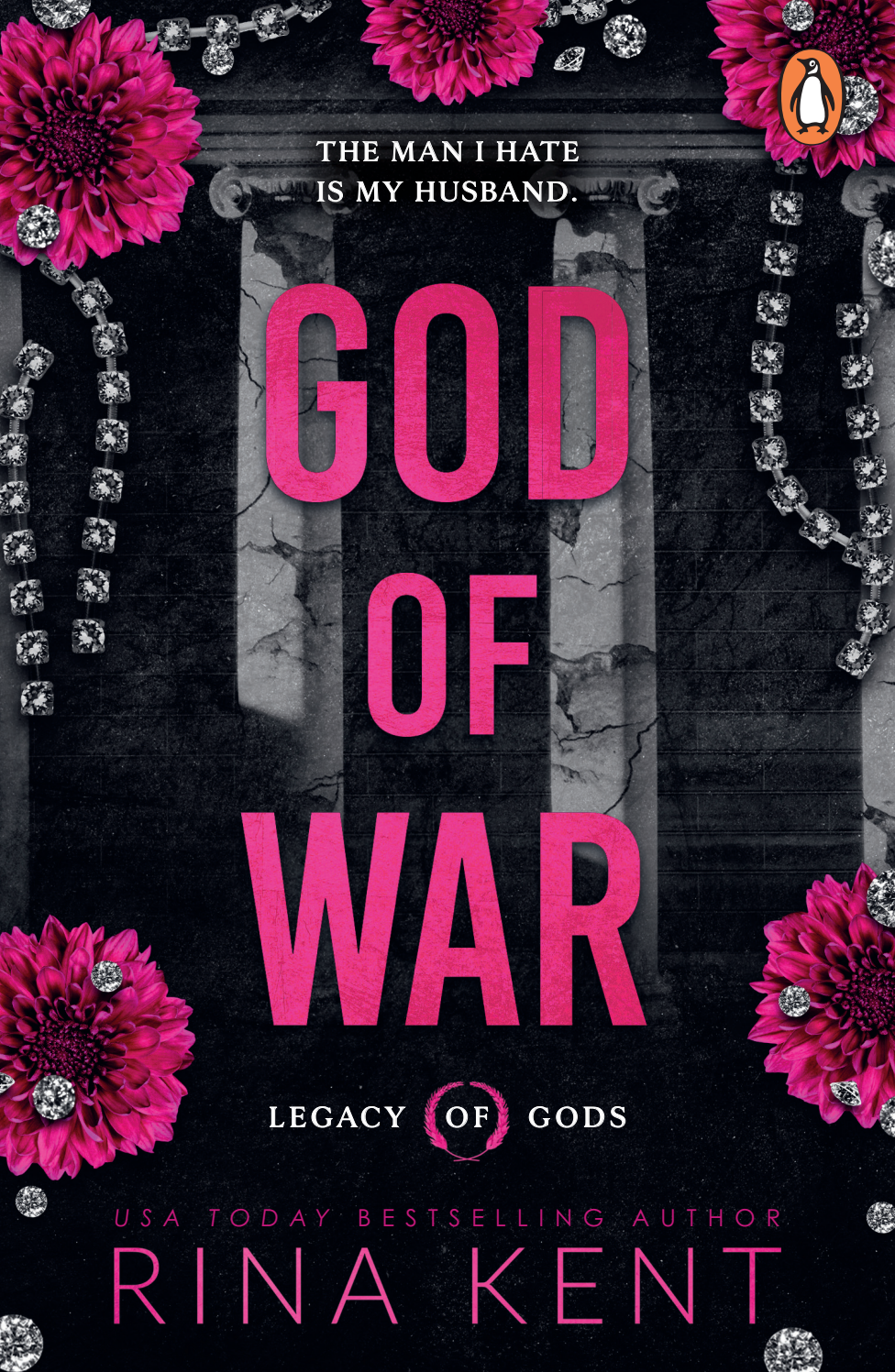

THE MAN I HATE
IS MY HUSBAND.
GOD
OF
WAR
LEGACY OF GODS
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
RINA KENT

PENGUIN BOOKS

GOD OF WAR

Rina Kent is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, international and No. 1 Amazon bestselling author of everything enemies-to-lovers romance.

She's known to write unapologetic anti-heroes and villains because she often fell in love with men no one roots for herself. Her books are sprinkled with a touch of darkness, a pinch of angst and an unhealthy dose of intensity.

She spends her private days in London laughing like an evil mastermind about adding mayhem to her expanding universe. When she's not writing, Rina travels, hikes and spoils cats in a pure Cat-Lady fashion.

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To the end of an era.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello, reader friend,

God of War marks the end of the Legacy of Gods series and the Rinaverse until further notice. This has been the most bittersweet book I've ever written. I was excited throughout the entire process, but I couldn't help feeling a smidge of sadness at the thought of saying goodbye to these intense characters.

Eli and Ava consumed me, heart and soul, and I hope you experience the same when you read their journey.

God of War is a complete stand-alone. However, since this story takes part way after the timeline of the previous five books in the series, it might spoil some events.

If you haven't read my books before, you might not know this, but I write darker stories that can be upsetting and disturbing. My books and main characters aren't for everyone.

This book isn't as dark as my other books, but it contains sensitive subjects. I'll list them below for your safety, but if you don't have any triggers, feel free to skip the following paragraph, as it will provide spoilers for the plot.

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God of War contains mental health issues, including

depression, anxiety, fugue states, and dissociative amnesia. There are on-page descriptions of a suicide attempt, deteriorated mental states, and violence. The main character struggles with alcoholism in the beginning and there are mentions of drug use. I trust you to know your triggers before you proceed.

For more things Rina Kent, visit rinakent.com

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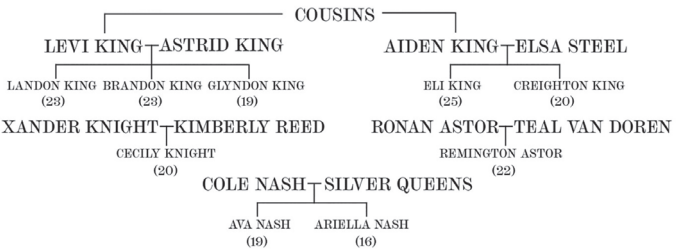


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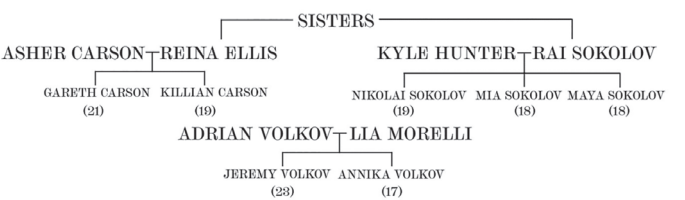
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LEGACY OF GODS TREE

ROYAL ELITE UNIVERSITY



THE KING'S U'S COLLEGE



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PLAYLIST

Don't Fear the Reaper—Baltic House Orchestra
Breathe—Lø Spirit
Time—MISSIO
BLEAK—Michael Aldag
I Like Me Better—Lauv
Misery—Unlike Pluto
oUcHiE (medium)—Mitchel Dae
Nothing's New—Rio Romeo
Escapism.—RAYE & 070 Shake
Blind Spot—Saint Chaos
PARALYZED—Death and All His Friends
You Make Me Feel Like It's Halloween—Muse
Broken Smile—Lil Peep
Goddess—Xana
Half My Heart—grandson
Feel Something—Jaymes Young
Church—Chase Atlantic
Spell It Out—You Me at Six

You can find the complete playlist on Spotify.

