

Chapter One

It was a dark and stormy night...

He stared out into the chaos outside his window. The streetlamps flickered and glowed amidst the pouring rain, the only solace for the lost and weary pressing through the storm. The windows shook from the wailing gales and thunder, a sudden clash of the iron gates slamming into the fence. Large trees groaned as its ancient roots were lifted from the ground. Only the grim-hearted could find beauty in this dangerous weather.

Soothing and nostalgic, and yet embittered with the taste of tobacco and regret. He pressed his head against a shuddering window to dull his headache and slow his racing thoughts. A stiff drink would be good right about now. Reaching for the bottle beside his drawer, he poured the rest of its contents into his teacup and drank away. Surely this would stop his mind from screaming.

It never worked, but he always pretended it did.

Suddenly a chime rang out, making him jolt in his seat. He managed to avoid dropping the cup on the floor but in the process he spilled its contents all over his trousers. It took him a moment to realize it was the doorbell. Someone was at the door? At this hour and in this weather? Who on earth could it possibly be? As he tried to recall whether he had made plans before that slipped his mind, the chime sounded once more.

He pressed his cigarette into the ashtray and made his way to the door. At this hour, in this unyielding torrent, a visitor could only mean trouble. A lost child, a stranded traveler, a wounded man smearing the solid cedar door bright crimson. Any other day he would've left an unwelcome visitor waiting, but perhaps the thundering rain pelting his roof in a cacophonous frenzy had weakened his judgment. Oftentimes, he'd think back to this moment, that had he neglected to answer that doorbell how different a path he would take. It was a thought that could only be had in vain, for even in his dreams the doorknob would always turn. Fantasy was no reprieve. And here as well, the doorknob turns. Against the backdrop of deep grey skies stood a spectacled man in a dark suit. He held a matching dark umbrella over himself, water running off the spines and pooling at his feet. His trousers were wet to the knees despite the cover. Had he walked here? There was no car in the driveway.

"Pardon my intrusion. Is this the residence of Mr. Allendale?", the mysterious visitor inquired. Indeed it was, and Mr. Allendale stood beyond the threshold from him.

"Yes it is", Mr. Allendale responded. "Can I help you?"

"I understand the circumstances are not ideal, but I come here regarding a matter of utmost urgency." The stranger reached a gloved hand into his suit and retrieved a thin navy blue box with a single red ribbon tied longways – a little bigger than the length of his palm. "This package is for you, please open it at your earliest opportunity."

Allendale's suspicions rose, but he accepted nonetheless. In his hand now, the soft velvet box felt chilled his fingers. "Can I have your name? You could have dropped this off before the storm, you know."

"I'm afraid I could only deliver it to you directly. My name is not something you need to know right now. I'm sure you're perplexed, but your answers lie within the gift, not in me. I'm afraid I have to take my leave now. It was brief, but a pleasure regardless. Farewell, sir."

He turned on his heel before his coattails could be grasped and disappeared into the storm, leaving a speechless Allendale behind him. And a little blue velvet box.

A gust of wind splashed the rain onto face and body, awakening him from his stupor. Closing the door, Allendale wiped his face with his moistened white undershirt. The weight of the box grew heavier with each step up the stairwell. A feather, a rock, a gun, an appliance, an elephant, his heart. Opening the door, he could have sworn his arms were close to ripping from its sockets from the enormous burden the box carried.

Frustrated by his apprehension, he threw the box on his bed and glared at it. Oh but of course it would look like it came from an expensive boutique full of niche designers only the richest of spoiled swine would visit. How its rich color and velvet mocked him!

"No, it couldn't be." Allendale paced around the room. The more he turned to see it, the faster his heart pounded. Open it now or later? Never was also an option to consider. No sufficed. No completed transactions and sentences. What did it matter to that stranger if he decided not to? Not like he or his sender would ever find out if he decided to burn it or throw it in the trash.

Fingers twitching, Allendale picked up the box and smelled it. Memories flowed with the scent, ending with a sorrowful and aroused gasp. "And topped with the most pretentious chypre."

On three he would open it and never look at its contents.

One - it was going to be nothing.

Two - he shouldn't fear anything: it's a box.

Three - now or never.

Ribbon pulled and plucked away. Deep breath, deep breath. Soft fabric rubbing against the edges. He could always turn away and leave the box unopened forever.

He swallowed and yanked the lid off. Regret and fear seeped into his veins.

Intact blue violets and yellow roses cut from its stems.

Allendale sat beside the box and ran his hands back through his hair. He wanted a bright shock of tea, or the bitter burn of whiskey, or perhaps just to have never opened the door at all.

"Can't come to the door tonight," he muttered to himself, feeling quite mad. "No one's home."

He plucked one of the violets from the box and held it between his first finger and thumb. The compulsion to crush it overcame him, but he ignored it, marveling at the delicate skin and deep color of the blossom. He held it to his cheek—felt the petal softness there—and dropped his hands between his knees.

A flash of cream caught his eye: a folded sheet of paper, nestled deep in the box of flowers. It was plain, but when he shifted aside the roses to touch it, he could practically feel how expensive it was by the weight.

Allendale held it up, tilting it this way and that, and trying to work himself up to opening it. The paper tilted, and opened, and although he didn't mean to read it, he couldn't help but recognize the familiar, curling script:

'My dear Daniel,'

His breath caught in throat. It was familiarity he had hoped to never feel again. The flowing letters were like creeping vines wrapping their tendrils around his heart, pulling taut. This handwriting was a memory, one that hurt.

The letter continued: "Before you read this, I must ask you to sit down. I hope this letter finds you in good health, and the shock isn't too much to bear. You have many questions running in your mind I'm sure, I'll try my best to answer them. I know you're upset that I haven't written to you in all the years since we matriculated and I have no excuse that will set you at ease, so I will not defend myself. I will also not ask for your forgiveness, it's not of use to me anymore. The only thing I ask of you from now on is an open ear."

It was him. The handwriting, the carefully woven words that planted an ache somewhere he wasn't aware could ache at all. The memories bubbled up, floating higher and higher in his mind until the whole space was filled with an endless film reel playing on repeat. The dark storm and thundering lightning were split with the early summer sun beaming down. A thousand raindrops glittered and shattered in the newfound light, refracting a thousand more images of that sight he'd buried so deep within himself. Shining blonde curls framing deep amber eyes. A lilting smile that belied chaos.

Allendale gripped the paper until it tore beneath his nails and read to the end.

For a letter attempting to make amends, it certainly did nothing to hide the airs of arrogance seeped deep in the paper. From the thick parchment to the elegant strokes and bright blue ink, everything exuded an unwarranted sense of superiority - all save the poor penmanship.

The corner of his lips twitched. Only he could read that bastard's handwriting without furrowing a brow. He shook his head and chased away the old pleasant memories that had been wrought with mire and heartbreak. The past built the foundation for his present and future. Good, bad, uneventful, each memory laid a brick one piece at a time to create his stronghold. The sweetness with his former lover had crumbled and cratered into a vulnerability not even time could repair. Instead Allendale used his anguish and rage to fortify the weakness and hoped to never encounter the one person who could topple it with a single breath.

Down came the walls and exposed the pathetic, sorrowful man who had no more heart to give.

"Of course forgiveness isn't of any use to you, Vincent," Allendale scoffed, folding the note neatly inside the box. "Such a thing is unbecoming of a social climber who landed himself in high society and turned your back on the lessers."

He removed a detached rose head and crushed it in his hand. Idiot had to use the most ambiguous and controversial flower. And those violets? Did he stay faithful to him or simply decided to watch from a distance while he stumbled through life?

Shivers ran through his body. What if it had been both?

Lightning crashed outside the window and startled Allendale so badly that he flinched.

The rain pounded on his bedroom window, so violently that Allendale got up and checked to make sure that it wasn't hail. He leaned his forehead against the cool glass.

How long had it been since Vincent had ruined his life?

No. That wasn't fair. An affair took two, after all, but it was hard to be even-keeled when he was all but banished to this empty manor in the far north while Vincent was...

The last Allendale had heard of him, he'd been spotted with some niece or cousin of the Queen. He was like a climbing rose—a parasite.

Ah, but what good did it do to stew in these pitiful, miserable thoughts? Vincent had everything he wanted. The fame, money, prestige: it all belonged to him and more. This box only served to rile him up and spiral further into his depression. It worked, but Allendale had a tried and true method to forgetting the messenger and the ominous gift.

