

evermore



HE'S NO  
FAIRY-TALE  
KING

# CRUEL KING

A ROYAL ELITE BOOK

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RINA KENT

PENGUIN BOOKS

# CRUEL KING

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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# CRUEL KING

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To the invisible ones.

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# AUTHOR NOTE

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Hello reader friend,

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 are morally gray and don't conform to societal standards.

*Cruel King* is a complete standalone in the Royal Elite world.

To remain true to the characters, the vocabulary, grammar, and spelling of *Cruel King* is written in British English.

## ROYAL ELITE SERIES:

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*Ruthless Empire*

*Royal Elite Epilogue*

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# PLAYLIST

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## THEME SONG

Time is Running Out—Muse

## PLAYLIST

The Fear—The Score

Paint It, Black—Ciara

Stronger—The Score

King of Nothing—Broadside

Pressure—Muse

Champion—Bishop Briggs

Supremacy—Muse

Mercy—Muse

Undisclosed Desires—Muse

Supermassive Black Hole—Muse

White Flag—Normandie

I Really Wish I Hated You—blink-182

Devil Devil—MILCK

Takeaway—The Chainsmokers

I Think I'm Okay—Machine Gun Kelly & Yungblud

Arcadia—Smash Into Pieces

Head Above Water—Avril Lavigne

Something Just Like This—Coldplay & The Chainsmokers

Hurricane—I Prevail  
For Reasons Unknown—The Killers  
Boyfriend—Ariana Grande & Social House

Find the Playlist on Spotify: [open.spotify.com/  
playlist/19zxVXZhptbIVs7omqXQAP](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/19zxVXZhptbIVs7omqXQAP)

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# 1

## ASTRID

---

*You may be noble, but stay away from King.*

This is the last place I should be.  
Alcohol, drunk teenagers, and thumping music.

A party.

Not to be dramatic, although I probably am, this place is like my worst nightmare wrapped in super-expensive watered-down alcohol.

Now, I'm not that much of a fun-ruiner, although my best friend, Dan, would say otherwise.

Spoiler alert, don't believe anything Dan says. He's into drama and all that jazz.

But I promised him I'd attend one party before the summer starts. Since Dan is part of the football team, I expected him to take me to their usual thing—not that I know what that is, but I had an idea it'd be in some posh house in London.

However, the sneaky wanker chose *the* party. A.k.a. the mother of all freaking parties in Royal Elite.

When Dan and I walked inside, I had to double-check to see if we were somehow trespassing into the Queen's

holiday mansion and if I should tell Her Majesty that I saw the drunk captain of the rugby team piss in her pool.

To say the place is huge would be like saying the Vikings are tiny. Okay, that was lame, but I kind of insert the Vikings in any similes I make.

Golden arcs decorate the entrance and all the way to the massive lounge area. The vaulted ceilings and the sweeping stairs only add to how ridiculously grandiose this place is—even for Royal Elite’s level. Jeez. To top it off, there are butlers serving drunk teenagers more drinks than they need.

I mean, I come from money. Scratch that. Dad is rich, I’m not. However, this is on a whole different level. Even for me.

When Dan said it was party night, I thought we’d crash in one of the popular ‘elite’ houses.

We’d drink their expensive liquor, try to pretend that we belonged to the same school that has the future prime minister and parliament members in the making, and then piss off to nurse a hangover.

But Dan forgot to mention a tiny detail about the location of the party.

It’s in the middle of freaking nowhere.

I stopped following the twists and turns Dan took with his car the moment we were out of London and no road signs came into view.

The mansion is hidden behind tall pine trees on top of a hill—no kidding. The owner is either way too private or way too gothic.

Or both.

Aside from the attendees’ cars, there’s nothing in sight.

Now that I think about it, this would be the perfect opportunity to mass murder everyone.

I can totally see this as the opening scene of a horror film.

*You need to stop watching all those gory films.* I can almost hear Dad scold in my mind. Oh, right. He's not Dad. He's *Father*.

That should summarise the formal nature of my relationship with Lord Clifford. He may or may not kill me for coming to this party without his permission.

One more reason why I follow Dan's demonic plots.

I sip from my second drink. I had one shot with Dan as soon as we arrived, but then he buggered off, so now, I'm walking around with this cocktail. There's barely a burn at the end, but I have a high tolerance, so this is nothing.

I need a distraction from the scene around me. I can't believe Dan left me—probably to go shag. Worst wingman ever.