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CHAPTER 1
AVA

THE FOUL MIXTURE OF LIQUOR, THE LATEST drug on the market, and a sense of euphoria flows through me as I sway to the loud music.

Here, I'm okay.

As I blend into the middle of lost kindred spirits and empty shells, I don't feel alien.

No pressure. No lost potential.

No disturbing images.

Nothing.

Just the way I like it.

I lift the double shot of tequila to my mouth and slurp half of it. The bitter taste sits on my tongue, leaving a lingering aftertaste that coats my mouth. But it also brings a sense of excitement and reckless abandon. The burn rushes down my throat and settles uncomfortably alongside the inauspicious dose of tranquilizers I've flooded my stomach with.

My solution? Find more alcohol, drugs, and whatever I can get my grubby hands on.

Something. Anything to relieve the pressure of the latest images that have been crowding my head.

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Blurry faces with blurry voices in blurry clubs.

The last thing I need is a reminder of my state of mind or the recent pickle I've gotten myself into.

So I choose to sweep it under the rug and pretend everything is fantastic.

Normal.

My friends chose this up-and-coming club in North London for the occasion. The grungy brick walls shine in a beautiful mixture of different shades of blue.

Violet laser beams glow on the crowd of people filling the massive downstairs hall. We have a VIP room upstairs, but it's always fun to get down and dirty.

The dirtier the better.

I've just lifted the half-full shot of tequila to my lips when a slim hand with milky-peach nails snatches the glass and puts it out of reach. I'm about to spout some profanity when my eyes meet her calm green ones. I'm instantly hit with a smidge of judgment and a copious amount of unconditional love.

"Cecy!" I shout over the music, my voice sounding surprisingly sober. "What are you doing here?"

She's wearing a beautiful pastel-orange spaghetti strap dress. Her silver hair is pulled up in a dainty ponytail, and her face glows more than ever.

I don't miss the fact she's comfortable wearing dresses now when she's always been a jeans-and-T-shirt kind of girl.

Or the fact she's put on a subtle hint of makeup. She wants to look beautiful. She loves herself more.

And to my shame, it's not because of anything I've done or even contributed to. It took me so long to figure out something was wrong. I could blame my condition,

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but that's no excuse. Not when she's been there for me our entire lives.

"You've had enough to drink, Ava."

"What are you talking about? I haven't even started." I reach for the glass, but she holds it behind her back.

"Don't even think about it." She grabs my elbow and starts pulling me from the middle of the crowd I've been happily nestled in. They all break out in a meltdown of questions.

"Ava, are you coming back?"

"You joining us for that Ibiza trip, Ava?"

"I have the latest gossip for you, Ava."

Ava, Ava, Ava…

I love the attention, the hungry gazes, the irresistible need to satisfy my every whim, every need, every demand.

I blow them kisses and wink at a few of the guys, whose names I can barely remember.

It's all part of my defense mechanism. My charm, my looks, my popularity.

I'm whatever they want me to be: A flirt. A social butterfly. A useless prodigy.

Anything. Everything.

As long as I confiscate their attention, I don't mind.

Attention keeps the emptiness at bay.

More importantly, the boisterous compliments and not-so-innocent touches ward off dark thoughts.

Even if only temporarily.

My best friend, Cecily, abandons the shot of tequila on a table and continues pushing her way through the crowd with me in tow.

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I tug on her hand, pull her to a stop, and wrap my arms

around her neck, swaying to the loud club music. "Come on, let's dance!"

"This isn't my scene, Ava."

"Please, Cecy. For me?" I bat my lashes and twirl her around.

She sighs and moves slowly, in no way matching my energy. I wiggle my hips, and the shimmering pink of my dress catches the strobing lights. My skirt is so short, people behind me must catch a front-row view of my arse.

Some guys hoot, and I blow them kisses, throwing my head back with laughter, falling into the intoxication. The madness.

The nothingness.

Some guys surround us, and Cecily tenses, her hands coming protectively around my waist.

I used to take this subtle change lightly before, but not anymore. This time, I'm the one who pushes the swarming bees out of the way; I then drag my friend through a hall that leads to the toilets.

The dark walls are decorated with the grungy neon signs of London, the red lighting casting a warm glow on the otherwise-dim space.

The chaos filters behind us, the music lowers a notch, and Cecily releases a breath as she leans against the wall.

"Ready to go home?" she asks slowly, almost hopefully.

"You know the exact answer to that." I pinch her cheek. "You go. I know you don't like nightlife."

"There's no way in hell I'm leaving you here alone when you're drunk, Ava. This club is in the middle of nowhere and gives off sketchy vibes. No clue why you came all the way here."

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"Something different from the usual Soho places. I'm all for adventures."

"Are you sure this isn't about your latest participation in the international cello competition?"

Phantom pain squeezes my chest, but I put on my best smile. "Nope. Maybe I wasn't made for classical music and should switch to DJing. It's much more fun anyway."

"Ava…" She's interrupted by a group of drunk girls giggling and swaying their way between us to the toilet queue.

Cecily takes my hand in hers. "Want to buy some junk food and rewatch *Bridget Jones's Diary*?"

"Don't you have a boyfriend you need to, I don't know, fly to New York with?"

So maybe I'm being salty, but I know I have no right to be. I always thought Cecily was my soul twin. My person. My sister. The one person who was always in my corner.

But that was before I realized how dependent I was on her. How inconveniencing I was to her. She took care of all my dumb drunk adventures. Kept me safe and sane, wiped my forehead after I got sick, then held me to sleep. She listened to my nonsense and let me invade her space with no complaints.

After she found the love of her life and he pointed out that I was taking all her goodwill and giving nothing in return, I hated him.

I thought it was logical to despise him. He's taking my bestie, and no one deserves my bestie. But no, the real reason I couldn't stand Jeremy was because he told me the truth I'd refused to see all along.

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He was right. I've been too reliant on Cecily. Too

clingy. Too childish. A mess of epic proportions, if you will. But it's not Cecily's responsibility to keep me together.

Which is why I kept my mouth shut when she said she was moving with said boyfriend to the States, even if it's been killing me inside.

Just now was a slip. I blame the alcohol.

I trap my bottom lip beneath my teeth and bite down so harshly, I'm surprised no blood gushes out.

"So you're not okay with it after all?" She watches me carefully. "I knew it. I was surprised you didn't throw a tantrum."

"I'm just kidding," I lie through my teeth. "You go live your life, Cecy."

"I can stay a few more weeks."

"No. Don't stop your life because of me."

"You're not a burden." She clasps my shoulders. "I'm worried about you. Like, really, *really* worried. You've been drinking so much, it's almost an addiction at this point. You haven't been taking your meds regularly, and you keep spiraling into these destructive patterns more often than not."

"It's called having fun."

"Taking weird pills from strangers is not fun. It's suicidal."

"They're not strangers. They're friends."