Yawning, he picked up the flowers and red ribbon and placed them inside the box, then slid it underneath his bed until it hit a wall. Out of sight out of mind. He changed into his usual nightwear consisting of his boxer briefs and a fitted tank top, laid on his bed, set his alarm, and closed his eyes. A good night's rest would help him forget or at least numb his feelings.

Chapter Two

Daniel dreamed of nothing, or at least that was what he felt waking in the morning with a long stretch and sleep in his eyes. Everything happened the same as every morning - light exercise, shower, eggs and tea. He packed a few extra biscuits in his satchel and walked out the door with his umbrella. A deep breath and a relieved sigh with the smell of petrichor and concrete, soft raindrops pattering against his umbrella. Today would be a good day.

In spite of his exile, Allendale still had a good rapport with his mother's family, namely a set of twin cousins who ran a successful pâtisserie spanning across the country, France, and New York City. Cassandra the business and accounting, and Liam the patissier; together they created their empire and offered a shoulder to their downtrodden cousin.

Hopping to the train, he made his way to Liam's workshop, put on an apron, and shaped the proofed dough for its final rise. He chatted with the helpers, having his first cup of coffee of the day, savoring every bitter note with a dollop of cream and honey. He greeted Liam with a smile and poured his cousin a cup the way he liked it: no cream with too much sugar.

"I'm not paying you," Liam said with a laugh, sipping on his cup.

"I figured I could work some shifts to pay a favor."

"Make me macarons and we'll talk."

"Not with this weather."

"It's just a fucking cookie, Danny. Don't let those baking blogs talking about how mango chutney reminds them of their dead nan from Wales tell you otherwise." Liam nudged Allendale's shoulder. "So, what's up?"

Allendale stared at the floor, spinning the band around his left ring finger. "Well..."

What was the best way to go about and reveal one's anxieties and burdens to another without dragging them down to the dark abyss full of alcohol and depression? To tell one of his closest confidants about the letter and his thoughts would only bring Liam and his sister deeper into his world, his disgrace. They knew a few details, but not enough to burn their fingers on the blazing fire that had been lit those many years ago. Or at least he had hoped. Their father, Allendale's uncle, was his mother's older brother and kept close ties to the firm despite his marriage to a normal woman of prestige, though his exact level of involvement remained unknown to Allendale.

Perhaps for the sake of keeping his head attached to his neck, he wouldn't ask anything about his uncle beyond the usual pleasantries. Not that he worried too much about it. The good thing about estrangement meant no one from the firm bothered to approach him lest they felt suicidal.

But for the most part, that uncle remained indifferent about him, unlike the youngest uncle and his smarmy bastard of a son.

May as well tell Liam and be done with it.

Liam downed the rest of his drink and pulled out a box of cigarettes with a sigh. "You know I'm gonna tell Cass about this."

"Yes, I know."

"Whaddya planning?"

"To close the chapter in my life involving Vincent by giving him what he ultimately wants."

"Which is...?" Liam struck the match against the rough surface and lit his cigarette. He offered one to his cousin out of courtesy - of course Danny never smoked, but those were the good manners his mother taught him shining through.

"Sorry Liam." Allendale shook his head, fingers twisting his band further. What a mess of a man he was, unable to decide whether to be rid of his ex forever. Dammit, he still loved him! "I'm still debating if I should."

"Well whatever you decide, Cass and I are always here for you. You short on quid?"

"No, the money's fine."

"Don't come crawling to me when it gets tight," he chuckled between puffs. "How about this? The business is catering this fancy gala in London full of important rich people from around the world. I'm going as just a company head, not exactly the head pâtissier - anyway! You can be Cass' plus one while I bring the missus. Whaddya think?"

"I'll think about it." Allendale smiled wistfully and gathered the ingredients for macarons. Baking his specialty always cleared his mind and brought him closer to the right choice. "And bold of you to make me Cassie's plus one. She's going to tear your ass apart."

"Shaddup and get to work."

Idle chatter, kneading dough, metal trays slid and clanked buzzed pleasantly throughout the bakery workshop. Flavored picked, food gel colors matched. Fold in the meringue into the almond and confectioner's sugar, fast and steady until it flowed without clumps, yet not enough to drip like running water. Pipe into circles and bake.

Allendale touched the side of the metal bowl of the stand mixer. The sugar cooled well, now time for the butter. If he went to the gala, would Vincent be there? A man eager to make his mark on the world would likely follow the money, though the chances were small given his letter. He said he'd be out of the country for some time, performing his angelic act in front of gullible businessmen and foolish nobles desperate for relevancy before pouncing beneath the tall grass and sinking his teeth into their vulnerable necks, sucking every bit of fame and money they were worth.

To think Vincent had been the one to warn him of his family! Allendale laughed to himself. Of course he knew his family was rotten - his mother said so herself, always doing her best to shield him from Granddad's influence and her crazy siblings and their strange children.

"Mum if you had only known," he whispered.

A loud smack echoed throughout the kitchen.

"Oi, what was that for!?" yelled Liam, rubbing his shoulder.

"Why are you putting Daniel to work, you knob?" said a woman, pointing a magazine to Allendale. "As if he ain't got anything better to do."

"Hey, he said he wanted to!"

"Good morning, Cassie," said Allendale.

"It's the afternoon, coz." Cassandra greeted Allendale with a kiss on the cheek and swiped a purple macaron, eating it. "Delicious as always. Your violet macarons were always my favorite. What's the yellow one?"

"Rose."

A calmer version of her twin brother, Cassandra prided herself on her business acumen and way with understanding numbers. Both twins were fairly acquainted with their father's family "business" and all that it entailed, but were kept in the dark of the less unsavory actions all thanks to their parents. The less they knew the better, and the more they avoided diving deep into the family, the easier it was to navigate through the sludge. Though Allendale couldn't be too certain of their knowledge, at least not since the incident. Cassandra alone had been one of the handful who knew of Allendale and Vincent's true relationship. Whatever else she or Liam knew, neither would ever tell.

Cassandra plucked a few more macarons before waving her hand at her cousin. "Let's talk."

They walked outside, meandering to a nearby park and sat on a bench beneath the ivy and hanging wisteria. Allendale dusted off the flour from his arms with a sigh. Telling Liam his plans was harder than to Cassie, who knew how she'd react to all of this. Easy going as she had been, Cassandra's temper flared whenever anyone tried to do him any harm.

A drink would be good right about now. Maybe after he could convince his cousin to go to the pub with him for a pint or five.

Cassandra rubbed her temples, unsure what to say next. "Daniel..."

Allendale fiddled with his ring. "I know."

"No, you don't."

"I'm not here to be judged or reprimanded. I just need to talk to someone who knows, someone smarter than me."

"You're not an idiot, Daniel," she said, patting Allendale on the back. "You were in love and got ruined. Anyone would wallow the way you did."

"Over ten years?"

"You're talking to a twice-divorced woman. This kind of misery isn't new or unwelcomed."

"Misery does love company."

"To our utter dismay."

"Anyhow," said Allendale, "that being said, if the other Allendales aren't showing up, then I think I'll go to that gala Liam talked about. As your plus one."

He nudged her shoulder, winking.

"That's so disgusting, Daniel." Cassandra laughed. "But sure, why not? Better than being grouchy and moody all to myself. And don't worry about the family coming. It would be weird for Rhys or his father to show up in something so public and "philanthropic." The only charity they care about is their Cayman Island accounts."

"Good. Uncle Henry never liked me, and Rhys probably hated me the entire time."

"Rhys never liked you hanging around Vincent," she corrected. "And the way I saw it, Vincent didn't like the way Rhys followed you either."

"Vincent hated everyone."

Cassandra lit a cigarette and offered one to Allendale. She shrugged off the rejection, as Daniel never smoked and her mother's lessons her manners were hard ingrained. "Oh, don't be dramatic. He liked everyone just fine: he only hated Rhys."

"I guess I took my own arse to notice. What about Liam?"

"Liam was busy schooling in France to notice anything, but I did see, and..." Her eyes glanced at Allendale's tense posture and shook her head, dismissing whatever thought or revelation had crossed her mind. A wry smile. All in due time. "...Anyway, what did you decide to do about Vincent?"

Allendale chewed on his bottom lip while rubbing the ring on his left ring finger. "You still have your divorce solicitor's number?"

Black tie events were never the sort of places Allendale frequented or liked. He preferred intimate places like small pubs or spending time alone on walks or riding his motorcycle to the next town and back. Back then his mother often scolded him whenever he left social events too early for her liking, once saying he was no different from his father in the heat of a moment. That had been the few times she ever mentioned his father to him. He was only three when they were separated, or so his mother had said. Whatever memories Allendale had, they were a grey blur compared to the colorful, vivid life he gained then lost later in life. All he knew was that his father loved him dearly. Or had. Allendale had no knowing his father was even alive, and Mother took that knowledge to the grave.