The entire school is gathered here. Some sway to the loud, offbeat music. Outside, a few of the rugby team cannonball into the kidney-shaped pool—that has piss in it. Others howl as they play a drinking competition that I wish I had the guts to participate in.

But then again, nothing is worth jeopardising my current position in the school—I'm part of the invisible folk. You know the type: those who no one actually cares if they miss a class or two—or an entire year. And I'd like to remain that way, thank you very much.

Invisibility is a cool superpower that allows me to breeze through without any bullshit or drama.

However, if I was going to remain that way, I should've probably chosen a less noticeable best friend than Daniel. In my defence, when I discovered his popularity, he'd already super-glued himself to me as my wingman.

Even with his popularity, I'm invisible enough that his harem of girls don't notice me when they're hitting on him.

Some of the Royal Elite students present here are still wearing their pristine uniforms with red ties and navy blue jackets. On their pockets, the school's golden logo is embroidered. The lion in a shield, topped by a crown, is a sign of both the power and corruption simmering within the walls of the school.

There's a reason the uniformed people are alone in a circle, probably discussing books. I would join in, but I doubt they'd like it when I tell them they're not supposed to wear a uniform to a party.

Even I, a total 'party terrorist'—per Dan's words—have opted for jean shorts, fishnet stockings, and a simple black top. Oh, I also wore my favourite white basketball trainers that Mum painted black stars on.

My heart shrinks at the thought of her. I take a deep breath of the alcohol and the designer perfumes permeating the air.

Fun. This is supposed to be a night of fun.

My idea of fun includes either my art studio or marathoning the latest gory film.

Just saying.

A long howl at the entrance wrenches me back to the present.

The chatter weans and the crowd parts like the Red Sea did for Moses.

When the kids trip over each other to make way, I'm not surprised to see the football team waltzing in like freaking England's champions. Only, wait. I think they did win a game that would lead them to some sort of a school championship today.

This could or could not be the celebration party for their win.

Another tiny detail that Dan forgot to mention.

*I'm not going to kill my best friend.*

*I'm not going to kill my best friend.*

Screw it.

I retrieve my phone and type.

**Astrid:** You're dead, Dan. Better start picking your funeral song.

**Daniel:** Resistance by Muse. U know that. What got ur knickers in a twist?

**Astrid:** Football party? Give me a fucking break. I'd rather choke on my own vomit.

**Daniel:** First, eww. Second, did I mention eww? Third, stop being a drama queen, crazy bugger.

**Astrid:** Where are u?

**Daniel:** Convincing Laura Davis to suck my dick. Heard she deep-throats like a pro.

**Astrid:** You're a pig. \*disgusted emoji\*

**Daniel:** What? It's on my list of things to do while I'm still in school.

**Astrid:** I'm beginning to think that ur list only has sex missions on it.

**Daniel:** There's nothing better than fucking.

**Astrid:** I'd rather watch gore.

**Daniel:** Astrid, I love u, but u're weird.

**Daniel:** Gotta go, Laura is giving me the look.

Great. I'm really on my own while Dan is banging his random girl for the night.

My head gets fuzzy—not sure if it's because of the drink or something else. Even the football team, who are fist-bumping the eager crowd and grabbing a random butt here and there, become hazy.

All I keep hearing are the multiple shouts of “King!”

There are two of those at Royal Elite School, also known as RES. According to Dad—sorry, *Father*—I'm to stay away from anything with the last name King.

When I became Lord Henry Clifford's ‘public’ daughter, he had two rules for me:

*You will not disgrace the Clifford surname.*

*You will stay away from the King surname.*

Ordinarily, I wouldn't listen, but the two kings of the school represent everything I loathe.

Unrestrained power.

Reckless behaviour.

Corrupted wealth.

They're probably the ones who own this ridiculously wealthy mansion. Old money is everything in RES and the King name is the definition of it. Even Dad's old money and aristocratic blood don't compare to theirs.

I don't wait for the team's grand entrance.

Invisibility 101: Never mingle with the popular crowd.

I make a beeline towards the back hallways of the mansion, but the cheers and the “Go Elites” follow me all the way through.

The obsession with the football team in this school makes me twitchy. I mean, come on, they're school kids, not the freaking Premier League Titans.

But again, sports have never been my thing. I'm all for art and creativity. I'm a far cry from being an athlete, and Dan always makes fun of how even a small run gets me all out of breath and panting.