"Not good ones." She sighs. "I'm not the only one who's worried, Ava. Your mum and dad are, too. Is it true that you haven't spoken to them since you left the competition hall?"

"I texted." My voice gets caught, and I swallow, then exhale deeply to release the tension.

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"And you believe that's enough?"

"For now." I can't trust myself to speak to Papa and Mama and not break down. I've had three panic attacks in three days. I know I'm spiraling and a huge episode is growing in the distance, but no one needs to know about that. Least of all Cecy, who's finally found her well-deserved happiness. If she figures out what's wrong, she won't go to the States, and I can't be in her way anymore.

"I'll take the meds on time and cut down on drinking. I promise." I lean my head on her shoulder so she doesn't see the blatant lies in my eyes. "But only if you FaceTime me every day for at least three hours."

"Promise?"

"Promise." I push away reluctantly and jut my chin in the direction opposite to us. "Now go to your man and do your magic before he kills the guys who surrounded us on the dance floor."

Her eyes light up, and then her entire body angles toward a tall, broad guy with full sleeves of tattoos. A personality that's completely contrary to hers. And, wait for it, he's an *actual* Russian Mafia prince in New York.

Jeremy has been keeping his distance, but he's been following us around from the get-go. Like, everywhere. I'm sure the only reason he didn't glue himself to Cecily is because she asked him for some alone time with me.

Although he's standing across the room, his entire attention is on her. His dark eyes meet hers, and in that fraction of a second, I don't see a scary motherfucker with a reputation that sends people running. I see a man who loves my friend as furiously as she loves him. A man who'd level the world to the ground just to protect her.

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"Want us to give you a lift?" she asks, ripping her gaze from him with obvious effort.

"I drove."

"But you're drunk."

"I only had half a shot, and you snatched it away before I could finish it. I'm perfectly sober."

"No, you're not."

"I'll call an Uber."

"That's not exactly safe."

"I'll ask Papa's chauffeur to pick me up. Is that safe enough?"

"I guess. I'd rather we take you home."

"I'll be fine."

"You sure?"

"Just go before Jeremy hates me some more for daring to occupy your time."

"Since when do you care what he thinks of you?"

"I don't. I care about you, and you love the twat, so I have to put up with him."

She gives me a quick hug. "Love you. Let's watch *Bridget Jones's Diary* tomorrow, deal?"

"Deal."

"Text me when you get home."

"Yes, Mum." I salute.

She gives a subtle shake of her head before she moves in Jeremy's direction. Cecily chances one last look at me, her brows drawing together, and I can see her contemplating either staying or forcing me to go home early like a granny.

I fake my best smile and send her kisses. Before she can change her mind, Jeremy appears in front of her like a mountain. His hand slips to her lower back with subtle

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possessiveness, and he drops a quick but passionate kiss on her mouth that makes her forget about me.

Only momentarily, though, because she keeps looking at me as he hauls her out of the club while warding off any unwanted attention.

She deserves all that and more. If there's anyone in the world who's owed happiness and a man who brightens up only when she's around, it's Cecily.

I'm slightly envious of what she has, but then again, to get something like that, someone needs to be as selfless and as purehearted as she is.

Innocent, maybe.

Less mentally sick.

More…normal.

So it's pointless for me to even hope for what she has—what all my friends have.

I snatch a glass from a passing man's hand, down it, and nearly cough.

Whiskey. Yikes.

Still, I have manners. So I kiss my finger and place it to his mouth as a form of thanks as I stroll back to the dance floor.

One more hour.

I'm not ready to face the emptiness that comes afterward.

If I'm drunk enough, I might forget a little.

Escape a little.

Live a little.

In no time, I'm surrounded by a group of people. Some are friends or classmates from the art school. Others are new faces.

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The more, the merrier, if you ask me.

We're on holiday from uni, and it's our last year. Cecy already graduated, and it's no fun without her at Royal Elite University. If I weren't positively terrified about living in my parents' house again and letting them see me in raw, painful detail, I would've transferred to a London university.

Oh well.

Thankfully for me, I didn't come here to think.

I slide my fingers into my long blond hair, lifting the strands to reveal my bare back as I sway sensually to the music.

Warm hands drop to the exposed skin on my sides, and I playfully shove them away.

"You can look, but you can't touch, Ollie," I coo over the music.

Not sure if he heard, though I don't think he cares, to be honest, because he continues staring at my hint of cleavage, blatantly eye fucking my long legs, my bare shoulders, and anywhere his greedy eyes can reach.

Perfect dress, in my humble opinion.

The string tied around my neck keeps it in place, and the tiny microskirt barely covers my arse. Snakelike straps spring up from my stilettos and hug my legs in stunning glittery pink.

"You owe me for earlier, love," Oliver says as he dances with me to the beat, mirroring my every move, every bat of my lashes.

"Oh?" I play coy. "How much?"

"I'm expensive."

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"Not more expensive than my trust fund, Ollie." I

stroke my fingers beneath his chin, tracing his skin with my chrome-pink nails as his nostrils flare. "Besides, we both know you're not thinking about money as a currency."

"Did I think right?"

"Possibly?"

Oliver is classically handsome—square face, light-hazel eyes, and sandy-blond hair. Pretty sure I dry humped him a couple of nights ago when he dropped me off.

He wasn't happy with how I left him unsatisfied, but he keeps coming back for more, so maybe if I'm in the mood, I'll go further.

Ollie groans as I move my hips. "You're killing me, Ava."

"I know." I laugh, the sound eaten by the loud music before it dies on a hitch.

A stare.

No. A glare.

Cold, calculating, and entirely destructive eyes hold me hostage.

Like a million times before.

And like all those times, my apprehension hasn't reduced one bit. If anything, my awareness has gotten a lot more daring. Suffocating.

It's impossible to figure out where he's watching me from if he doesn't make himself entirely visible. However, whether I see him or not, I'm extremely conscious of his presence.

Like a parasite. Or, more accurately, a high-tech security camera where I'm the sole focus.

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Sweat trickles down my back, and my skin heats by several orders of magnitude.

Instinctively, my hand drops from Ollie's face, and my movements slow as I search the corners of the club. That's where he always lurks, like a shadow, the darkness's lord and master.

A fucking ghost.

I see him. And I wish I didn't.

Eli King stands by the bar, nonchalantly leaning back, one hand nestling a drink and the other tucked in the pocket of his pressed black trousers. He always wears something black. Like a Gothic duke in a faraway castle. A step above Dracula and Satan's favorite tutor. It fits with the sharp jawline, high cheekbones, and vile character.

His crisp white shirt highlights his broad shoulders and lean muscled frame. The cuffs are slightly rolled, revealing a Patek Philippe watch that's so expensive, it could buy everyone in this club. I know because I bought that watch. Got into shit with my dad about spending so much money as well. Seven years ago, I begged Nana to take me to Switzerland, we met a retired watch master, and I had to plead for weeks before he agreed to make that special edition.

Though Eli doesn't know that tidbit. I made Aunt Elsa give it to him and swear to never tell him it was from me. So he thinks it was a gift from his mum for his twentieth birthday, which is probably why he always wears it.

Despite the shadows, the chaos, the noise, and the endless people separating us, I see him clearly. Too clearly. As if the world is transparent and he's the only tangible being in its midst.