Looking into the mirror, Allendale adjusted his black bowtie, attached his cufflinks, and buttoned his waistcoat, straightening out any wrinkles or uneven fitting. He brushed his dark brown hair with gel, not a single strand out of place or too stiff. The right amount of bounce and flair. Just because he disliked enormous, boisterous crowds did not mean he lacked a fashion sense or any sense of formality.

Tearing into a new bottle of scotch, he poured it into a silver flask and hid it in the inner pocket of his black jacket. Liquid courage to dull any aggravation from the inevitable arrogant and self-righteous chatter of the elites, a favorite tactic of his for any event. Vincent never liked it whenever he drank excessively, complaining how Allendale was too much of a happy drunk to his liking. Whatever that meant.

Not as if it mattered anyway. The divorce papers had been mailed out internationally a few days ago, and the chapter that haunted his life neared its end. All would be good, and perhaps there would be another man to catch his eye at the gala. Whatever. He should be enjoying life, not living like a social pariah.

Reaching for his wallet, the golden gleam of his wedding band on his finger stilled his heart. The pomp and bravado deflated into a profound chill coursing through his veins. Habits were difficult to break, and this one meant he had to forgo his lingering feelings for Vincent, good or bad. What sort of face would Vincent make when the courier delivered the divorce papers to him? Allendale cried the day after he signed the papers with the solicitor and drank the night away, reminiscing when he and Vincent made the bold decision to marry in secret while in university.

The papers would be signed and mailed back, ending the silly fantasy of two young men in love once and for all. Surely Vincent must have had a trace of softness for his husband? Even a little? A spot?

Removing his ring, Allendale dropped it into his breast pocket, patting it for reassurance. Not quite ready to let go, but it was a start.

At the gala, Allendale and Cassandra leaned against a pillar, sipping on their second flute of champagne, while Liam gloated and soaked up the accolades from various wealthy patrons sampling the pastries from his bakery. Someone had to be the charming face of the company while the other acted as the responsible handler holding the leash.

"Is he always like this?" asked Allendale, watching his cousin brag about his eclairs to interested guests. They were decent at best and stodgy at worst. He could make better eclairs.

"It's good for the press," said Cassandra, lifting her flute to someone she recognized in the distance with a professional smile. "Everyone loves a business with a personality behind it."

"Glad I'm not in that line of work."

"I think you'd be great at it if you bothered to try. You were always a magnet for strangers for some reason."

"It's my dashing good looks, Cassie," he said, running his fingers through his hair. He snapped his head in a dramatic manner. "You wouldn't understand."

Cassandra pinched his arm. "Oh shut up."

His cousin stepped away to mingle and speak to rich guests while Allendale wandered around the halls of the large ballroom estate. Marble floors, thick oak wood doors carved by artisans, expensive statues, paintings from artists even the average person learned in primary school, a paradise for the decadent rich to dally around pretending to care for the unfortunate by opening their wallets and connections.

He entered the gardens, leaving behind the raucous laughter and mundane classical music played by hired players. Few people were present, likely escaping the banality of the parasitic social order for a brief moment of peace. Leaning against the drink rail of the enormous limestone deck, Allendale accepted a drink from a server, thanking him.

A handsome man locked eyes with him. Somewhat short, olive-skin with dark, slicked back hair, and an easy smile. Not quite Allendale's type, but it wouldn't hurt to speak to him.

"*Mi scusi signore*, may I join in?"

Allendale measured up the man once more and nodded. "Bored?"

"This gala is like all the others," said the man, clinking his flute against Allendale's. "My name is Marcello Serafini."

Serafini? Was that not the name of the ultra luxury Italian car brand? Given the man's fine suit, impeccable leather shoes, and multiple gold rings, he must have been a relative. Sons of legacy corporations coming to such an event wouldn't be out of the ordinary.

The mobile text vibrations in his trouser pocket went ignored.

"I'm Daniel Allendale."

"Allendale?" Marcello shrugged. "Are you from a new business or start up? I would have noticed a handsome man like you in other events."

"That's because I'm someone's guest." Allendale sipped his drink. This was an opportunity to step out of his comfort zone and take a chance. "These places aren't for people like me."

Three more buzzes.

"I think it has plenty of room for you, *caro*." Marcello leaned close to Allendale, whispering, "But if you're feeling restless, I have a penthouse in Mayfair. Just you and me and none of the flashy lights or any of that stuff that bothers you."

A phone call vibrated then silenced by Allendale's frantic hand fishing to shut it up. Who in the world was trying to call him?

Allendale whistled. "Mayfair? Aren't you extravagant? Are you going to spoil me tonight?"

Back-to-back text buzzes.

"That depends." Marcello wrapped his arms around Allendale's neck. "How big is your cock?"

"Bloody hell," groaned Allendale, reaching for his phone. Gazing back at the French doors, his blue eyes met with amber glowing with a fury that could burn the world from its intensity.

Gasping, Allendale pulled himself away from Marcello's arms and peeked at his mobile. Eleven unread notifications and a missed call from Cassandra. The preview message plunged his body into a quaking terror.

[VINCENT IS HERE!!!]

Chapter Three

How?

How was Vincent here at the gala? The letter said he had international business to attend. He couldn't have received those divorce papers this fast!

The stormy night, the letter, all the drunken anger and sadness flashed before his eyes, plummeting his mind further into a spiral of confusion and unbridled rage.

The time nears when you and I are to reunite again, though it will be a bit later than I had anticipated since I have business abroad. You probably never thought you'd ever see me again, and you would have been right had I not gone as far as I had. As you may have known through the media, I have made quite the name for myself and I take great pride in it. Nothing is beyond my reach and I only aim to gain more. There is no Babel or fall from heaven, not after the inferno you were forced to endure. Rest assured, what happened was not for naught and I will not be deterred by anyone, not even you. To ensure my success, your wedding band: you must remove it before we meet. It is imperative that it is long gone and out of sight. Until we meet again, my dearest Daniel. - Vincent Lemaire ~~~Allendale~~~

Wasn't this what Vincent wanted? Did he truly expect him to fall into a worst depression and become celibate whilst he encircled his serpentine arm around the waists of lovely rich women and had not-so secret meetings with powerful men known for lascivious proclivities?

"You," Vincent said, narrowing his eyes and stomping toward the two men. "The utter gall!"

"Who is this man, Daniel?" asked Marcello, glaring at the hostile stranger.

"Get lost, you fool." Vincent shoved Marcello away and seized Allendale by the lapels. "This man is my husband."

"What? He has no ring!"

Vincent sneered at the trust fund child and focused on Allendale. "Of all the ridiculous things you have ever done, this one takes it all! You're absolutely incorrigible, Daniel — we're leaving."

Vincent was dark and handsome; the brooding moon to Allendale's own sun. He'd always had something of a Byronic misery to him—it was only in the waning light of their marriage that it erupted into temper.

Daniel couldn't decide if he was more beautiful or terrifying when he was angry.

"Let go of me!" Allendale ripped himself free of Vincent's grasp. "What are you doing here, Vinc—nevermind! I don't care!"

Vincent grabbed Allendale's wrist. He was stronger than Allendale, and taller, too. When Vincent yanked him close, Allendale felt his neck crick trying to meet his blazing eyes.

"We're *leaving*," Vincent hissed. Allendale's nose wrinkled.

"You're drunk," he sneered.

"Hey, now," Marcello brushed himself off and poked Vincent in the shoulder, "Danny told you to leave. *Arrivederci, signore*, although I hope to never see you again."

Vincent turned the force of his glare on Marcello, who flinched.

"I have a car," he said to Allendale, without taking his eyes off of Marcello. "We'll walk out, and you'll get in, before you do anything to debase yourself."

Vincent pulled the two of them all the way to the foyer at a brisk pace, leaving a spurned Marcello behind who faded from Allendale's mind with each step while Vincent's back fixed itself in his place. He looked at him from behind with a wine-soaked gaze from behind a curtain of curls that seemed duller than Allendale remembered. Memories floated in and out. Ones of soft locks cradling his chin as a younger Vincent leaned against him on a summer night, ones of drunken arguments and betrayals in hotel rooms and conference halls.

Welling up in Allendale's chest was more than nostalgia or indignant rage; humiliation and sorrow twisted around him like the thorny tendrils of a rambling rose. That was Vincent. Incessantly cruel with incessant beauty, the whirlwind of his heart. In this moment, being dragged away like a pet dog on a leash by a man who told him he didn't want him anymore, Allendale felt the pain from their decade of wasted love sear through his wrist where Vincent's skin touched his own.