As I walk down the half-empty hallway, my head feels fuzzy and disoriented. I see double of the couple making out near a door.

I sway and bump into something.

"Watch it!" someone grunts and I mumble something in return.

Shit. I don't feel good.

I reach for my phone to call Dan. The numbers turn into blurry, wavy lines. I blink and fall against a wall.

I hit Dan's number and the rings sound like they're coming from an underground room. He doesn't pick up.

*Come on, Dan.*

I try again, but the more time that passes, the hotter my skin becomes. My clothes feel like pieces of lava on my flesh.

I hit Dan's number on my phone again. He still doesn't pick up.

I remember that we agreed to meet at the car park, so I opt to wash my face and head out there.

My hand shakes while I clutch the phone and make my way down the hall, searching for the washroom. There's something else Dan mentioned about tonight's party that somehow flashes into my fuzzy head.

*Don't go into the pool house. It's restricted access.*

I don't know why I'm thinking about that now. After all, this is far from the pool house.

Couples stand on either side of the wall, making out and whatnot. I push the first door to my right and stop. The sound of flesh slapping against flesh and unmistakable moans make me slam it shut immediately.

I try the next, and the next, but they're all either locked up or occupied.

And I might have pissed off a few couples.

My clothes stick to my heated skin and my legs turn wobbly and weak, hardly able to carry me. A summer vibe song blurts from the speakers and buzzes through my ears.

A rush of energy washes through me and a weird urge to dance takes a hold of me. It's with effort that I resist the pull and continue on my way.

After a trip down the similar halls, I spot one of the football team's players following a girl out of an isolated room.

Thank God.

I run towards it as fast as my legs allow.

As soon as I'm inside, I head to the door on the right and almost cry with joy when it turns out to be a washroom.

The automatic tap opens, and I splash water on my face over and over, but there's no extinguishing the fire expanding all over my flesh.

I know something is wrong with me, I just don't know what. Could it be the cheeseburger I had with Dan on the way over?

All I know is that I need to go home. Now.

With one last splash of water, I trudge back to the exit.

I should've heard the male voices. I should've hidden in the bathroom for a bit more.

Hell, I should've never gone into 'the room' in the first place.

The moment I open the door, pale blue eyes peer into my soul.

King.

The same king I was warned to stay away from. He's watching me with a smirk and a glint in his eyes as if he found his next prey.

"Looks like a little lamb lost her way."

## 2

# ASTRID

---

*Invisibility 101: Don't mingle with the  
most popular boy in school.*

**H**oly shit. Are those eyes for real?  
It's the first thought I have while staring up at the eldest of the school's two kings. The blue of his irises is so pale, it's almost grey, but not really. It's like a cloudy sky with a promise of some blue. It's impossible to predict whether they'll darken into a storm or clear into a mesmerising day.

And it has absolutely nothing to do with how much I love the colour blue or how his eyes have one of the rarest variations I've ever seen.

I'd take hours of mixing paint and still not be able to come out with the right colouring.

In my two years in RES, I never paid attention to the 'Kings'. Of course, they were shoved down mine—and everyone else's—throats at school for being the rulers. The kings. The prodigy football players. The future heirs of King Enterprises that own half the country and control the other half through politicians.

You can't escape the King surname in the UK—unless you live in a cave, and even then, their name might follow

you there. They dominate *The Daily Mail* and every mail. If I didn't know better, I'd say they're after the Queen's throne. Only, some might argue they're already more powerful than she is.

However, this is my first up-close-and-personal look at a 'King'.

Levi King.

Captain of the football team.

Crowned king of the school.

And attractive as shit.

It's not his eyes, but more like *all* of him. His golden blond hair is short on the sides and long on top, pushed back in a sexy tousled kind of way. His jaw is too sharp for a seventeen going on eighteen-year-old. He's too tall; I have to look up to stare up at him—or ogle the shit out of him, basically. The hard ridges of his shoulders and arms hint at muscles honed by hours in the practice room. He's like a young Viking in dark jeans, a black T-shirt, and the team's royal blue jacket that has the school's lion-shield-crown on it.

Yup, he totally inherited Viking genes from the folk who invaded England's shores once upon a time.

Well, shit. Even with the football team reminder and something Dad said about staying away from the King last name, I want to run my fingers through his hair and see if it feels as silky as it looks.

I open my mouth, meaning to say something—something stupid probably—but nothing comes out. That's weird. I don't feel as funny as I did not so long ago.