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Eli King has been my damnation ever since I figured out what that word meant.

My nemesis.

The only man who's immune to my charms.

If anything, he disregards them with cold indifference. Like right now.

His eyes exude a bottomless darkness, and their stormy gray never rages nor revolts. Never deviates from the coldness I faced the day he shattered my heart to pieces and stomped all over it.

Turn around and remove your distasteful presence from my sight, and I'll pretend I didn't hear your embarrassing confessions.

His words still sting despite the years that have passed. Whoever said time heals everything has obviously never met Eli King.

He's worse than an infected wound that's refusing to heal and more brutal than a war without an end.

On the other hand, that terrible lapse in judgment on my part flipped my feelings for him upside down. I used to be blind, but now I just loathe him.

I want to annoy him.

Tug any feelings out of him just to disrupt his day and destroy his carefully put-together life.

He watches me and I stare back, unwavering, even if I'm burned by that icy gaze, if I'm pulled apart and shattered to pieces, I'll never back down in front of the prick.

Feeling particularly suicidal tonight, thanks to my spectacular failures and, possibly, the cocktail of substances, I grab Ollie's hands and place them on my bare sides again.

My skin doesn't catch fire. I don't break out in a sweat nor experience the shattering sensation of mysterious eroticism.

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But it's good enough.

My arms wrap around Ollie's neck, and I dance slower than the rhythm, provocatively, swaying my hips, jutting my breasts. The music pulses through my body, the bass reverberating in my chest and making my heart race in a symphony of chaos and rebellion.

The feel of Eli's eyes is a toxic elixir, swirling and bubbling within me, a concoction that promises a temporary escape from reality and a false sense of bliss.

Ollie matches my movements, touching, caressing, and falling completely into it, but my attention is not on him. I never break eye contact with the dilemma leaning against the bar, his eyes still detached and completely unaffected by my show.

So I snake my fingers into my hair, pulling it up, biting my lower lip while I stare into his black soul.

"Fuck you," I mouth.

Then, and only then, does he react. The corner of his lip quirks up in the most amused, sadistic smile before he takes a generous sip from his drink.

Scotch. Malt. Straight.

I hate that I know all these details about him. I wish I could be hit with amnesia so I could just forget him, his favorite drink, his wardrobe choices, and his entire malicious personality.

Ollie gets closer until he's almost flush against me. His smell, oud and musk, nearly suffocates me, but I put up with it and trace my forefinger over his stubbled cheek, forcing my entire attention to stay on him.

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Giving Eli the show he signed up for.

I have no idea why he doesn't leave me alone when he

clearly has no interest in me whatsoever, but I'll be damned if I don't play his game.

At least today.

Most of the time, I just avoid him like the plague. What? I'm not always drunk, and when it comes to Eli, my courage—or impulsive foolishness—largely depends on the level of alcohol and drugs pumping in my veins.

I lift my head, but my movements slow when I find his spot at the bar empty. A strange, crushing disappointment crinkles in my chest, and I hate it with everything in me.

Worse than I hate that man.

My phone vibrates in my bra, and I jolt, then disentangle myself from Ollie to check it out.

Ariella: Call me. It's an EMERGENCY!

My heart trips over itself as I storm off the dance floor, ignoring Ollie's and the others' objections as I fly up the stairs to the VIP room I rented tonight. I close the door behind me and pace the length of the tacky space with red faux-leather sofas and black walls.

My younger sister answers in a matter of seconds. "Ava!"

"What…?" I swallow. "What's wrong? Are Mama and Papa okay?"

"They're fine."

"Nana and Grandpa?"

"Living their best life on their latest cruise in the Mediterranean Sea."

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"Okay…then what's the emergency?"

"Figured it was the best way to get you to call me."

I release a long, tortured breath and lean against the side of the sofa. "Ari, you little shit, you scared the hell out of me."

"Oh, please. No more than you scared the hell out of us during that competition earlier, then proceeded to ghost us."

"I didn't ghost you. Besides, it was…nothing."

"Only if 'nothing' means literally freezing midnote for, like, five minutes and then storming off the stage."

"I had…a block."

Of senses. Of existence.

I literally ceased to be me at that moment.

"And you couldn't, like, talk to us about it?"

"So you'd pity me?"

"So we'd support you, idiot. Mama and Papa are worried about you. I'm worried about you."

I bite the corner of my lip. Why the hell do I manage to be like this and concern every single person I love about my mental state?

"We'll talk tomorrow after I'm past the hangover. Can you tell Mama and Papa that I'm doing okay right now and keeping busy practicing for the next competition?"

"Sure. How much do I get paid for lying?"

"Bitch, please. You love lying."

"I love getting paid more." I can imagine her smiling like a little psycho. "How about you tell me Remi's schedule for the week and we call it even?"

"Ari…you're my baby sister and I love you, but you need to take a hint when a man isn't interested in you and move on."

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"Didn't stop you when you were falling into a puddle at Eli's uninterested feet."

I touch my hair and clear my throat. "And I got over him and then some. In fact, I hate He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named."

"As you should, Sis."

"Maybe you can do the same?"

"Nah. Eli is unfeeling and has no trace of any human emotion in him. My Remi is different. He's lovable, a gentleman, and every woman's dream man. He just needs a little push to see the love of his life, aka me."

I smile despite myself. "You're not going to give up, are you?"

"Only after my ring is on his finger."

"Jesus. You're thinking of marriage at eighteen?"

"I've loved him since I was eleven. That's seven years too late, if you ask me."

"Oh Lord."

"Back to the topic at hand, are you going to get me that schedule, Ava?"

"Nope."

"Is this really worth losing my support when Mama and Papa grill you for actual answers? Think very carefully, Sis."

"Ugh, you're a little bitch."

"I take after my beautiful bitch of a sister. Mua ha ha."

I'm about to call her a few colorful names when I hear the door clicking open behind me. "Give me a sec, Ollie…"

My words trail off when I face the door and get instantly trapped in the depths of those eyes.

Cold. Indifferent. Stormy.

I swallow hard, not caring if my sister hears it. "I'll talk to you later."

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"Only if you have that schedule for me. Byeeee."

She hangs up, and the sudden click nearly makes me jump in my skin. Though it has nothing to do with Ari and everything to do with the man whose height and broadness block the entire exit.

I straighten, forcing my shoulders back, but it's categorically impossible to make them relax.

"To what do I owe this displeasure?"

I'm proud of how bored my voice sounds. It took a lot of practice to sound as cold and indifferent as he is.

Eli shoves himself off the door, and even though he no longer blocks my exit, his presence overwhelms my senses in a fraction of a second.

Imposing. Intimidating. Suffocating.

I can't take my gaze off him because I know it will take only one misstep and it'll be game over for me.

One stupid move, and I'll strip away another chunk of my barely put-together soul.

"The real question is…" His smooth, deep voice touches my warm skin like a whip. "What have you done to owe me the displeasure, Ava?"

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CHAPTER 2
AVA

A LONG TIME AGO, WHEN I WAS YOUNGER AND dumber, I used to look at this man like he was a god.

The only touchable god. One I could see up close and personal. One I could worship without fearing any system of reward and punishment.

I had the dedication of a religious fanatic and a lunatic fundamentalist until the grandiosity shattered right before my eyes.