This man is my curse.

Allendale ripped his wrist out of his grip and lept back. He had no plans of leaving this building with Vincent.

His former lover snapped back to look at him with bewildered eyes. "What do think you're doing? Don't tell me you really fancy that slimy bastard!"

His jaw clenched. "What's it to you?"

"Husband?" he sneered. "That's a word for the man you promise yourself to, not a fool like me who's life was only for you to step on."

The show of possession was salt to the wounds Allendale desperately prayed would finally heal.

"I'm not your marionette who'll move the way you please, when you please. If standing next to me in public brings you so much shame, I'll spare you the trouble of sullyng your bedroom with my presence as well."

Vincent stared back at him silently, his ever bright eyes dim, his Adam's apple trembling just for a moment. The whirlwind twisted around Allendale once more.

Gently, with a voice that reminded him of the youth they shared. "I didn't come here to sleep with you, Daniel."

"Then you've come to sign the papers." Allendale rolled his eyes. Not enough to write a letter with ominous flowers, he had to take the coup de grâce and twist the knife into his heart and watch him bleed. "You could have done that anywhere else but you chose to find me so you can look me in the eyes before finalizing it. You've always been a cruel man, Vincent, but if you think me incorrigible, you should look in the mirror."

Vincent lifted his hand, unsteady and meek, unsure what words to say. His mouth opened and closed, the words trapped in his throat. With misted eyes he said, "I will never sign those papers."

Allendale flinched. "What?"

"I was never ashamed of you, Daniel. I always wanted you by my side, hand in hand, kisses and smiles and everything. But..." He swallowed. "Your family was far too dangerous."

"You don't think I already know that? After what happened then? You still abandoned me even though... even though..."

They stood quiet between the glimmering flashes of dazzling gems and the cackling crowds, full of inebriated mirth. To anyone watching, two men simply stared at one another while the world celebrated.

Vincent took a hesitant step forward, eyes darting back and forth, almost afraid of any sudden movement. His hand brushed against his husband's hand. "You are a very coveted man, my love. We mustn't speak so freely here. Please... Take that chance and follow me."

Allendale shivered. "What are you going to do?"

"If it will quell your fears, I promise I won't touch you. And I'm going to tear those horrible papers in front of your face."

"And why now? What has changed for you to come to me as you are, no longer giving a damn of being seen together?"

"Circumstances." Vincent's deflated expression melted away with a confident grin. "I have finally gained a favorable hand, for you and I."

Vincent grasped Allendale's hand, smoothing the worry away with his thumb, just as he used to when they were young and madly in love. "Now, will you follow me to my car?"

Allendale sighed. The shackles he had reluctantly torn apart managed to snake their way back around his wrists and ankles, welded shut and key swallowed by the devil who held his heart. No matter how much he hid or ran, Vincent returned in the least expected of ways, whether it had been in his dreams of the good or bad times or through seeing his husband prance about with important figures as if he had not already been promised to. Such audacity! But what else could he do given that his husband came back to him, drunk, furious, and with a hint of what he hoped was sorrow.

He waved his hand in front of his face. "Only if I'm driving, rummy."

The valet pulled up and opened the doors for the men. Vincent's foot nearly gave out before catching himself on the right door while Daniel wrapped his arm around his waist and took him to the passenger side to the left.

"I know where I'm going," muttered Vincent, pouting. The British roadways remained a challenge and a mystery to the Belgian man.

Memories of their times spent on the road ebbed and flowed. Allendale drove while Vincent navigated, distracting his lover with kisses or attempts at fellatio or simply asked random vulgar questions such as which ball would he sacrifice if it meant owning a flying car. If the circumstances had been lighter, Daniel would have asked if he remembered those silly trips or the train rides where they slept on one another's shoulders, fingers entangled and refusing to let go.

"So," started Allendale, driving to the destination Vincent haphazardly put on the vehicle's GPS. "How did you find me?"

"I had been invited to that Gala," said Vincent, staring at the starless sky hidden from the light pollution and waxing moon. "When I saw those papers, I lost it entirely. But something possessed me to take a closer look at the attendee list, and lo and behold was I to discover Liam Allendale's business as a part of the dessert catering."

"You took a chance with that."

"They love you too much to exclude you, Daniel." Leaning onto the window, Vincent sighed. "Do consider them more."

"I always have."

Silence and the sound of the navigation followed the rest of the journey. Allendale peeked over to see Vincent resting his head against his hand, snoring softly while his head lolled around, awaking to the sudden jerking movements only to fall back to sleep. Had they not had such a chaotic reunion, Allendale would have thought it to be cute.

He wiped the smile off his face and concentrated on the road. What an inappropriate response. So many years and Vincent's presence still left a profound fondness in his heart. That love he had felt, at first sight, first kiss, first embrace, and first and only "I do" never withered away even at the bottom of a bottle or in his darkest moments. He had far too many questions for Vincent and unsure where to begin. How could anyone find the right thing to say while their mind thundered through a storm of uncertainty and anguish?

At the hotel, Allendale parked the car and shook Vincent by the shoulder. Vincent's head bobbed. The light of the street lamp caught him at an angle that resembled his youth.

Ten? No, eleven years left alone in shame without a single message telling him where he'd be. Mum was dead, and Granddad had been at a loss for what to say about Uncle Henry and Rhys' accusations and exiled him to the manor he now lived in. The one person he thought he could lean on...

"Vincent..." Allendale parted the blond curls from his husband's face.

Vincent stirred from the touch, eyes fluttering and opening, finally focusing on Allendale. Yawning, he moved toward the soothing touch, humming with pleasure. "Are we there yet?"

Allendale snatched his hand away. The shadows hid his embarrassment. "Get up. We're at the hotel."

"Okay," he said, yawning and stretching in his seat. "Let's go to our room."

"Your room."

"I know what I said."

* * *

Marcello could not get Allendale out of his mind. No amount of alcohol or flirting with other beautiful men could ease that itch that crawled, twisted, and turned - a thorn deeply embedded and trapped, brewing and festering into an obsession. The one thing could stave away the intrusive thoughts.

But how when he had no other way to find him?

"Marcello!" said a woman he recognized. "Please try these macarons. They are some of the best."

He picked a green macaron and sniffed it. "Where are they from?"

"See that man over there?" She pointed to a boisterous man laughing with a group of people.

"Yeah?"

"That's Liam Allendale. He's the owner of the pastry business that catered the desserts. Very talented guy. He has shops in France and New York."

Marcello arched his eyebrows. "Allendale?"

Perhaps there would be a way to meet that gorgeous man again after all. If only that stupid man hadn't interfered!

Making his way to Liam's group, he grabbed a drink and slithered right into the crowd as if he had always been there. He made a few quips, laughed at the jokes, and encouraged Liam to brag some more. Closer and closer, he made his way toward Liam until he was beside the renown baker. They chatted about silly things, the party, and other pleasantries, words that opened doors under the right applied pressure. It was time to make his move.

"I am Marcello Serafini."

Liam choked on his drink. "The car brand!?"

"Yes, yes. That is my bisnonno who started the business."

"Sorry, mate, I only speak English and French, but I take it you're from really old money."

Marcello chuckled. "No worries, friend. So these desserts... they're very good. So good that I want to make an order for later. For my nonna's birthday you see. How about we exchange numbers and we can meet somewhere to discuss?"

"Sounds like a plan."

Chapter Four

The boutique hotel Vincent stayed had an art deco, retro feel full of rich colors, eclectic paintings and pillars, and bespoke furniture. Clattering glassware and the soft laughter and the hushed prattle of patrons at the bar mixed with smooth jazz and the scent of clean incense. The concierge stepped from the desk to personally greet Vincent.

"Mr. Lemaire-Allendale, welcome back. I have placed the Dom Perignon in the wine chiller as you asked. Will there be anything else you need?"

"And the robes?"

"They're as you asked. The personal shopper made their delivery after you left."

"Good." He nodded, pressing on the elevator button. "Do not disturb my room. I'll call if I am in need of service."

"Lemaire...Allendale?" asked Allendale when the elevator doors closed.

"Did you think I ridded myself of our name so easily?" Vincent dug into his pockets, removing his wallet.

"I honestly did."

"Says the man who signed his divorce papers as Allendale-Lemaire." Doors opening, he pulled out three cards and handed two to Daniel. The third card was used to open the hotel room.

