

Surprise parts her lips. "You're playing a song for me?" She's wracking her brain, her eyes flicking over me. "I'm not being tutored, Haydn."

"Aware. School is out. Final grades in." I take out my bow from the case. "Straight A's for us both."

For my composition project that'd been riding my ass all semester, I composed a twelve-minute cello concerto and premiered it with the conservatory orchestra a few days ago, playing the solo part myself.

I'd say it went well. I was the only standing ovation at the graduate recital.

Best part was seeing Audrey on her feet and clapping so hard, I thought her bracelet was going to break off. Tom loves a section from the cello solo so much, we're talking about arranging it in one of The Carraways songs. "Killer Ultraviolet" went platinum—a song I had a hand in from their first album—so I trust I won't be bringing shit to the table.

Feels good knowing her perfectionist brother trusts me too.

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Audrey is still iced over in shock and repeats, "You're playing a song for me?"

"You still buffering? Need a full system Cobalt reboot?"

"Not unless it comes with *clarity*." She speaks more emphatically. "You said that you never serenade anyone. That it was cheesy as fuck."

I instantly laugh hearing her curse like me.

She smiles, then stresses, "I'm serious."

"I know." I get on the bed near her feet, my violin in hand. "It is cheesy as fuck, and there was never anyone I wanted to serenade before you, if we're calling it that—"

"That is the definition." She gestures to me. "You are serenading me."

"Serenading?" I give her a look. "English major, that is the wrong tense."

"You are starting to serenade," she defends.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, princess. I might get cold feet."

"I'll warm them," she counters.

"If you can catch me."

"Already caught."

I can't stop looking at her challenging gaze. A groan tries to scrape out of me.

"Anything else, Haydn?" The *try me* in her eyes is hypnotizing.

"Yeah. Tell me what song you love."

She makes a proud little noise. I almost get choked up hearing it, knowing it won't be the last time. Then she leans up against the headboard, the sheets slipping just above her breasts in a quiet tease.

My blood heats. I flex my muscles while she's sifting through a mental playlist, and I pop open my laptop near my leg.

She bows toward me, eyeing the laptop. "What songs can you play? Maybe that'll help narrow this down."

"Pick any song. Any genre."

She humphs. "Help me."

"Begging me again?"

"Demanding."

"I'm picking for you. You have five seconds to turn me down." I pull up sheet music. "Five, four." My eyes flit up, her smile like a shooting star. "Three, two." *Yeah, she wants to hear my choice.* "One." I place the

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violin beneath my chin, and instead of a pop song, I play my favorite score for Audrey.

A sweeping, yearning melody through forests and mountains, carried by a relentless pulse. Her gaze widens at the passionate swells. I look at her more than the sheet music. I just want to see her—as her carriage rises and falls, as her eyes reach deeper and deeper into me. Like she's tangled up in my legs, my hands, my lips, my soul.

I transport us through landscapes and time, but she's transporting us through the sensation. The salt spray, the forceful wind, the soft earth, the sweat that builds as our bodies grind and hold and ensnare.

The romance. The passion. The reason.

When the last notes fade, we exhale together, and she asks, "Where have I heard that before?"

"It's called 'The Kiss' from *The Last of the Mohicans*."

"Can you…can you play it again but on the viola? I want to hear the difference."

I'm very in love with her. "I can."

And I do. I also play several pop songs, some ABBA at her request. I switch between instruments. I tease her about some of the choices, and she stands firmly by them. As expected.

I play every single one, able to sight-read. Some I can play just by ear. There's one point where her eyes go glassy. She's more overwhelmed, so I stop, then edge closer until she's tucked more between my legs.

"What's going on?" I whisper.

"Birdie." She shakes her head, then I recognize the emotion before she says, "I've known you were brilliant, but I didn't even realize how much." It's awe.

She's in awe of me.

My chest floods, but I laugh a bit. "Did you think I was exaggerating when I called myself a savant, Virginia?"

"No," she says fast. "Not at all." She's flushed, but her lips tease upward at my smile. "I can teach you how to flaunt your talents."

"I have no doubt you can, arrogant girl." I cup her cheek and bring her down onto the bed, kissing her in deep, unhurried strokes. Her hands roam and clutch.

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We're heavy breaths and hard, quickening pulses. Her moan lives against my ear as I make love to her very fucking slowly. After we've come and I have her in my arms, I whisper, "Think you can wake up and shower before sunrise?"

I feel her smile. "I have been very conditioned for that wakeup call."

"Me too."



We're in Central Park as the morning light skates over the lake. It's less crowded and quieter at this early hour. Audrey and I share an almond croissant and drink coffees while sitting on the edge of the iconic Bethesda Fountain. Water spills from the tiers behind us, filling the quiet with a steady rush.