The god was never a god after all. He's more akin to a devil: sinful, seductive, and destructive.

Now I understand why people who leave their religion have the most contempt for it. I completely get why they sabotage it, sully its name, and write hateful words about it in obscure online forums.

When you give an undeserving god your dedication and he ruins you through it, you're bound to loathe him so that you don't hate that stupid version of yourself who once worshipped him.

When I followed that god like a lovesick puppy and he looked at me once in a blue moon, I nearly gave myself a heart attack due to the excitement. I was lucky to have any form of recognition from a man who had girls falling at his feet, but I was the only one who got close.

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Now I see it for what it is: indifference.

I meet Eli's frosty gaze with my nonchalant one. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did you just insinuate that I care about your opinion concerning anything I do?"

He steps closer silently, smoothly, almost creepily. I'm forced to tip my head back to stare at him.

I hate how tall he is, and I'm not short by any means.

It's just that Eli was made to look down his straight nose at most people, and he does it so well, with a pinch of arrogance and an unhealthy dose of utter disregard.

He has a way of making others feel like they're not worth a speck of dust beneath his shoe.

It's the handsome face, I realize. He was born with superior looks, thanks to his parents and due to no contribution on his part. A face that makes people stop and stare at the ridiculously sharp jaw, perfectly proportional high cheekbones, and stunningly full lips.

But Eli's most notable feature has always been those mysterious eyes.

People say eyes are the windows to the soul, but it's impossible to tell what he's thinking, no matter how long you stare at them. They run deep—so deep that I was pulled into them once upon a time. I fought and floundered and yearned to be the only one who understood them.

Good thing I'm out of that haze now and couldn't care less about whatever demonic plans he entertains.

He stops a few steps away, but it's enough to flood my senses with his scent, something subtle and masculine and definitely made specifically for him, because I've never smelled it anywhere else. "You clearly don't care about my opinion."

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"Clearly." I cross my arms to stop my hands from giving away my mental state. If there's something I've learned about Eli, it's that he's a master manipulator and a predator who won't hesitate to use people's weaknesses against them. Ruin them through those potential loss-of-control moments. Absolutely decimate them until there's nothing left.

"But you do care enough to put on amateurish shows in front of me." The slight lilt in his deep voice catches me off guard.

"You might believe you're the sun and that the world revolves around you, and I'd hate to burst your bubble, but no, no show I do is for you."

"Even when you were looking at me the entire time you were acting like a stripper?"

I force a smile, refusing to fall for the provocation. "You know me. I love giving attention to admirers."

A curve touches the corner of his lips. "So I'm one of the admirers now?"

"Clearly. Or you wouldn't be following me around like a simp. Sorry, you're not my type."

"Is this the part where I get on my knees and beg?"

"I'm afraid that won't cut it."

"How about if I send flowers and a box of chocolates?"

"Unoriginal. Try harder."

"If I cry into my pillow?"

"Only if I get to witness it personally."

"So I have a shot. Fantastic."

I release an exasperated sigh, putting an end to the stupid back-and-forth. I hate his blatant amusement whenever he riles me up for sport. But what I despise more is how I still fall for it every time.

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"What do you want, Eli?"

"From you? Nothing."

"And yet you're haunting me like a vengeful ghost."

"More like one of those mischievous ones that scare the ever-loving fuck out of you just for laughs."

"Ha ha. There, I laughed. We done?"

"You're supposed to be scared."

"Oh, hold on." I throw my hands up and shield my face, mimicking watching a horror film. "I'm so terrified. So scared. Get me out of this B movie scene. Is that enough for you tonight?"

"Your strap has fallen." He motions at my chest.

I slap a hand on it instinctively before I look down and see that the strap is perfectly in place.

A nick of annoyance mounts on the previous copious levels of annoyance, and I narrow my eyes at him.

"It didn't? My bad." He doesn't sound apologetic in the least. "But then again, you wouldn't have had to worry about it if you weren't dressed like a stripper."

"I'll call when I have any fucks to give about your opinion of me."

"You're funny."

"And pretty and popular. Your point?"

"Delusional, too. Apparently."

"Nah. I leave that to you." I hike a hand on my hip. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have better people to spend my time with."

I walk past him, my head held high, ready to tuck this unfortunate encounter away with all the previous ones.

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"I heard you made a fool out of yourself today. Again."

My heels click on the floor as I come to an abrupt halt

and turn around to face him. All of a sudden, I'm thirsty. For alcohol.

Or anything that's able to soothe the dull ache at the back of my throat.

Crossing my arms, I adopt my most mocking voice. "Whoa there, soldier. Slow down on the stalkerish tendencies, would you?"

"Don't even try to sass me, Ava. What was it this time? Your pills malfunction?"

"Screw you," I snarl.

"I'm not interested in contracting the nest of STIs from the losers you fraternize with."

"They're no worse than your fuck buddies."

"My fuck buddies are always tested, unlike the drug addicts you mingle with. And don't try to change the subject. Why did you flee this time? What did you see? Or not see?"

My lips part, and I stare at him like he's an alien. What does he know? *How* does he know?

It doesn't make sense.

Sure, since our families are close and his mum is my godmother, he's aware of my condition. But like everyone else, he must think it's depression, anxiety, and some mild case of psychosis. He could deduce the meds, and considering his stalkerish habits, he could figure out the alcohol and the occasional drugs.

But that's it.

There's no way in hell he's privy to what's eating me from the inside.

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I lift my chin. "No idea what you're talking about."

He narrows his eyes. Gray. Stormy. Calculating.

I can see him concocting a plan to coax me to talk, but if that doesn't work, I'm sure he'll force it out of me. Even if I kick and scream.

Especially if I kick and scream.

"Speak, Ava. Don't make me resort to unpleasant methods we both know you're unable to handle."

A lick of heat sneaks its way beneath my dress, and the room's temperature takes a sudden hike. My throat dries, and it's exceptionally difficult to swallow.

"I didn't know you were this concerned about me." I flash him my sweetest smile. "I'm touched."

"Concerned? More like embarrassed."

"You'd have to care to be embarrassed by my actions, and we both know that emotion doesn't exist in your arsenal."

"It exists in my mother's. She called me to ask about your, and I quote, 'worrisome state of mind.'"

The thing I hate most about Eli is that his mother is Elsa King, aka my godmother and second mother figure after Mama.

Sometimes I can't believe a considerate, absolute green flag of a woman actually gave birth to this devil. I'm surprised he didn't eat her while he was in the womb like some parasite.

"I'll talk to Aunt Elsa myself. You stay out of it."

"Only if you stop being such a disgrace. You're becoming an embarrassment to your family. I'm certain your ex–prime minister grandfather will disapprove of your scandalous lifestyle if it's printed in gossip magazines."

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I grit my teeth so hard, my jaw hurts. "Thanks for the touching concern. You might want to stop being so

obsessed with my life. Desperation doesn't look good on you."

"Because it looks better on you?" His lips tilt in that infuriating way again, and it takes everything in me not to slap it away.

"If you're done…" I start to walk to the exit, but he steps in front of me, blocking the light, the door, and my oxygen.

Eli first and last touched me four years ago, when I was seventeen, and ended my birthday, turning it into the most shameful disaster.