If anything, energy buzzes through my heated skin so hard that a tremor runs along my limbs.

I stumble forward and a strong hand clutches my bare forearm.

A bolt of electricity shoots straight to a secret part of me.

Oh, God. That feels *so* good.

“You okay there, Princess?” He removes his hand after steadying me.

I clutch it in mine and put it on my arm. “Do it again.”

My voice is too sultry even to my own ears, but I don’t care. His touch just elicited something euphoric and I want to feel it again.

My lips clamp around a moan as I move his hand up and down my arm in a long sensual caress.

For the love of Vikings, why does it feel so smooth and hot and...bloody amazing?

I need more.

A lot more.

“What do you think you’re doing?” He stares down at me with a look of interest mixed with menace.

Or maybe it’s only menace and I’m imagining the interest part because my body needs it right now.

He pulls his hand free from mine and before I can groan at losing the sinful sensation, he advances into me until I’m pressed against the doorframe.

He smells like clean soap mixed with expensive cologne and smoke. I sniff with a loud, embarrassing sound like a drug addict getting a fix.

All that penetrates my hazy brain is his hot as shit presence and the fact that he’s way too overdressed for a Viking.

I reach for him in a mindless attempt to remove his

clothes. His jacket brushes against my top and my nipples tighten with pulsating throbs.

My movements stop at the humming sensation. That feels so good.

Why does it feel so good?

Worse, why the hell do I want to rub my breasts against his chest—or jacket, I’m not so picky right now.

“You’re not supposed to be here, Princess.” The rumble of his voice rolls over my hyperaware skin like whips of his tongue.

I nod, not even aware of what I’m nodding at. I just need him to get a little closer.

“Do you know what happens to bad girls who go where they shouldn’t?”

I continue nodding, too transfixed by the ethereal blue of his eyes. Are those some flecks of grey in them? If only I had my sketchbook to capture the moment.

Though it would be near impossible to emulate the colour.

Levi grabs me by the arm and this time, a moan escapes my throat as he drags me out of the bathroom and into the vast room I breezed through earlier.

I’m too focused on his hand on my bare skin and how my thighs have tightened to notice anything around us.

“Look what I found.” His voice alerts me to the shapes in the dimly lit room.

The low music thumping from the walls has ‘you’ll end up dead’ in the lyrics as soon as I let the outside environment sink in.

Okay, that’s not creepy at all.

Half of the football team are either smoking, drinking, or playing cards. They all look up at Levi’s words.

“I thought girls were for later?” one of them asks with amusement. “Not that I mind. You can start with my dick, love.”

Eww.

“Naw, come on!” Another throws the deck of cards. He has curly brown hair and is wearing his jacket backwards. “I’m not taking your sloppy seconds anymore, Chris. *C’est pas cool.*”

“I’m your senior, Ronan. Shut it.”

“I think she wants me first.” Hot breaths tickle down my ear as warm lips brush my earlobe. “Don’t you, Princess?”

*Um, yeah! Yeah!*

*Keep doing that, please.*

I want to shout that at the top of my lungs, but I can’t find the words. I can only close my eyes and lean into his hard chest. Well, hell. He can probably use this thing as a surfboard.

Something at the back of my mind tells me this is wrong—so wrong, but I don’t particularly care about that something at the moment.

That something can go suck it as long as King keeps touching me and making me feel good. Torturous, but still so fucking good.

“Wait,” a smooth voice calls from my right, where two members of the football team are isolated playing...chess?

He stands up and stalks towards me with infinite ease. His team jacket clings to his broad shoulders. Either he walks too silently or I’m too buzzed to hear his steps.

Because the next thing I notice, he’s in my face, looking down at me with sinister eyes that are darker than Levi’s.

Even his hair is jet-black. He shares Levi's straight nose and the same posture, but he's nothing like him.

While Levi gives the impression of a badass Viking king, his cousin has the aura of a silent serial killer king who may or may not slaughter his people if he feels bored.

The younger of the two Kings, Aiden, watches me for a few long seconds with his hands nonchalantly tucked in his pockets as if he's assessing a lamb for slaughter.

Damn these two cousins and how beautiful they are. Even with menace written all over his face, I can't help noticing the whole deadly charm he has going on.

"You're Clifford, aren't you?" Aiden asks.

"Clifford?" The previous playfulness in Levi's voice vanishes into thin air and his tone hardens.