This past week has felt unreal. Finally having the freedom to do what I want with my life. Finally not being crushed with anxiety. Finally being immeasurably with her.

Maybe she can see me breathing fuller, deeper breaths because she asks, "How are things with your parents?"

"Better." I nod to myself and let out a laugh. "Yeah, I'd say *better*. And fuck, I never thought I'd say that." I've already explained what happened at Lincoln Center to Audrey and how I couldn't be in a relationship while they were controlling a big portion of my life. I had to take the reins, knowing it meant hurting them. "It's baby steps. But my mom seems really receptive to my boundaries."

"Which did you pose to her?" she asks, since she helped me form a list this week, but I did not want to slap my parents in the face and deliver all of them at once. They will take this shit personally like it's a receipt of their failings and not a guidebook of what I need.

"No texting me job opportunities. No criticizing my career choices. I figured those are the easiest to start with." I set my coffee aside. "I think they understood better when I said Phoenix was the only one who asked how my school was going. While they would just list all the reasons why I shouldn't be there."

She has a warm smile on the lake. "I love a happy ending. Or maybe this is a happy start toward the happiest ending. I love those just as

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much too."

"Would you hate anything that's happy?"

"No, and you wouldn't hate it either. Happiness is for the lovers and the birds." Her little satisfied expression glimmers like the water.

I nod a couple times. "You want to call us lovebirds, don't you?"

She whirls more into me, knocking our knees together. "That is precisely what we are. It can't be refuted. I have cold, hard facts."

"You can throw the evidence at me later."

"Why later? Is there somewhere else you wish to be?" She studies the lines of my face.

"You want the longitude and latitude?"

"Yes." She shifts her hair off her shoulders, holding my gaze even stronger. "Just so I know of the place you wish to be most, especially if I can't find you."

"You'll always find me, Virginia," I assure. "The place I wish to be most is the place with you. I've known that all semester. I could have been anywhere, but time and time again, I just wanted next to you."

She tries to contain her overwhelmed reaction. It pinches her cheeks and lights her brimming eyes. Because Audrey can't contain very much at all. Then she gasps. It jolts me.

"Fuck," I curse. "*Audrey.*"

"You must make it true now. Solidify it."

My lips flatline in confusion. "What?"

And then, of fucking course, she unclips a coin purse. "Your wish. You must solidify your wish. It's perfect timing. We're already at a fountain." She slows her eager pace. "You can reject my coin again, but I have a good defense for why this is a wish you should make."

"Save the breath. Hand me the coin."

She perks up, then gingerly places a half-dollar in my palm. The biggest coin in her pouch. "It's my last one of its kind," she says.

"Honored." We rotate toward the fountain's full basin together, glancing from each other to the coin-littered bottom.

"You want me to teach you the wish-toss form?" she asks.

"I've seen you do this a thousand times, and you just plop it in like the old lady in *Titanic*."

"That's actually very sweet, considering she was letting go of her most treasured possession."

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"Wasn't an insult," I say, more quietly. The sunlight is bathing her freckled cheeks and rising pink lips that I want to kiss again. I'd given up on dreaming. I'd forsaken romance and commitment, and now, my whole heart believes everything I've ever wanted is in reach.

It's not impossible anymore. It will never be impossible, and all I want is to embrace her with this emphatic hope. Right here with her. Tomorrow with her. Life with her.

I swallow a ball in my throat, then lift the coin. "One wish."

"One big wish."

"One big wish," I correct.

"You wish that I will always be next to you," she says.

I laugh hard. "Who's constructing my wish, you or me?"

"Is that not the wish you're going to solidify?" She tries to steal the half-dollar back.

"No, no, no." I draw my arm away from her reach. "Lenders stealers, Virginia."

"Fine." She straightens up in haughty surrender. "Make your wish. Any wish you like. So long as it's not involving heartbreak—"

"Why the hell would I do that?" I interject.

"Because you don't believe in this as much as I do, Birdie."

"I'm taking this *very* seriously," I say with weight. She believes in fate and wishing wells enough that it matters to me. "Don't be afraid of my wish. It's one of the greatest I have."

She searches me for the answer but doesn't claw it out. "I won't ask or it won't come true." Then she gestures for me to throw the coin.

This won't be the last half-dollar I cast in the air. It's just the first one I release with deep intention. It sails in a glinting arc and plunks into the water.