Since then, he never does. Not even accidentally. But that doesn't stop his heat from engulfing me and his smell from invading my every sense.

He's too warm for a cold bastard.

"Go home, Ava."

"Since when do you get to tell me what to do?"

"Since you're clearly unable to think. Don't take anyone home. Don't drive. Take a black cab and leave."

"Aw, you're not going to offer to drive me yourself?"

He raises a perfect brow. "Would you take said offer?"

"No."

"So what's the point of making it?"

"Indulging me, perhaps?"

"You're far too indulged by others. I don't plan on making the list."

"You won't make any list, for that matter."

"Debatable." He steps closer, his body heat enveloping me like a threatening cloud as his rough voice deepens. "Now leave."

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"The answer is no."

"Out of spite?"

"You're not my keeper."

"Let's go with that if it makes you sleep better at night."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Go home," he says again and then turns to leave. When he reaches the door, he throws me a dark look over his shoulder. "Alone."

I resist the urge to flip him the middle finger as I stand there fuming, my body warm and my heart thumping so loudly, I'm surprised it doesn't spill out onto the ugly carpet in the room.

My state is so extremely disoriented that I have to take some time to pull myself together again.

Ten minutes later, I find my way back to the dance floor. Screw Eli and his orders that definitely won't be met.

I let myself be absorbed by a swirling vortex of ecstasy, a concoction of substances, and emotions that transport me to a realm of hedonistic bliss. Among the lost souls and hollow shells, I find solace and acceptance, a sense of belonging that makes everything else fade into the background.

So I drink another shot, dance until I nearly drop, then agree to join Ollie and some others at an after-party.

Fuck Eli.

Fuck the cello.

Fuck my fucking head.

By the time we spill outside, it's somewhere after one in the morning.

I shouldn't be driving, but our friend Raj's house is, like, ten minutes away, and the roads are empty at this time, so I should be fine.

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Besides, I hold my liquor pretty well, so I'm not even that drunk. Just drunk enough to see the world through pink goggles, like my favorite color.

I stumble into my car and tell the others to go ahead. Ollie offers to drive me, but I decline with a smile.

Before I pull out of the parking lot, I text Cecily that I'm home, like a world-class liar. But it's because she won't be able to sleep if she knows I'm still out.

What Cecy and my parents don't know is that I refuse the notion of spending any unnecessary time alone.

Jesus. I can't believe I'm graduating in a couple of weeks. What am I going to do without the buffer uni's offered me?

Make other cliques of friends outside? Join a thousand and one clubs?

I desperately need to stay out of my parents' orbit before they figure everything out.

With a sigh, I shove all those thoughts to the back of my mental closet as I refresh my makeup.

My phone vibrates, and I freeze when I see it's a text from Eli.

Tin Man: Are you going home?
Me: New phone. Who's this?
Tin Man: Your location better be on the way home.
Me: Guess where I am for a hundred quid.

I snap a selfie while doing a kissy face and send it over, then silence my phone and pull out of the car park. I nearly drive into a wall, but my car's camera saves me in time.

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Oops.

I follow the GPS and voice command the car to play music. Bach's Cello Suite no. 2 in D minor fills the car, and I release an annoyed noise as I punch the radio button and listen to some pop music instead.

Classical music and I are officially divorcing.

That's what I said after my last failed attempt at winning yet another competition last year.

And yet I went back this year. Only to make a bigger fool of myself.

What did you see? Or not see?

Eli's words from earlier send a shiver down my spine.

He couldn't have known, right?

No one does—

I stare at my rearview mirror when I notice a car without headlights following me.

How long has that been there?

I look ahead but the road is clear.

Shit.

Okay.

I shake my head to come back into focus and speed up, just a tiny bit over the speed limit.

The car matches my speed, and my heart starts to gallop at a scary rhythm. I voice command my phone to call the police.

You can never be too careful in these situations. Even if I'm overthinking it.

I come to a junction and hit the brakes when a car flashes past. Jesus. A BMW. No surprises there.

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The suspicious car comes to a halt behind me as someone picks up.

"Metropolitan Police Emergency Department. How might I help?"

"There's a weird car without headlights following me," I say as I hit the accelerator again, pushing the car forward with sudden speed. My body flings backward as the tires screech.

"I need you to remain calm, miss. May I have your name?"

"Ava…Ava Nash."

"Can I call you 'Ava'?"

"Yeah."

"Can you tell me where you are, Ava?"

"I don't know exactly. Near the M25. Hold on—" I steal a look at the GPS, and the next thing I hear is the loud, unbearable blaring of a truck's horn before its bright lights blind me.

I turn the steering wheel as hard as I can while hitting the brakes. My car swerves as I spin around and around, and then a sickening crash resounds in my ears.

The last thing I see are the eyes that follow me everywhere.

Dark. Cold. Destructive.

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CHAPTER 3
AVA

A BITTER TASTE STICKS TO THE BACK OF MY DRY throat.

I cough but choke, the sound leaving my lungs in long, torturous heaves.

Darkness materializes around me with depressing finality, and I completely lose any sense of my physical body.

I don't know where I am.

My surroundings dive into pitch-blackness.

My head follows suit as tendrils of shadowy hands grab me.

A strangled sound gets trapped in my belly, and the tight noose of a panic attack wraps around my throat.

No…

No…

No.

I blink my eyes open, and slowly, almost like a slow-motion documentary, the grainy colors of reality engulf me.

The light condensation against the oxygen mask strapped to my face comes first, followed by bright white walls.

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Darkness recedes in my peripheral vision with a snake-like motion, and with it, my awareness trickles back in.

A beeping machine.

The smell of hospitals and mint essential oil.

The gradual return of my physical body to reality.

My name is Ava Nash. Twenty-one years old. I love classical music and reading scandalous bodice-ripper novels. I watch cheesy rom-coms or true-crime documentaries—nothing in between. I'm kind of obsessed with the color pink, can eat candy floss for days, can't get enough of salted caramel popcorn, and can survive on smoothies as long as they have strawberries in them.

Like every time I get my episodes, I repeat the usual mantra I taught myself. It's my attempt to prove my existence to the shadowy version of myself. The version that seems to forget the entire world and succumbs to frightening numbness for extended periods of time.

I breathe steadily as the remnants of the fog clear, and I wiggle my toes. It's a habit I picked up to ensure I'm here. In the present.

My other self doesn't have the capacity to wiggle my toes. I watched some security footage from our house once. I look robotic when I'm in that state—too stiff, too emotionless.

Too lost.

The feel of my body returns in small increments, and that's when I sense that my right hand is warm.

Too warm.

I try to crane my head to the side, and the rustling of the pillow fills the quiet space.

"Ava?"

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Deep, rough notes penetrate my foggy brain, and I find it hard to remember to breathe properly.

Eli's cradling my hand between both of his as he stares at me from the chair at my bedside.

I thought I'd already woken up.

Is this another episode—or, worse, a nightmare?

I swallow, but a ball constricts my throat. So I wiggle my toes again and, yup, still moving. This is real.

How…?

I stare at Eli's brutally handsome face as if it'll explode with answers for his bizarre existence in my vicinity.

For some reason, he looks older than when I saw him earlier. Slight stubble covers his harsh jawline, and his hair is longer, disheveled, and finger-raked. He appears to be a bit tired as well, his lips absent of some of their color, as if he's suffering from a cold.