I hold on to the feel of his hand on my arm as I choke out, "I'm just Astrid. Clifford is Dad's name." I giggle and lower my voice. "Oops. Shh. Don't tell him I called him Dad. He doesn't like that."

Aiden raises an eyebrow as if he's proved a point, but he's not looking at me. "Hands off, Lev."

Silence rolls through the room. Even the other guys stop whatever they're doing and focus on me sandwiched between the two cousins.

Or more like, they're focused on the hostile energy that's brewing between the two kings.

Me? I rub my back against Levi's chest, needing to feel the friction and something else—I just don't know what.

"No." It's a single word, but even in my half-dazed, euphoria-seeking state, I can feel the power behind it.

"Father said—"

“I don’t care what he said.” Levi cuts him off in a cool tone. “Uncle doesn’t tell me what to fucking do.”

A few of the guys howl as if he delivered the punchline of the century.

“You’re digging your own grave.” Aiden shrugs and stalks back towards the chessboard and another player who’s been waiting for him.

Levi’s arm curls around my shoulder and he pulls me into the hard curve of his side. A shot of electricity runs through me and settles between my thighs as his fingers stroke my bare skin underneath my top.

I suck in a stuttering breath, holding on to the sensation with everything in me.

“Anyone else have any objection to make?” he asks, but he doesn’t seem to be expecting an answer.

Levi King’s word is law.

Anyone who goes against him will only crash and burn.

The football team’s players all come from prestigious tycoon families, both old and new money, but they’re nothing compared to the Kings’ power.

The only one who can stand up to Levi is another King. Which isn’t happening any time soon since Aiden seems to have lost interest in this situation altogether. He sits on his chair, head leaning against his hand as he continues playing chess.

I’m not surprised when not one of the team members says a word.

Levi drags me beside him down the hall. I hold on to every touch like I’ll die if he stops.

“Save some for me, Captain!” one of the guys shouts.

I'm too occupied by his arm around my stomach to register anything else.

It isn't until a door closes behind us and Levi releases me that I realise we're in a room.

Alone.

### 3

# LEVI

---

*A monster isn't born. It's made.*

Here, little lamb. I won't eat you.  
At least, not yet.

The girl was all over me not two minutes ago, but now that we're alone in one of the private bedrooms in Uncle's sickeningly large mansion, she looks about ready to bolt.

I breeze past her, and she trembles then shrinks back against the wall as if the mere contact is electrifying.

I flop onto the edge of the bed, leaning on one hand, and tilt my head to watch her.

She's pretty in a pop fiction kind of way. Pale rosy lips. Long, silky brown hair and eyes so green, they almost sparkle and shit.

Granted, she's not as pretty as the girls who throw themselves at me and the team all the time, but she's got it going on in a discreet, almost tomboyish kind of way.

With her denim shorts and unconventional trainers, it's like she's stuck at that point between girlhood and teenagehood.

The only difference is, there's nothing immature about

her petite figure. She has soft curves and a tiny waist that fit perfectly in my palm earlier.

In the beginning, I planned to play with her, push her buttons and then pass her around for the team.

But after I learned her last name, she became my prey for the night.

Screwing Clifford's princess means one thing—pissing Uncle off.

And I live to piss Uncle the fuck off and see how he looks at me like I'm a rock in his shoe.

The failure.

The king without a crown.

The family's black sheep.

I'm just giving him one more reason to hate me—aside from the grand finale I have planned for his favourite holiday home.

I pat my thigh. "Come here, Princess."

She swallows, the sound echoing in the silence surrounding us. Clifford glances between me and the door for a fraction of a second.

They say the human brain is wired for snap decisions.

It's funny how people make mistakes, thinking they're the right choices.

Like Clifford's princess for instance.

Her brain is obviously telling her to run. Deep down, we can all sense danger, but not everyone focuses enough to relate to their basic instincts.

I should probably thank chess and Uncle's tyrannical upbringing for making me so aware of my surroundings.

Clifford's princess either missed some aristocratic lessons from her lord father or she simply doesn't give a fuck.

It'd be so interesting if it were the latter.

With one deep breath, she abandons the door and takes tentative steps in my direction, red creeping up her neck.

She comes to a halt in front of me, rubbing her arm and peeking down at me through her thick lashes. I grab her wrist and she moans, her eyes fluttering closed.

I stop myself before I yank her to my lap and fuck her senseless.