As the coin sinks to the bottom, I look into her sparkling blue eyes. My soul yearns to catch the next sound that leaves her lips, to be with her for infinite strings of time. And I silently wish, *Audrey Virginia Cobalt will love me forever.*

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The remnants of a midday party spill around my parents' living room. A large trunk has been overturned, with theatrical garb strewn about the floor, chairs, and couch. My eyes graze over it all: velvet capes and opera cloaks, top hats and pipes, lace cuffs and cravats, silk gloves and pocket watches, paper fans and shawls, jeweled crowns and scepters.

Snuffed candles have left wax puddles on the coffee table, and the chiffon cake I brought over is nearly all gone, one lonely piece remaining on the gold platter. It had been the very best *Happy Suspension Party* that has ever been thrown.

Quite possibly the first and only.

Eliot insisted on the festivities after he was suspended from *Amadeus*.

His contract included a conduct clause, and he could've been terminated after his mugshot circulated through the theatre world, but the producers opted for a four-week suspension instead of firing my brother.

As one could expect, Eliot has been celebrating.

We're all in good spirits for him. We made sure to bring the theater to him today. Full of monologues, music, and dance. My head spins, hardly sober. But I had no alcohol. I am just drunk off joy.

Pure, lovely joy.

"Must we go?" I complain as I wobble in the foyer. My brothers grab their coats off hooks, and I'm holding on to Birdie's arm, then his waist, as I attempt to clasp my heels. "There's still cake left. The party is not over until the last slice of cake is eaten."

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Birdie leaves my side so quickly, I lose my support and almost topple into the foyer bench. "Haydn!" I grab the wall to steady myself.

Tom *cackles*.

I glare. "I am on two feet, Tom. I did not fall. There is nothing to be laughing at."

"No, you're right, it would have been funnier if you face-planted." Tom grabs his jean jacket. "Nice choice in boyfriend, Audrey Virginia." He follows Phoenix out the door. My cheeks flush. *Boyfriend*. I'll never stop loving that title.

Birdie returns with the last slice, holding the spongy cake in his bare hand. He bites a large chunk while striding toward me. *Barbarian* is on my tongue. I can't utter the word when he drops down and with his free hand starts buckling my heel.

My face is on fire.

My brothers are thankfully already out the door. Now I wish it'd been left open, blowing cool air against me.

When my heels are fastened, Birdie rises, licking his thumb. "Cake is gone. Party is over, Virginia."

I pout. "Why do you wish to end this so quickly?"

"Quickly?" His brows rise as he laughs. "We've been here for almost *six* hours."

"What's two more?"

"It's Monday. Your brother has ballet tomorrow, and I heard Harriet talking about summer school." He studies me with furrowed brows. "Are these parties not…your usual thing?" He glances back toward the living room where my mother and father are putting away our chaos. Their laughter flows into the foyer.

We offered to help, but they told us to go before it gets dark. We have a two-hour drive back to New York ahead of us.

"This party was different." My throat swells. I can still hear the piano. Birdie played all night, creating his own melodies for our extravagant theatrics.

A detective theme when Ben pretended to solve Harriet's murder, a light, whimsical tune for Jane's monologue, a dark atmospheric melody for the reenactment of *Macbeth*—I'd joined Eliot, Tom, and Phoenix in that one. Birdie played Chopin when Charlie requested it,

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and Adolphe Adam for Beckett. The music drifts so quickly from my mind, I fear it'll leave altogether.

Birdie seizes his leather jacket from a hook. "Different because it was a suspension party?" he asks. "Because—who the fuck throws themselves a party when they've been *suspended* from work?"

"Eliot, of course."

"Rhetorical, Virginia."

"I knew that. *Of course*." I swat my hair off my shoulder.

"Of course," he repeats into a smile and leans forward to press a kiss on my lips. My lungs blaze, and when he backs away, he asks, "So what's so different about this one?"

"You were here," I say, catching his eyes. "Phoenix. Harriet. I think there was just more music. More…more…" I struggle to speak, the word lodging in my throat. "More *love*. Is it so bad that I find it hard to leave this night? Memories won't do it justice."

He casts another glance back toward the remnants, his chest rising in a deeper breath. "Yeah, I understand. It was special." He doesn't say the word mockingly. I know he means it. His gaze hits mine again. "But there will be another, right?" he asks. "Because don't you all throw parties for like every little thing."

"Not *every* little thing."

He fits his arm around my frame, and we walk out of the house together. "Tom was telling me you threw a party for the birth of an alfalfa sprout."

"Ben was *eleven*, and he'd been trying to grow the sprout for a year. It was a very big deal."

Birdie laughs, and I'm almost about to combat him, but then he says, "I love your family, Virginia."

Those words are a key to my heart. He has unlocked a new door into it.