The cards were two IDs, one a UK driver's license issued three years prior, and the second a Belgium national ID from five years ago. He wanted to laugh at the abysmal standards of the British DVLA for handing Vincent a license, however the chuckle halted at his throat upon viewing the name on the card.

Vincent Lemaire-Allendale.

The same had been with his Belgian ID. For all these years, Daniel had thought Vincent immediately dropped his surname when he left. To untether himself from the embarrassment and shame of having a failure and a disgrace as his spouse. In the media, Allendale had seen his name plastered over and over as Vincent Lemaire and assumed as much. Anyone would. And yet, legally, he never removed the name. A sliver of hope fluttered into his heart. The vilest of the evils that escaped Pandora's box, the infection that refused to let go of its firm grasp on one's mind once it took hold. He could not allow himself to be swayed by Vincent. He refused!

In the room, Vincent stripped himself of his navy tuxedo jacket and black tie, tossing it wherever it would land. The shoes were removed without bothering to undo the laces and thrown around, striking the walls with a heavy force, almost infuriated. Unbuttoning his shirt, he sat on the king sized bed and patted the spot beside him.

"Get comfortable, Daniel."

"Comfortable?" scoffed Allendale. He removed his shoes, socks, belt, bow, and jacket and place them in a neat pile. Loosening his dress shirt, he sat at the opposite end of the bed away from Vincent. Damn, he forgot his flask.

As if he read his mind, Vincent searched around Allendale's jacket and found the flask. A quick sniff and curl of his upper lip. "Scotch? Is that how low you've gone?"

"And what's wrong with scotch?"

"It's disgusting is what it is." Vincent opened the bathroom door and poured the entire flask's contents down the drain. "And you always cry when you drink it. Where's the Mexican stuff? That always got you in a jovial mood. Honestly anything except scotch had you happy."

"Tequila isn't that easy to find, you know."

He took off his shirt and unfastened his trouser button.

No use in arguing about him wasting his drink. He should have drunken it back at the party, though who knows in what state Vincent would have found him in if he had. Perhaps somewhere in the gardens blowing Marcello's back out until that Italian fop cried prettily and asked for more. Oh things Vincent would have done if he caught him in such a scandalous position in a semi-public area! Allendale dared not think of it.

Sobriety saved him once again.

Vincent exited the bathroom and paused, staring hard at Daniel.

Allendale squirmed, darting away from the intense gaze. "What is it?"

"You're so fucking sexy. I am beyond livid that I cannot touch you." He hurled the designer teal, red, and purple striped robe at Allendale in a huff. "Get dressed, you tart."

"You must be still drunk if you're cursing like that," he muttered, putting on the robe. "So what pressing matters did you want to speak to me about that required me to leave the gala? Was it all a lie to get me here alone with you?"

"Nothing of the sort." He sat beside Allendale, and moved closer when Daniel slid to make more room. "Stop that. I'll behave."

Taking a deep breath, Vincent faced his husband, amber eyes steady and resolute. Much to be told, much to hide until the right moment. The record needed to be set straight before the situation worsened, before he'd lose Daniel forever. "I'm going to be blunt and you are not going to like anything I have to say. And to that, I need you to stop being a coward and take it like a man."

Was he going to reveal his true intentions with the letter? Were the words Vincent said at the gala false? No shame or humiliation? Denying the divorce? If Vincent lied about all that... God take him now. How could he endure such a vicious onslaught from him again?

"Daniel," said Vincent, cupping his face with his hand, voice gentle and firm. "You're working yourself into a sweat. Breathe slowly... There you go."

Allendale closed his eyes. "J-just tell me already."

"You make this so difficult, my love." A warm kiss to the forehead. A relieved sigh. What a joy to finally savor that man. "I've already broken your heart once, I wish to never do it again, but I must."

"Please let me go, Vincent." Hot tears rolled down Allendale's cheeks. "You've hurt me enough. Look at me! I'm a drunkard and lonely man who has only two people in his life, and they're not even guaranteed to stay for long. Not with such a pathetic dreck like me. And you wouldn't want to be seen with me anyway. I started smoking about three years ago because the pain was too much and I couldn't stop grinding my teeth. I can't even tell Cassie and Liam that I'm a smoker now because they think I'm better than that. But I'm not! And you coming back with that awful letter. Telling me to divorce you, to get rid of the ring- that was the last straw! I wanted to keep that ring for as long as I could because my love refused to die. You've obviously moved on, but I haven't! And seeing you like this? All rich and famous and strutting around like you own everyone and expect me to be a dog at your beck and call without an ounce of sweetness or softness in your heart? I can't bear it--"

"You're **wrong**, Daniel." Vincent seized Daniel by the shoulders. "I **love** you and only you. You have no idea the absolute hell I went through to be where I can tell you this safely."

"But you said in the letter--!"

"I never said anything about a fucking divorce!"

Allendale pushed Vincent away with his legs. "Don't lie to me!"

"I said to get rid of the ring, not the marriage!"

"Isn't that the same? Let go!"

Vincent held up his hands, remembering his promise. "It's not remotely the same! You simply cannot be this illiterate, Daniel! You're better than this!"

"Symbolism, you bloody pillock!"

"Argh, fine, I cannot argue against that interpretation." Nervous hands scraped against his scalp, lips quivering. Hopelessness sunk into his shoulders. "But it's not that at all. I wrote ambiguously in case that bastard interfered with the package."

"What are you talking about? Who the hell would give a damn about our business?"

"Your cousin Rhys, Daniel!" he snapped. "The reason I abandoned you was because Rhys was threatening to kill you if I didn't!"

Terror flooded Allendale's mind. Thoughts racing from that horrific night when everything had gone downhill. Sweat dripping. Heart stopping. He had already come to terms with what had happened with Rhys and yet this small piece of information brought back the despair, the

hatred, the sniveling and crawling, the shouting matches with his husband, everything he wished to be erased forever.

"Daniel? Daniel, please breathe."

A cool hand pressed against Allendale's fevered skin, calming the shakes and tears.

"I don't understand... He could have killed me any time. I never really... Why couldn't you just tell me? I, I, I don't think he would have done it."

"Do you truly believe I was going to risk that?" Vincent buried his face into his hands, laughing bitterly. Lifting it, he said, "Call his bluff as you say in English? No. I would never do anything that could put you in harm's way. And what other choice did I have, Daniel? I was just a part-timer from your average middle class family studying abroad. What power did I have against one of the most powerful mob families in Britain?"

A decade of life and love wasted by the venomous clutches of the Allendale Family. An uncle who envied the adoration his brilliant and powerful father showered onto his bastard grandson from his reluctant daughter. A cousin who relentlessly bullied said bastard for his standing in the family ranks, only to have been humbled by the whelp. And of course the sad, oblivious bastard himself who existed and found light at every corner, darkness be damned. Vincent illuminated that darkness into a tiny corner, not realizing the beast that hid within until it had been too late.

"I'm a fool," said Allendale.

"That makes two of us." Vincent leaned his forehead onto his husband's, fingers interlacing, shaking with anticipation. This was what he had come back to England for. This moment, this revelation with more to slowly drip as not to alarm his forlorn lover.

Daniel looked into Vincent's eyes. Parasite. An invasive species that came to suck the marrow of the world and leave it brittle and dry, leaving chaos in its wake. However, that was not what he saw at that moment. A scared, desperate, mildly intoxicated man wishing to grasp the remaining flimsy fibers of a rope that had been unbound and burned. He wrested a single thread and pulled and pulled and pulled and pulled, never giving up, enduring humiliation and sin, until the thread went taut and hoisted him above water.

Heed was not taken when Allendale pressed his lips into Vincent's. The undying love he hated spilled over like a broken dam, destroying everything in its path. Consequences were for the sensible and judicious; he was neither and he did not care.

Chapter Five

Hands and arms entangled. Vincent moaned into the kiss, pulling Daniel closer, refusing to let him go. Too many years had gone by without one another's touch. What to touch, what to have, what to take and claim - the possibilities were endless. Eager hands unbuttoned, pinched, massaged, and rubbed as many places as it reached. Where to begin with the unbridled lust, anger and regret?

"This doesn't mean I trust you," Allendale panted between the kisses, exposing his neck for ravishment. A hot wetness sucked and chewed nibbles and grand bites. His eyes rolled back in pleasure. How he missed this feeling!

During their university days, they fucked almost every day. Standing beside one another, catching the scent of the other's cologne or shampoo mixed in with their natural odor was enough to send them into a frenzy, sneaking into empty rooms or hiding between alleys to make out, frot, or give oral - several times actually going the entire way. Neither were drunk or under any influence. Shameless and outrageous, none of it mattered as long as they had each other, and it had been that young, ardent love that led them to marriage in the middle of their second year.