When she moaned earlier, I thought it was a show or some seduction technique.

I stand and tilt her chin up with my thumb and forefinger, staring straight into her dilated pupils.

No wonder she turns into a puddle whenever I touch her. She's pumped with E.

I push her away and she releases a tiny gasp, her eyes snapping open.

"Wh-what?"

"I don't do druggies. Run along."

Her brows draw together as if she's offended. "I'm not a druggie."

"Says every druggie."

She tilts her chin up in defiance. "You can't tell me I'm something I'm not."

Huh. Interesting.

She has the attitude that comes with the princess title.

My hand wraps around her waist under her T-shirt so that my skin is touching hers. She fits so fucking perfectly in just one palm. My fingers creep up near her ribs and I stroke her until a shudder goes through her.

"That feel good, Princess?"

“Oh, God, yes.” Her eyes flutter closed as she steps so close that I smell lilac on her. “More.”

That’s what every druggie says.

I know that, should’ve said that.

But I’m caught in how her lips part, accentuating the pink teardrop in the middle. She’s so aroused that I not only feel it in the tremors of her body, but I also smell it in the air.

I’m tempted to yank her top off, bend her over, and fuck her until she forgets her name and screams mine.

But I meant it. I don’t do druggies.

Clifford’s princess stares up at me and bites down on the corner of her lip. My pelvis crashes against her lower stomach as she moves up and down against my jeans.

My dick hardens as she moans, “Please, more.”

Fuck me.

Maybe I can make an exception this time. I’m already corrupted, so I might as well.

But before I give in to my demons, I snap, “Out.”

When she stares at me with that slight blush, eyes shining with innocence and pain, a sick thought remains in my mind.

I want to complicate her.

Ruin her.

Crush her innocence.

Then watch it all burn.

But again, that’s what I feel about most beautiful things.

If my soul is black, why does the world need colours?

I grab her arm and drag her towards the back door. Her lips part as she struggles to keep up with my strides. When I open it and throw her outside, her lips part.

She wobbles towards me. “No, wait—”

I shut the door in her face, muting all the foggy chaos that erupted because of her presence.

Tonight isn’t the time, but it will come.

Clifford’s princess and I will have another duel once she’s sober and can handle me.

But for now... I smile as I exit the bedroom and return to the team.

It’s time for my summer gift to Uncle.

## 4

# ASTRID

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*Not only did I bleed, but you also  
left me for dead.*

**M**y fists bang on the door for what seems like hours.  
It's like there's no soul behind it.

No answer.

No nothing.

I slide down to the ground, regaining my breathing.

So much weird energy buzzes through me, like there's a party going on through my organs. I want to jump and run—at the same time.

I don't know where this place is, but it's dark. The only light comes from the main house in the distance. "Something Just Like This" by Coldplay and The Chainsmokers playing at the party. Somehow, I drifted from the main house and ended up in this adjacent building during my trip earlier. Maybe this is the pool house Dan mentioned.

Normally, I'd make sure there was no one in my immediate vicinity, but normal isn't today.

I jump up and start dancing, twirling between the bushes and riding the wave coursing through my veins.

If someone is invincible enough to jump to the sky, it's me.

The music seeps under my skin and tightens my muscles. My tank top sticks to my back with sweat the more I twirl and shake my hips like Mum and I used to.

Pressure builds behind my eyes at the memory of her—or the lack thereof. It's been two years and she's becoming more and more like an illusion. Her smile is disappearing and the positive energy she taught me has been replaced by a deep gloom.

While dancing, I pull the underside of my forearm in the direction of the light. It's not clear, but I can almost see the tiny tattoos of a sun, a moon, and a star.

She made the star black because I'm her 'star'. She said she named me Astrid because it means an old Norse star, a super strength that she needed when she had me.

The tattoo is the last memory I have of her.

If I hadn't asked her to come pick me up from an art class late at night, if I hadn't thrown a tantrum when she told me the news, maybe she'd be here now.

Maybe I wouldn't be stuck with Dad and his entitled last name.

If I'd gotten her out of the car in time, if I had called for help in time...

I screw my eyes shut against the grief and the what-ifs. My shrink said guilt-shaming will only consume me without offering a solution. Still, the wave of crushing guilt is as constant as every breath I take. It's lodged in the dark corners of my heart and my soul.

It feels like it was yesterday. The smell of smoke, burnt flesh, and metallic blood.

So much fucking blood.