Wait.

Can hair grow in the span of a few hours?

A day?

Two?

I narrow my eyes, trying to remember the last thing that happened. I was going to an after-party with Ollie, Raj, and the others, but then…I…

A car without headlights.

Calling 999.

Blinding lights.

A lorry.

A crash.

Stormy, harsh, soulless eyes.

The same eyes that are fixating on me right now.

"Ava? Can you hear me?"

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The rough timbre of his voice nearly sends me into a more prominent panic attack. My heartbeat spikes, and the

machines go crazy. Crazier than the fake note of concern in his voice.

He curses under his breath and pushes something above my head as he strokes my face.

"Breathe, Ava. Fuck, come on, beautiful. Breathe."

I actually stop panicking for a second because what…? What's going on?

He called me *beautiful*, and he's touching me. Matter of fact, he's been touching me since I woke up.

Eli never touches me.

The longer I stare at his eyes, the more my breathing slows. They're different. But how…? Why…?

"That's it. Good girl."

My heart trips over itself, and my breathing stutters. The machines beep louder, and my world tilts on its axis.

Did Eli just call me a good girl?

The Eli King?

Oh.

This must be a dream after all. Let's hope it doesn't turn into a nightmare where he jams a spear into my chest and laughs like a maniac as my blood splatters on his precious shoes.

I close my eyes and will myself to go back to reality. This is just so cruel, even by my strange-dreams standards.

"Ava…open those eyes. Look at me."

I peek at him and immediately regret it. His somber gray eyes are as angry as a hurricane and as tempting as the damn devil.

"You feeling all right?"

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His words don't match his expression. He sounds concerned, but he looks bored. Cold. Indifferent.

Like the Eli I'm used to and the Tin Man we all know and hate.

This imposter needs to piss off or at least put more effort into sounding sardonic and unbearably sarcastic like the actual Eli. Two out of five on Trustpilot—could use more imitation skills.

I pull the mask from my face with an ease I didn't expect. Honestly, after that accident, with a truck, no less, I expected to die or at least end up with lifelong paralysis. In the best-case scenario, I'd get away with a few broken bones. I stare down at myself, at my hands, and move my toes again.

Nothing.

There's no way in hell I would've come out of that one unscathed.

Hold on. Was the accident a dream?

Though, if I were speculating, I'd bet money the current situation is the actual dream, not the other one.

Maybe I'm dead and this is a benevolent angel's effort to give me a dreamlike experience of what I couldn't have when alive.

Brilliant. Dead at twenty-one. What a loss of potential.

But maybe it's a good outcome, considering all the fuckery that's been happening in my life lately. And the burden I've posed to the people closest to me.

I start to sit up, then pause. Eli helps me and sets a pillow behind me so I'm comfy.

Maybe I'm disfigured and he's sympathizing? Though he doesn't do that.

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If sympathy were to meet Eli in an alley, it'd stab itself in the eye, and he'd just step on it and be on his merry way.

I touch my face and feel the normal texture. No bandage. Hmm. I'm at a loss, to be honest.

"What are you doing here, Eli?" My voice sounds low, husky, a bit odd, as if I've been screaming for days.

Eli rises to his full height, looking majestic in a black shirt and gray trousers. His godlike presence and the tinge of intimidation that rushes through me whenever I'm around him pale in comparison to a different phenomenon.

His eyes.

They grow in size for the first time in my life. They're a lighter shade of gray, close to a cloudy summer's day.

"Say that again." He speaks slowly.

"What are you doing here, Eli?" Annoyance breaks through my voice, and I have to swallow past the discomfort.

Before he can answer, I catch the shadow of Papa and Mama walking through the door. They're both holding coffee cups and speaking in a hushed tone.

I think I hear "*again*" and "*it's not doable anymore*." My posture straightens to eavesdrop, but they both halt when they lift their heads and see me.

A rush of comfort mixed with a tinge of unease floods me. Yikes. I avoided them for as long as I could after the competition, but a strange car without headlights brought us to this less-than-glamorous scene.

"Hi, Mama, Papa…" I say with a guilty voice and trail off when they look positively shocked, as if I'm a ghost.

Something's off.

They both seem worn out, like they've aged five years since the last time I saw them. My father, Cole Nash, is the most collected man and the most loving father, and yet, right now, he looks to be on the edge of something. His

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beautiful green eyes, which have always reminded me of spring and sparkling exotic water, look half dead.

He's lost weight, too.

Mama is worse. Her usually shiny blond hair that she passed down to me is now dull and uncharacteristically gathered in a ponytail. Her skin is pasty white, and her face looks haggard.

Silver Queens Nash is a celebrity in this world. And it's not because Grandpapa is an ex–prime minister, my nan is an ex-politician, or my father is a business tycoon. It's because she chairs different charities and works extremely hard to make our world a better place.

She's how I learned empathy, sympathy, and to be abundantly aware of my privilege and how to use it to help others.

My parents are the reason behind my high standards for love, family, and communication.

They taught me and Ari our worth way before we were old enough to understand the term.

So it kills me to feel like I'm the reason behind their soulless eyes.

"Ava, honey…" Mum wraps her arms around me and squeezes me in a hug that nearly crushes me.

"She…" I can see Papa's calculating gaze straying to Eli. A look of mutual understanding passes between them before my father nods, and a fractured sigh falls from his lips.

What the hell is going on?

Papa has never liked Eli. And I mean *never*.

He's called him a little psycho since he was twelve and has often gotten into massive rows with Uncle Aiden—Eli's dad—over that.

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He hated him even more when I had a stupid crush on him and warned me to avoid the nuisance, as if he were a spark of fire and I were a house pumped full of petrol.

It's safe to say that he's the only person who joins in enthusiastically whenever I talk shit about Eli. So the fact he's nodding in agreement with the same person he calls *a prison runaway* and *a privileged criminal* is bizarre, to say the least.

This is a dream after all.

Mama pulls away, but her touch doesn't feel surreal. I can feel her warmth and smell her favorite cherry perfume. It's her. My mother.

"Are you feeling okay, honey?" she asks, stroking my hair away from my face.

Papa sits beside her, and I stare at them, then at Eli, who's standing behind them like a wall, both hands in his pockets and a devious look in his eyes.

"Yeah," I answer. "Papa. What's going on? Where's Ari?"

"Ari went to get you a change of clothes." Papa strokes my hand. "Do you need anything else?"

"No…" I get distracted by Eli again, pause, swallow, then groan. "Seriously, why is he here? Wait. You can see him, too, right? Mama? Papa?"

Mama steals a glimpse behind her, and when she looks back at me with a furrow in her brow, my heart races so fast, I nearly throw up.

Is it my imagination again?

No.

Please no.

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"Where else would Eli be?" Mama asks with a note of confusion.

"He better have stayed the entire night by your side." That note of loathing Papa has for Eli rushes to the surface, and I let out a breath.

Okay. It's a bit more normal now. Except where Papa wants Eli to spend the night by my side.

And that he's here in the first place.

"Do you remember what happened, hon?" Mum asks.

All of a sudden, a shroud of tension covers the room. Three pairs of eyes dig into my skull in silent expectation.

Way to pressure a girl.