They never took their hands off one another and included each other in most of their outings and excursions. It wasn't just sex, they had told themselves. The meaningful conversations, the chemistry, the little intricate details that made their boyfriend him, all of it had a part in their rash decision to marry. Naturally it came with the perk to have the same dorm room together. In those days, neither Vincent nor Daniel would admit it played a big role in marrying. To say that would be to admit all they wanted to do was have a dedicated space to fuck without a care. Now, through maturity and time, it would be disingenuous to deny it. Youth and hormones were a dangerous combination.

If Allendale's family had not interfered, and Vincent remained his steadfast husband, would they still be married or would it have dissolved after the comfort settled and the sex waned and the eyes wandered to newer men? Daniel wished to believe he would never look at another and simply ask his disinterested husband for a no-fault divorce, however with the temptation he experienced with Marcello, the idea of him being pure at any point of his hypothetical scenario seemed naive.

Kissing Vincent, Allendale pulled down his trousers and tossed them aside. His body demanded he continue to lock lips, twist tongues, and taste every bit of that gorgeous man, but his mind screamed to pull away and lay down the rules. A simple confession did not fix a decade of misery and ostracization. Those vitriolic words Vincent had spewed could never be forgotten, and perhaps never taken back. Once said, the acid took hold and slowly melted all of Daniel's defenses and corroded his heart and soul. Mending it would take years of trust and work, and once repaired, the scars would still remain, open and bare, pieces missing and uneven. Its shape never what it once was.

"And it doesn't mean our marriage is saved either."

Vincent parted Daniel's robe and buried his face between his chest. "I'll give you a reason to stay."

"Sex isn't a reason." Daniel moaned.

"However many it takes." His tongue licked along his husband's torso, stopping at the hem of the underwear. Yanking it off, Vincent grasped the hard, weeping dick and swallowed it without warning.

"Ah, Vincent, wait!" Allendale clenched his fingers into Vincent's curls, lifting his head from his groin.

Vincent smacked the hand away and pinned Daniel's hips down, pressing his head further down. Given how long it had been since Daniel had been with another man - namely him, it would not be long before he came, writhing, crying, and beautiful.

Allendale arched his back. Dammit, why did Vincent have to be so good at giving head? The same vicious tongue that beat him down into submission years back was the same one giving him pleasure. Swirling, tracing along the bulging veins and digging into the foreskin for a taste, lapping around the head and planting a generous kiss before going back to deep throating. The satisfied glint in Vincent's eyes before closing them and hollowing his cheeks to cover every part of the twitching cock with tight heat.

So close. Allendale tried to buck his hips to relieve himself faster but Vincent's grasp had been too hard. One look at his smug face drooling, sweat plastered on those lovely blond locks, mouth stuffed and full of cock had been more than enough to send him into ecstasy. He came with a hitched groan and collapsed on the bed while Vincent continued to milk him for everything he had.

"S-stop."

Vincent pulled away with an intentionally loud pop, kissing the softening member for good measure. He stuck out his tongue to show his husband the fruit of his labor. Thick and copious, musty and unpleasant, Vincent swallowed Daniel's semen with gusto, relishing the unamused expression on Daniel's face. It had always freaked him out whenever he swallowed. Some things never change.

A delectable sight, a feast for the eyes! Daniel laying, quivering from the intense orgasm, sensitive and overstimulated. One touch could send him coming again, shouting how it had been too much too soon. Vincent crawled over his body and hovered over his chest, his cock begging for attention and release. Licking his lips, Vincent used one hand for himself and one to reach around from behind and play with Daniel's spent dick.

Allendale squirmed from the touch, eyes fixated on that fat, glistening cock. His mouth salivated. "Cut it out."

"No," he said breathlessly.

"I meant stop touching my dick, idiot." Allendale snatched Vincent's wrist and took it away from his crotch. "Give it some time, will you?"

Vincent chuckled, moving his knees upwards to bring his cock closer to Daniel's face. "Can't bounce back up like you used to?"

"We're not twenty anymore, Vincent." He took Vincent's idle hand and placed it on his shoulder for better leverage. This may have been a one night stand, but he still wanted his former lover to have fun. Reaching to Vincent's dick, he used his left to help jerk him off and the right hand to fondle his balls and press a knuckle hard into his taint.

"Oh fuck!" hissed Vincent. That scoundrel!

"Who's sensitive now?"

"*Hoer.*"

"That's right, I am. What are you going to do about it?"

"Paint your face with white."

Allendale bit his lips. The thrill of seeing that perfectly sculpted man come undone by his touch and words, the moans and small twitches with the twist of his fingers, calloused palms from manual labor contrasting and massaging the delicate flesh mixing with Vincent's own soft, manicured hands, nothing could compare! How wonderful it had been to see that man's ears inflamed with red by the utter filth said only to have them spat back with more vigor and lust.

"Do it," said Daniel, knuckling along the perineum. Vincent's moan stirred his flaccid penis back to life. "Cum all over me."

"I'll do that and more, my love. The only place you belong is our bedroom, naked and with your ass gaping from all the times I fucked you. You'd like that, wouldn't you? Just being a cozy housewife doing absolutely nothing except staying pretty and keeping your legs open for your husband while I slave away, bringing home the money you demand."

"You say that but you forget how much to crave getting fucked." A finger teased and rubbed into Vincent's hole. "I'll be spoiled in the day, but at night I'll do all the work filling your arse with cum."

Vincent shivered, almost losing his balance. "And I will get that fill any time I want. You can fuck me until I go blind but I will make sure you never have an excuse to ever leave me."

He squeezed Vincent's dick harder, noting the shallow and fast breaths and thrusts. "You have an insurmountable amount of work to get to that point."

"However long it takes, you *will* be mine, Daniel."

He came without a word, brows furrowed, concentrating on aiming solely on Daniel's face. Large ropes of semen spluttered, rubbing his erection until every drop drained, marking his husband with his most intimate scent. His cum rolled down Daniel's nose, cheeks, and chin, some landing on his neck. The most satisfying had been the splash of white on his husband's panting lips, begging to be licked off. Looking behind, Daniel's cock had been painfully engorged, standing proud and frustrated from the lack of attention.

Daniel simply had no idea how much beauty he held even in those vulnerable and lewd moments. A magnetic power drawing anyone who so much as glanced at those glowing blue eyes full of kindness and pain. Forever trapped and unwilling to let go of the siren that had unknowingly enchanted them without uttering a single word. That oblivious handsome man was supposed to be his!

* * *

In a posh penthouse, a man sat in his office chair and faced the window, rocking back and forth with anticipation. He looked through the medical records he had procured from a hospital through bribery and extortion. Two weeks ago, his father had suffered a massive heart attack, requiring immediate surgery. A triple bypass, as the report read. Stable condition, though due to his poor dietary habits, heavy smoking and drinking, recovery would be a challenge, especially if he did nothing to change his ways. Although none guaranteed a long survival.

The man chuckled gleefully. God was indeed a benevolent being. Henry Allendale had been the prime candidate to take over as the boss when his father announced his potential retirement as leader. However it all changed with the recent health scare, and all of the family scrambled to gain power, himself included.

"Frankly, I do not give a damn if he dies and I gain the spot as underboss instead." The man poured himself whisky from his decanter and drank it neat. "Now that my old man is incapacitated, I am free to do what I want."

His grandfather would be powerless too as his priorities lied with finding a suitable heir. He'd have no choice but to give it to him even if it meant acknowledging his grandson's odd proclivities.

Not that Rhys Allendale would reveal those perverted tendencies to his dear old grandfather! What if it gives *him* a heart attack? That would be more than delightful. Both old hindrances gone and irrelevant to how the firm should be ran. Downright the best damn thing that could ever happen to him.

He tossed the papers aside and opened his mobile, flipping to his secret photo gallery folder. The first image was the most recent, it being a zoomed image of a man wearing construction clothing, pointing to somewhere above. His buff arms full of grime and sweat, and his wet shirt clung onto his chest and abdomen, revealing the defined curves of his muscles. And face sported a tinge of ruggedness from forgetting to shave the day prior. The man was objectively handsome, one of the most attractive men Rhys had ever seen in his entire life.

And he had him once, and he would never forget that incredible night. Thanks to his father's untimely illness, Rhys had the opportunity to have him once again.

"Daniel..." Rhys swiped until he found his favorite picture of Daniel smiling, kissing it reverently. Zipper undone, he pulled out his member and touched himself to the images his private investigator had sent. "I can't wait to have you."