I tell him that right before we reach the large SUV, the seating limo-style. We cram in beside Tom and Phoenix, where Tom is already lying with his head in his boyfriend's lap and clicking a Zippo lighter open and closed.

There is light ribbing from Birdie, which causes Phoenix to shove Birdie back into the seat. He laughs, crashing beside me, careful not to whack me in the face. His arm naturally finds my shoulders.

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Ben and Harriet tuck close together while they check her summer syllabus on her phone. Just last week, she changed her mailing address to my brothers' apartment.

We're not only quiz bowl champions, but we are officially neighbors, she and I.

Each year, I hope we add more titles together.

The fall semester at MVU will be different without Ben, but if there were any worries about me encountering Guy on campus, those can be incinerated.

Because Guy Abernathy will not be attending MVU in the fall. He won't even be in New York.

He's moving to Cambridge to finish his master's at Harvard.

Guy, I've learned, does not have much social capital when it comes to his own dad. All this time I never really considered that he could have a poor relationship with him. After a tee time at a country club between my father and his, everything changed.

Harriet called my father "Zeus," but I like to think of him more as the king on a chessboard.

It's checkmate.

Though I haven't the slightest idea of how the conversation went—nor do I care to know—I'm relieved there's no trace of animosity. Guy believes greater opportunities for his career are in Cambridge. Maybe they are. A march up a corporate ladder is as dull as he is. I only care about him not returning to MVU. If he ever does, my father assured he'd intervene again.

Another victory.

I smile to myself, then relax against Birdie's side, his arm draped around me, and I touch his fingers, twisting his fede ring.

Everyone settles in for the long ride home to New York.

All here together.

I smile, especially as Eliot exchanges a devil-may-care grin with me. He stretches his bicep across the seat, riding backward nearest the driver. My roommate. He never allows catastrophes to topple him, or me. A true inspiration of mine.

I've started seeing him as the foundation of the Cobalt Empire. If he were to crack, it would spur war.

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Charlie and Beckett are side by side, but it's Charlie who's staring out the window as lights blur and the car grows quieter, lulling most of us toward sleep.

Then Charlie tilts his head back to us, his yellow-green eyes sweeping. And he says, "What have you learned, children?"

My heart rises, and we share smiles that ascend. Beckett sends a contagious one to Ben, which spreads to Harriet, then me. Until everyone in the car is grinning.

As Birdie looks to me for answers, I explain, "It's the start of a rhyming game that we all created."

"Another game?" He raises his brows. "Jesus fuck." He lets out a laugh.

"How many will you be here for?" I counter.

Birdie's eyes sink to mine. "All of them."

All of them.

It's exactly what my one true love would say.

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EPILOGUE

AUDREY COBALT

"You lie. There is no bug in my hair," I say with a defiant swat of my hand at the strands. It's not buggy out. We are in *Paris*. "The Parisian bugs are too preoccupied."

"With a redhead, yeah." Birdie is watching a tendril of my hair while popping a bottle of Champagne. I flinch at the noise. He tosses the cork. "Sorry, trying to scare the beetle."

"Beetle?" I smooth out the pink picnic blanket beneath us. We're in the wilder reaches of the Bois de Vincennes, where a moss-green lake ripples beneath the Temple of Love, a classical rotunda with a domed roof and slender columns. Untamed meadow and summer flowers are all around us.

This entire trip to France with my boyfriend has been utterly romantic, even if there might be—or might not be—a beetle in my hair.

I tense slightly at movement from the corner of my eye.

"Still not going to let me get it out?" he asks. "Stubborn girl."

I sit upright, stiffer. "It's a ladybug. They're sweet."

"Not a ladybug." He reaches forward, and I let him pinch out a—oh, a stink bug! I shriek and spring to my feet, shaking out my hair.

Birdie is rolling in laughter. "Sit the fuck down, you're fine. *You're fine*." His chest bucks in more amusement.

I collapse back onto his lap. "I've been defiled by a stink bug." I throw my head into his shoulder. "If you don't still love me after this, we'll have to break up."

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"Yeah. This is my dealbreaker. You losing a battle with a fucking bug."

"Most awful." I share a smile with him, then slide off his lap after he kisses me. "Which ones are from where?" I gather my hair into a claw-clip while he sorts through several boxes and names off the different boulangeries.

He's pouring the Champagne into flutes, and while his hands are full, I feed him a piece of a chausson aux pommes. An apple turnover.

"Not good." He swallows it with a hard head shake. "Don't eat that —*Virginia.*"

I'm tearing into the crust. "I have to know what you ate."

"I just said it's not *good*, as in underbaked. As in raw fucking egg. Do not eat that."