"Um, yeah. I called 999 before the accident because someone was following me…" I trail off when I hear a subtle *tsk* coming from Eli, then narrow my eyes at him.

"Someone was following you inside the house?" Papa asks with a note of weird carefulness.

"Was someone else there when you fell down the stairs?" Mama says.

"Stairs…? There were no stairs. It was a…"

My lips seal together when Eli shakes his head. I narrow my eyes.

"It's fine if you're confused," Papa says. "You've been under a lot of pressure lately, so let's leave it for now. We're just glad you're okay."

I nod, but the confusion mounts to an unprecedented level. I am so going to have a field day talking to Cecy about this.

"Where's my phone?" I ask Mama. "I want to call Cecy."

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"She's on her way from the States."

I frown. "But she wasn't leaving until next week."

"She hasn't been here for about a month, Ava," Mama tells me, her voice soft but her face slightly paler.

What? There's no way. We were together a few hours ago.

My protests remain unsaid when a few doctors and nurses walk inside, looking like a prim-and-proper private crew that someone like Eli—or Papa—would insist on hiring.

"How are you feeling, Mrs. King?" the doctor asks, and I search my surroundings for Aunt Elsa—Eli's mum. Or maybe Aunt Astrid—Eli's aunt. Or Eli's grandmother. Those are the only Mrs. Kings I know.

I find none of them and redirect my gaze at the white-haired doctor, who's watching me with that fake sympathy.

"Mrs. King?" he repeats.

"Who is he talking to?" I whisper to no one in particular. "Is Aunt Elsa around?"

"He's talking to you, Ava," Eli says with a cruel tilt to his lips. "We got married two years ago, remember?"

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CHAPTER 4
AVA

MY JAW NEARLY HITS THE FLOOR, AND MY mouth remains hanging open for longer than socially acceptable.

I stare at the countless faces surrounding me, searching for the joke. The *I got you*. The *you didn't see that coming, did you?*

Neither comes.

"Mrs. King?" the doctor asks again while adjusting his gold-framed glasses.

My heart squeezes and beats in intervals of uncomfortable pain.

Something must be wrong. There's no way I'm Mrs. King nor that I married Eli two years ago.

I was floundering in fucking depression two years ago. He mocked, ridiculed, and humiliated me two years before that.

He taught me the valuable lesson to never love again.

There's no way in hell I married him when I was nineteen nor that Papa would have allowed it.

I release a burst of nervous laughter before it chokes and dies down amid concerned gazes from my parents, sympathetic looks from the doctors, and a cold glance from the devil himself.

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"Good one," I say with my usual cheerful energy. "Almost got me there. I don't know what I did to piss you off this time, considering you're always such a joy to be around, but I think you took it too far."

Eli's eyes narrow the slightest bit, and I think I catch a muscle clenching in his jaw.

"Mrs. King," says the impressively groomed doctor. "Can you start by telling us what year we're in?"

"Ava. It's Ava. Stop calling me 'Mrs.…that'!" I snap.

"It's okay." Mama strokes my shoulder. "Try to relax, hon."

I realize my fingers are clenched in the bedsheets and my palms sting. I slowly release them and frown when I find my nails short and bare. I've always had a shade of pink on my nails and toenails since I was fifteen.

It's impossible that I've kept them bare.

Did the hospital remove my nail polish when I was admitted? That seems trivial and quite bizarre.

"I need this entire thing to stop." I sound more determined than I feel. "I'm not married to that prick, and I sure as hell am not Mrs. anything. I'm only twenty-one, for God's sake."

The sudden tension in the room slaps me across the face, and I freeze upon catching the note of horror in my parents' expression.

"Wh-what?" I sound terrified to my own ears. "What's wrong?"

Eli's gaze, which could rival Antarctica's frozen landscapes, falls on me. "You turned twenty-three a few months ago, and we've been married for over two years, Ava."

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I realize I'm shaking my head and force myself to stop as I study my parents' gazes. "He's lying, right? Mama…? Papa…?"

Since I was young, I've known my father to be a massive figure in and outside our home. The man who could fill the horizon with his presence alone but who still treated my mum like a queen, and Ari and me like his princesses.

So to see him lower his head sparks a jolt of pain in me. Because I know, I just *know* I'm the only note of discomfort and shame in his and Mama's perfect family. The splash of black ink on his intricately woven life.

Ari is the normal, though mischievous, daughter. I'm the anomaly. The one they sometimes need to walk on eggshells around because I was born with a defective brain and a serious case of psychosis.

It was fine when I was living with them, when they could keep me under their watch and coax me to take the meds I hate more than my faulty brain.

But uni came along, and I think they gave up. Or maybe I forced them to by keeping my distance whenever they popped that unorthodox question: *Have you been taking your meds?*

I'd say yes instead of the truth. I'd been substituting those fuckers with my favorite cocktail of alcohol and drugs.

Now I can see that concern rising from the ashes as Mama shakes her head.

It's not a lie.

Even if Eli is devious enough to stage this masquerade and even hire an entire medical crew for it, my parents would never betray me.

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My gaze falls on those eyes that have haunted me my entire life.

Stormy. Icy. Mysterious.

And reality slams into me worse than my disturbing nightmares.

I've lost complete recollection of my life for two whole years.

And somehow, someway, I managed to get myself in the worst trouble imaginable.

Married to Eli King.

This is just another nightmare I'll eventually wake up from, right?

So it's not a nightmare.

I lift my head from Cecily's shoulder and stare at her face. Her hair is shorter now, all pretty and wavy. She looks more mature; her eyes sparkle differently.

Happy.

I realize that's what she looks like: happy.

Though something's troubling her, and I can take a wild guess that it has to do with me.

After Cecy and Ari came along, I managed to kick Eli out under the pretext that I needed girl time.

My sister's style has also changed. She used to dress in these wannabe outfits that could rival the wardrobe of Satan's favorite underlings, but right now she's wearing a cute polka-dot dress and black Prada boots.

Her bowl-cut dark hair makes her look adorable, but like a gorgeous menace.

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I can't believe she's, like, twenty now. Twenty.

The prospect that I didn't only lose two years of my life but also of hers and everyone I care about floods my veins with unease.

As I push away from Cecy, Ari shimmies out of her boots and sits cross-legged on the hospital bed, watching me like a rookie detective from those late-night mysteries. "You could use some skin care."

"Thanks for the concern, little shit."

"Anytime." She flips her hair, but I can see the hint of pain she attempts to hide. "I thought I'd never see you again."

She pauses and bites her lip when Cecily shakes her head.

I stare between them, feeling awfully like an outsider. An imposter in someone else's skin. "What's going on?"

Cecily releases a heavy sigh. "We thought something bad would happen to you after we heard about, you know."

"I don't know. What?"

"After you fell down the stairs," Cecily says.

"You really threw yourself down the stairs?" Ari asks in a vulnerable voice I'm not used to hearing from my rowdier-than-hell sister.

"What…? No? I don't know. I don't remember that. I don't remember anything after…after the party last—"

I cut myself off before I say *last night*, because that's not the case, confirmed by my doctor, who suspects I suffer from a form of dissociative selective amnesia.

There's no telling what the reason is nor how I'd be able to retrieve the missing memories except by being in a supportive environment.

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Which is a lot of words to say he has no solution.