Chapter Six

In the morning, Allendale woke up to the smell of fresh coffee and Vincent thrusting into him as if there were no commitments or promised tomorrows. Both were quite insatiable last night, ignoring the expensive Dom Perignon in favor of wanton fucking and eating one another's face like rabid dogs in heat.

At some point while he sucked on Vincent's cock, Vincent had sent a message to the concierge. Gently, he guided Allendale's face away and answered the door with his raging erection on full display, and returned back to the bed. He tossed a plastic bottle on the bed and removed his dress shirt. A thin chain necklace with a plain gold band ring hung from his neck.

Allendale stood agape at his brashness. Lube. He texted the concierge of a fancy, exclusive hotel for lube!? And naked!? Why did he ever expect him to become less reckless with time?

Vincent grabbed the lubricant and slathered it on his hand and dick. "Grow up, Daniel. We're not twenty anymore. Shampoo and spit always burned in the morning."

"And the condoms?" he asked, holding out his hand for a squeeze of lube and spreading his legs.

"I'm not making love to my own husband with a condom."

They fucked, slept, then fucked some more whenever one woke up after passing out. That morning had been no different, heavy bagged eyes, exhaustion and all. Vincent came first and finished Allendale with a handjob, then collapsed on top, panting and whispering endless "I love yous" into Daniel's ear.

The coffee chilled, but was thoroughly enjoyed by the tired men.

"Where's your wedding band?" asked Vincent, coming out from the shower.

"In my jacket pocket," said Allendale, preparing another cup of coffee for himself. Expensive hotels had to be taken advantage of. When would he ever find an espresso machine with freshly ground coffee in his hotel room ever again? Never. Best to steal the robe too. Maybe a bottle of water so they can put it in Vincent's tab.

Vincent put on his robe and searched the jacket then went to his suitcase. Pulling out a file, his nimble fingers separated the papers and removed what he needed. He stood over Daniel and ripped the papers in half, then fourths, then to whatever small size he could get them in and sprinkled them over Daniel's head. Bending on one knee, he rubbed the end of Daniel's left ring finger, admiring the pale ring-shaped imprint.

He kissed Daniel's knuckles one by one. "I can't sign what is destroyed."

"It was destroyed a long time ago." Allendale pulled his hand away.

"I seek to amend it."

"And why now? Why not when you made your first million? Ten million? Why did you wait ten miserable years to save our broken marriage?"

"There are circumstances that came up and I have to act now. As much as I would love for you to wear your wedding band, I cannot allow you to flaunt it flagrantly. Far too many eyes have come within your midst."

"So those violets..." He shook his head, sighing: his suspicions were true. "You've been watching me the entire time?"

"Did you expect anything less from me?" Vincent scoffed, sitting beside him. "And don't worry about the yellow roses. They were for insurance in case that idiot interfered."

"For a minute there I thought you were going to wage war against me."

"The flowers were severed from the stems. If anything it meant any perceived animosity was over, but I don't think your cousin is smart enough to figure that one out."

Allendale tugged at his brand new starched buttoned shirt, barely giving the breakfast menu any attention. After his shower, Vincent handed him bags of new clothes from various designer houses and told him to wear them instead of his gala clothing. Stupid to assume those bags were for Vincent and not him. Didn't plan to sleep with him? What an idiot he had been to take the chance and follow. Those dejected eyes full of uncertainty and the tremble in Vincent's voice sealed his fate. Hook, line, and sinker.

He sighed. What was done was done and he could no longer take back yesterday. Though Vincent's words were sincere, he couldn't help but to feel apprehensive about the entire situation. Why now, and what more did Vincent know that he hadn't revealed? Time would only tell, and the best course of action was to maintain skepticism and a safe distance.

Vincent sipped from his teacup and smiled at Daniel.

Searing heat and heart flutters. A gentle smile destroyed all his fortifications and any lofty thoughts of strength. Why did his husband have to be so charming and beautiful?

"You look amazing in that outfit," said Vincent. "There's plenty more for you in our room."

"You know this means nothing."

He signaled for the waiter. "I'm aware."

"And that's the last time we... do it."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure."

Last night had been a whirlwind of emotions. When Daniel allowed himself to give in and sleep with Vincent, he expected internal turmoil and mistrust, uncertainty. Instead his kiss erased the doubt and any thoughts of past and future betrayal. One kiss, a simple touch brought the reprieve he had sought. That primal itch that haunted his body and soul, many many years of

bound hands and being unable to pry himself free, driving him mad, finally scratched. With a blank mind, he let go and enjoyed a night of unrestrained passion. And it was amazing.

Even now with his mental distance from Vincent, his body demanded to be touched, caressed, kissed, loved, as if eleven years of anguish never occurred and the man right in front of him had been by his side the entire time. His groin stirred at the sight of Vincent unconsciously licking egg yolk from his bottom lip.

His dumb prick was the greatest enemy.

What will happen to me now?

"I can take you back to your home," said Vincent, paying the bill.

"You are not driving me from London to Reading."

"Don't be so dramatic, Daniel. Believe it or not, I've improved immensely. I was given a *loicense* in your country for a reason."

Allendale arched an eyebrow. "I don't sound like that."

Vincent grinned. "I heard on the *telly* that it's going to rain, so do you need me to purchase you a *brelly* and some *wellies*? Did you enjoy your *brekkies* too?"

"It's *broolly*, not *brelly*." He couldn't help but to laugh. Despite the bitterness and regret, they could still find levity in their conversation. Perhaps Vincent told the truth? No. Better to be suspicious than to accept him without constraint.

A soft buzz from Vincent's mobile. He looked at his phone, removed his keycard from his pocket, and slid it gently across the table. "Here's the keycard to the room. I'll follow you later."

Allendale took the keycard without hesitation, rolling his eyes at Vincent winking and blowing a kiss when he stood up. Only an idiot would assume all was well, and he had a feeling Vincent knew he suspected something given sudden change in conversation. Whatever it had been, it necessitated an immediate answer, one where Daniel could not be present or privy to. Did it involve a party that spoke a language Daniel understood? Vincent knew many languages, but Allendale did as well thanks to his efforts to learn Dutch and French for his husband and never let the acquisition fade away despite the sour separation.

Maybe Vincent didn't want to take the chance.

In the room, Daniel packed his clothing into the shopping bags and took the Dom Perignon, the robe, and the leftover coffee grounds and tea bags with him. If the shampoo and conditioner were not attached to the wall, he would have taken them too. Cowardly to leave without a single word, but he never touted himself a brave man, only someone with the drive to carry on in spite of the heavy burdens placed upon him.

Approaching exit, he sought to throw away the keycard but paused when he glimpsed Vincent talking on his phone at the bar, his full attention on the conversation and something in his hand. He wiped his eyes with a napkin and kissed the object, nodding to whatever the other person said.

“Yes, he’s safe for now,” he said in Spanish. “I won’t let anything happen to him, even if it kills me.”

Daniel’s heart jumped to his throat. The hard plastic dug into his clammy palms. Damn that guy. He approached the hotel desk and returned the keycard to the associate, claiming it belonged to Mr. Lemaire-Allendale and for it to be returned to him as soon as possible. Silently, he headed to the tube for the train station and hopped to the next train back to Reading.

On the train, he distracted himself with recipes and adjusting his work schedule. Anxious fingers twisted his left finger. The contact with his skin startled him. Coldness spread down his back. Vincent still had his ring!

No, he wouldn’t come all the way to Reading just to return his ring. Allendale smacked his forehead. Of course he would! It had been the reason why he bothered to pack all the clothing Vincent bought for him to begin with. Forget the clothes and suffer the consequence of Vincent having an excuse to visit his home!

Perhaps he didn’t notice he kept the ring?

Looking into his text messages there were read messages from Cassandra earlier that morning. Odd?

[Are you alive?] 0642am
[Where are you?] 0650am

Better to answer now than ignore.

[I’m on the train going home. You?]

A flurry of messages instantly followed.
[Worried sick. Did you find Vincent?]
[Don’t tell me!]
[Daniel!]

A sinking sensation dropped into the pit of his stomach. Opening his call log, Cassandra had called hours after the text, yet the missed call banner had been erased. Under contacts, he typed in “Vincent” and received no results.

He sighed in relief. Okay. Maybe he hadn’t– no, wait. A worse thought crossed his mind.

H-U-S-B-

One result.

Opening the contact, a full list of information cascaded. Personal and work email, work number, home number, mobile numbers, addresses, relationship, important dates: he had filled them all in!

Allendale leaned back into his seat.

Oh shit.