I continue swaying to the music with less energy. My arms wrap around my middle and I open my eyes, chasing the ‘guilt-shaming’ away.

I want to take off my clothes and take a dip in the pool.  
*Sounds like a brilliant idea, me.*

I jump and hop amidst the bushes and the dirt path leading to the main mansion.

Dan better show up or I’ll kill him. What’s the use of a best friend if he doesn’t go stupid pool dancing with me?

The bright lights of the house become clearer, and I stop, shielding my eyes with the back of my hand. Ugh. Why so strong? I’m still struggling with the lights when the sound of hushed voices reach me.

“Come on, we don’t have time. Do it!”

“Shut it. Everything needs to be perfect.”

“Just do it already or we’ll be in trouble.”

My ears perk up at the hushed whispers coming from between the bushes. They’re male, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard them before.

Or have I?

But then again, RES is too big for me to know everyone. Especially since I nailed the invisible role.

Besides, this is the farewell party before summer, so more than likely, all the students are here.

My instinct tells me this isn’t a conversation or a situation I should be privy to. And my instincts are always right.

I sneak in the opposite direction towards the blinding light.

A twig crunches under my shoes like in some cliché

horror film. I freeze in place, muting my chaotic breathing as best as I can.

“Who’s there?” the first hardened voice asks.

“I’m going to check.”

“Don’t let them escape!”

Oh, for the love of Vikings!

I sprint through the bushes and between the tall trees. Loud footsteps echo behind me.

My heart hammers against my ribcage as if it’s about to spill on the ground. The more the footsteps close in on me, the harder I push forward.

I’m not an athletic person. The mere act of running whooshes all the energy out of me like I’m a deflating balloon. Soon enough, I’m panting and sweating like a pig.

“It’s over here,” one of them calls.

“I’m bringing backup.”

Dad is so going to kill me if these guys don’t.

*Too many gory films, Astrid. You watch too many gory films.* There’s no way high school students—RES’s posh students, no less—would commit murder.

Then I recall that their families’ power can get them out of anything. Including murder.

God, I hate everything these rich kids stand for.

I try to run on silent mode, but the twigs continue crunching under my feet as if purposely giving a signal to my hunters.

Branches and the odd tree trunk scrape against my bare arms as I carry on my run.

My pulse pounds in my ears when I reach a small road. I bend over behind a tree to catch my erratic breath.

Aside from the moonlight slipping through the clouds

and the trees, it's pitch-black out here. The mansion's lights and music have completely disappeared.

The footsteps have vanished, too, and so have the voices. Phew. Maybe even my horrible athletic skills have managed to get me out of this unscathed.

Still, my heart won't stop beating fast and hard against my chest cavity.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

I take tentative steps towards the empty road, hoping to find someone for help.

Two steps forward. One step back.

The sound of a night bird—or beast—makes me freeze in place, almost peeing myself.

When I go home, I won't take gory or horror films for granted anymore. It's terrifying as hell in real life.

"This way!" someone shouts.

"No one sees and lives to tell about it," a familiar voice—super familiar—deadpans as numerous steady footsteps sprint in my direction.

I bolt down the road, my heart hammering in my chest so loudly, I can't hear my own breathing.

Run.

Run.

*Run!*

They say you don't feel it when your life ends.

I do.

It happens in a split second.

One moment, I'm running down the road; the next, blinding headlights freeze me in place.

I want to move. I want to get out of the way.

I can't.

Something hard crushes against my side and I'm flying over the road. I fall with a thud, my hands flopping in an awkward position.

Something warm pools underneath me and sticks to my T-shirt.

Voices scatter all around me along with the loud squeal of someone slamming their brakes.

The metallic stench of blood fills my nostrils, just like that day two years ago.

It's rainy and dark. So fucking dark, I can smell death in the air.

It has a distinctive scent, death. All murky and metallic and smoky.

Mum's head is lolled to the side with blood running all over her neck, smudging the white blazer she was happy to receive last week.

I stretch out a hand, but nothing in my body moves.

I can't reach my mum.

I can't save her.

"P-please... Please...no...please..."

Dark shadows loom over me. They're talking, but it's hushed and I can't make anything of it.

Warm fingers touch my side. I crack my eyes open and make out a small star tattoo like mine on the inside of his arm.

"Leave her," the voice says.

My world goes black.

# 5

## ASTRID

---

*They didn't think I'd come back alive.*

### TWO MONTHS LATER

Back to school.  
Back to life, basically.