I inspect the pastry. He's...not wrong. The apple compote is meant to be gooey, but the center layers of dough are far too gummy. But... possibly? I'm tempted to nibble.

He blinks. "Are you still considering it?" he asks like I've left my mind in New York.

"It's only fair if you did—"

He grabs the apple turnover and chucks it toward the lake. "For the ducks."

I gasp. "You would kill a duck?"

"Over giving my girlfriend stomach cramps and a night with the toilet, yeah. I would rather kill a duck."

"I won't tell Ben."

"I don't care if you do." He tries the second chausson aux pommes, then nods. "Much better. Here." He extends his hand, and I lean forward and take a tiny bite from Birdie, our eyes fastening for an affectionate beat.

I touch my fingers to my lips as I chew, my cheeks burning a little. *Better*. We're still in search of the greatest apple turnover in Paris. Though, if I'm quite true to myself, I would say even the undercooked one has merit. As it led to a moment I already want to tuck close like a keepsake.

He hands me a flute of Champagne. I take a small sip, my gaze wandering to a bench where two friends share a cigarette.

"You can smoke," I suddenly say.

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He chews more slowly, his brows furrowing.

I shift onto my knees. "You can smoke, Haydn," I say more confidently. "We've been in Paris for two days, surrounded by cafés where people sip espresso and smoke cigarettes, and the stench never bothered me. I am cured." I wave two hands down my body.

Yet his eyes remain on mine with narrowing confusion. He downs some Champagne, then swings the flute toward me. "Your phobia—"

"It wasn't a fear of cigarettes. It was an aversion."

"Aversion," he repeats in thought, then he starts laughing with an eye roll. "Virginia."

"Yes?"

His laughter softens. "Did you think I haven't smoked around you for months just because of your aversion?"

I go still. "No...that sounds rather self-absorbed. I would have considered that maybe you..." I sip my drink, bubbles tickling my nose.

He motions me. "You're almost there."

"That you don't like cigarettes," I conclude. "What I've...known." I am too impatient, I must ask! "Do you really not like them? This whole time?"

Birdie rubs at his eye, still laughing.

"It's not funny," I say, unable to retract a smile. "*Birdie*. I need answers."

"Oh, but you've known all along."

"Okay, for the past five minutes I've known."

"Try five *seconds*."

I look him up and down. "What don't you like about smoking?"

"Cigarettes dry out my throat and make me feel like I inhaled a dust bowl." He opens another box. "Like I wanted it to be any harder to breathe."

I can't tamp down my excitement. "I will never have to take a cigarette break with you."

"Nope."

"Nor you with me." I smile down at the apple turnover, wondering what other things I'll learn about Birdie now that we're together. I love how there's more and more to discover. Which reminds me, "The weather isn't looking good in Scotland. I might need to purchase new boots while we're here."

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He licks apple compote off his thumb. “Were your five pairs that you brought not enough?”

“None are waterproof,” I point out.

“Fair. It’s storming then?”

“Heavy rain, yes. It’ll be very cinematic.” I can’t wait to go to the Isle of Staffa with Birdie and visit Fingal’s Cave. “We’ll kiss in the rain.”

“Fuck in the rain.” He smiles into a laugh. “That made you blush? Too crude for you, princess?”

“No.” I prop higher on my knees, my palm to his chest. “Say it again, barbarian.”

He clasps my hand over his heart, and I glance downward to see our fingers tangled—his silver fede ring on mine. It belonged to his great-great-grandfather, a family heirloom that Birdie had resized to fit my right hand.

He said he was the St. Pierre who was promised, but the biggest promise he ever wanted to make was to me.

To wear something so precious of his is my honor, but the meaning behind the gesture is what had me in tears. Under the Eiffel Tower, no less.

“I’ll make love to you in the rain,” Birdie says. “I’ll fuck you in the rain. I’ll do everything good to you in the rain.”

“And the sun and snow.”

He grinds out a smile. “Just the rain.”

“You can’t deny your girlfriend.”

“I make the rules.”

“I light them on fire.” I push him down, my hands on his chest, my body half splayed on top of his, and his hands sweep into my hair, against my face.

“Our love rings my heart,” I murmur to him. “It is wrung again and again, and it sends up my body a wholeness, a happiness, a perfect harmony. Just with you, Birdie St. Pierre.”

It’s perfect weather for a picnic.

And for his dream date that is my dream too.

“Virginia.”

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LOATHED LOVE

"My only love sprung from my only hate!
Too early seen unknown, and known too late!
Prodigious birth of love it is to me,
That I must love a loathed enemy."

- *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare

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