The past two months were pieces cut from hell. I half expected Lucifer—the real one, not the TV show one—to jump out and inflict some sort of torture.

While all the kids at school holidayed and posted pictures from all over exotic places, I spent my time split between the hospital and rehab.

All of it crashed down on me in such a short period of time, it's like I'm reliving the tragedy from three years ago.

Unlike then, I didn't come out unscathed.

I broke my leg, bruised my ribs, and dislocated my shoulder. According to the doctor and the nursing staff, I was lucky.

Lucky.

Such a weird word.

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I even heard my stepmother say that to her countless snobbish friends. I was *lucky* to have escaped death twice.

Obviously, this luck thing isn't hereditary, because Mum died in her first car accident.

Why couldn't I share that *luck* with her?

Dan flings an arm around my shoulder, bringing me back to the present.

The September sky has a beautiful pale hue and the sun actually shines down on us peasants in the UK.

The air smells of autumn's humidity and that tame forest scent—coming from the huge pine trees surrounding Royal Elite School.

Dan and I make our way through the tall double doors, both dressed in our uniforms. Mine has a dark blue skirt and a matching jacket with RES's golden lion-shield-crown on the pocket. A red ribbon is tied around my neck over the white button-down shirt. Dan's is identical except he has trousers and a red tie.

Dan smiles—complete with a left dimple—at all of the female species passing by us and adds a few winks, causing some of them to nearly fall over each other.

He's good-looking in that classic British kind of way. First of all, he has a dimple—that must be why I wanted to be friends with him. People with dimples kind of draw others in like magnets. He takes his time to style his chestnut hair in a way that looks imperfect. Add in his turquoise ocean eyes and he's like a model in the making.

No joke. A scout stopped his mum in the mall and begged her to have their agency represent him.

“Hey, crazy bugger.” He pokes my arm. “We can do the final year and we can even do it sideways, too.”

I roll my eyes. “Does everything need to have a sexual meaning with you?”

“Hell yeah. Senior year, senior sex life, baby.”

I shake my head. Incurable Dan.

For a moment, I’m lost in all the students rushing through RES. Half appear excited—mostly freshman—while the other half look as if they were dragged out of bed.

Oh, and I belong to the second half, thank you very much.

One more year.

Just one more year and I’m out of this shit show.

Dan stops me on the side of the half-covered hall where students are filtering through and catching up on all the fun they had during the summer.

Some discreetly whisper while pointing at me, but it’s few and far between.

I may be a Clifford, but I’m not at all that important in RES.

Here’s to hoping the accident news will die down soon so I can go back to being my cute, invisible self.

Problem is, there were double accidents that night. The mansion caught fire when that car hit me.

We have a Facebook group for RES students, from which teachers and the administrators’ board are banned. In said group, some have speculated that the hit-and-run driver put the mansion on fire, then during their escape, they hit me.

Other freaks suggested that I’m an accomplice, since, well, Clifford and King are enemies. And boo-freaking-hoo, it appears that the mansion belongs to Jonathan King.

“You returned from the dead.” Dan ruffles my hair again. “That alone deserves a celebration. I’ll delay my shagging sesh with Cindy if you want to grab a greasy cheeseburger from Ally’s?”

“Wow.” I gasp in mock surprise, putting a hand on my chest. “You would delay your sexcapades for me? I didn’t think you loved me this much, Bug.”

“I know, right? The sacrifices one has to make for friendship. You better name your first baby after me. Daniel Junior would look bloody brilliant on paper.”

That draws a chuckle out of me, even though I’m not in the mood. This is Dan’s way to cheer me up.

Aside from attending the football team’s camp, he spent the summer making the rehab sessions less boring and drawing a laugh out of me every chance he got.

He doesn’t voice it, but I know he’s been feeling guilty about leaving me alone that night. I’ve been trying to tell him it wasn’t his fault, but Dan will just be Dan.

Loyal to a fault.

My shadow to a fault, too.

Or maybe it’s the other way around. I’m the invisible one, so I’m probably the shadow in this friendship.

One more year and we’ll both be free of our parents and their expectations.

*Free.* Just the thought pushes a burst of unanticipated energy through my veins.

Dan and I continue our way inside, talking about our classes.

RES’s old architecture doesn’t reduce any points from its stupid grandiose reputation. Built in King Henry IV’s time during the fourteenth century, it was first used for the