* * *

Such an inconvenient time to receive a phone call. Now? Really? At such a crucial time, when their relationship only just began to heal? Staying focused on the voice at the other end of the line was proving to be much more difficult than Vincent had anticipated. Imprinting every detail of last night into his mind was far more important. Tucking away the scent and taste of his husband deep into his memories, every twitch and moan, the comfort of being in his dearest Daniel's arms as they both slipped in and out of sleep... His husband aged like fine wine during their years apart. Hopefully the man he was speaking to could telepathically sense his disinterest in the conversation. He already promised Daniel's safety; what else needed to be said?

"Pardon me, sir," a woman's voice snapped Vincent out of his trance, "this had been found and returned to the front desk."

The receptionist procured a keycard tucked neatly into the hotel's intricate holder. Odd - he left the holder next to the coffeemaker. That could only mean-

"I'll have to call you later." Vincent said in Spanish, ending the call without waiting for a response. Stay composed, stay composed. "Thank you, miss. Do you happen to know how long ago this was turned in?"

The woman slightly tilted her head in thought. "Hmm... Not too sure, sorry. Must not have been too long ago though."

All he could muster was a nod in response.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Did he come off too strong? No doubt showering his husband in too much of everything scared him off. He should have returned to their humble roots and gone to a basic bed and breakfast instead. But no. No! Daniel kissed him first! He didn't decline a damn thing! If he felt uncomfortable he would have left sooner, not after having breakfast together!

Nausea and anxiety flooded Vincent's senses as he ran past the countless suite doors. He could feel his face and fingers going pale as he struggled to unlock the door to their room. The lock finally clicked open.

"DANIEL!!"

Stillness. Nothing but his own belongings and a partially-made bed, done likely out of guilt. Cowardly – still cowardly after all these years. Chances are he even hesitated opening the parcel he had sent, despite the sender not being mentioned.

"... That bastard even took the champagne," Vincent sighed. "No, no. Pull yourself together, Vincent. Don't start this with negative feelings. Perhaps he found out about his uncle's illness and had to leave."

But he wanted to speak to him about that! About his family's situation, about Rhys! He left too soon!

The ring. His wedding band!

"I can't *not* return this to him," Vincent said as a mischievous smile crept up his cheeks, pulling out his mobile. "Perhaps I can pay him a visit at his home."

Chapter Seven

Two more steps and he would finally be safe at home. Allendale rushed up the steps, jamming and slipping his keys into the door before finally opening and slamming it shut. Dropping his items, he raced up the stairs and rummaged through his closet. It was there! It had to be there! The last time he had used the infernal weapon hadn't been too long ago!

There!

Underneath a shoebox was a hard plastic black box with disc combination lock on the latch. He spun the numbers and opened it, revealing a gun and a few magazines. A quick check, safety on and magazine empty. Everything had been as it should be.

The cursed gun had been given to him by his grandfather's bodyguard – a Polish man named Karol Pietrzak – after his exile from the family. A quiet man roughly fifteen years his senior, Karol observed him throughout his childhood and teenage years, keeping a distance away, eyes watchful of him and his mother. On the rare occasions he spoke freely, Karol talked to Daniel with a gentle voice and a reassuring hand on his shoulder. He never said much, but his presence and smile echoed loud. He would always be there for him, through thick and thin, blood and shame. The exile had been no different.

"K-Karol?" Daniel had answered the door expecting his Granddad to reconsider or at least put him out of his misery. Instead Karol stood there, hulking and rigid with hardened eyes full of resolve.

So it would be Karol to choke the life out of him, he had thought.

Granddad prided himself of his loyal hound, often flaunting his immense strength to those he needed to intimidate. Daniel witnessed it once and swore to never use Karol or anyone for such heinous deeds. Never in his life did he ever think to be on the receiving end of the command. All those years learning of the Allendale trade in secret from his mother, constantly reassured by his grandfather nothing would happen and that he wanted Daniel to see this, because he was an Allendale, because he had what it took to be great like himself, and above all because he was dearly loved.

Sinking to his knees, Allendale had broken down in tears and accepted his fate. Granddad's love had a limit and today it had been reached and crashed down into hell. At least his mother wouldn't have to deal with any fallout and neither would Vincent.

Trembling, he mustered the courage to look at the man and asked, "...Can I be buried next to Mum?"

Karol held out his hand and reached for Daniel. He paused at the flinch then continued and rested his hand on the young man's head.

Soft pats and ruffles.

Daniel opened his eyes and saw a hard plastic case.

"Your old man sends you this." He placed it into Daniel's hands. "The code's 034. Open it."

The gun started menacingly at Allendale. He swallowed hard, unable to pry his drowning eyes from the weapon. "So he wants me to do it myself...?"

"He would never." Karol looked away, muttering, "And neither would Boss."

Lowering his hand onto Allendale's shoulder, Karol squeezed it and patted it before leaving. "Protect yourself, Daniel."

Allendale shivered from the memory. Given that Vincent returned back into his life, his gut screamed for him to keep his gun close, locked and ready for whatever nightmare was to come his way.

* * *

Several empty martini glasses lined the bar. Not a single drop left over, save the quintessential olive. The patron ordered another drink and downed it with gusto. Flicking his wristwatch, the man grunted. Too early. But the promise of copious alcohol on that man's tab piqued his interest. He simply had no other choice than to peruse the menu and whet his tongue.

A handsome blond man dressed in impeccable refined clothes entered the bar. He smiled politely at the bartender and nodded when his amber eyes met the man's grey.

If the walls could speak! Everyone in that bar could not tear their eyes from him. Old rich or feigning money, it did not matter to anyone there. Strip the man naked and his elegance and beauty remained. Worst of all, the man knew his worth and milked it all for it could provide. Nothing more dangerous than an ambitious man like that.

The patron steadied his bouncing knee on the barstool, ordered a shot of vodka, and drank it. Vincent Lemaire-Allendale was not a man to be trifled with, especially now that he contacted his beloved husband.

"Olives are the best part," said Vincent, taking one from the empty glass and eating it. He sat beside the large man. "Didn't know a bodyguard was allowed to drink."

"I am free to do what I like on my day off."

"I suppose to deny a Polish man his drink is to deprive him of water."

"A Belgian would rather hang himself than give up beer."

Both men chuckled. Vincent ordered a house cocktail and ate another olive.

"Never took you as a vermouth sort of man."

"They're *wódka* martinis."

"Figures." Vincent stared at the bar menu. "He returned to Reading."

"Left you behind, I take it?"

A wry smile formed. "I had to take a phone call."

Karol frowned. "Was it him? That idiot is too emotional."

"Daniel could be like that too, but I only tolerate it coming from him."

"Will you be heading to Reading?"

"Of course I am. I'll be driving tonight." Digging into his pocket, he pulled out his wallet and set it on the table. "Did you get what I asked for?"

"Breaking and entering is illegal," said Karol, taking a copied key from his pocket.

"It's not when I'm still his legal spouse."

"He also has a *pistolet*." Saying the word in English would be far too risky given the atmosphere.

"He's not the only one."

Karol squeezed the martini stem until it broke.

Vincent smacked Karol's bicep. "At ease. I would never do anything to endanger my husband's life. Otherwise you wouldn't even be here giving me that key."

The manor Daniel lived originally belonged to the Allendale family a generation prior to his grandfather Paul. Eventually a brother of Daniel's grandfather inherited it and lived there until his untimely passing. While the family mourned and learned to live without James, Paul never quite stopped grieving for his sibling and preserved the home. When he exiled Daniel into the property, he made sure to always have a copy of the master key in his possession. A threat or for safety, one could never tell.

"Boss loves him." He handed Vincent the key.

Vincent's bottom lip stiffened. He took a large wad of cash and threw it in Karol's way. "Evidently not enough to do that to him."

Another drink ordered. "He's the least of your worries."

"Old bastard probably had given himself an infarction with how his son nearly died." Wrapping an arm around Karol's shoulder, Vincent poked at the large man's chest. "It'll save us a lot of trouble."

"Maybe..." Karol tensed, eyes darting from Vincent. "But he might be the only guy able to hold back Rhys should Henry die."

Redness spread throughout Vincent's face, grip tightening on Karol's shoulder. "The old man did nothing to hold that putrid rat. He did nothing then and he'll do nothing now. He's a stupid senile fool obsessed with some senseless family code only he's kept to himself and never bothered to tell the ones who matter."

Karol breathed deep, careful not to offend Vincent with any more words. Even before the scandal, the few times he had met Vincent he could tell by his eyes alone that the young man had a tinge of malice beneath the layers of ruthlessness and zeal. The kindness and civility he expressed to everyone was rote and none were the wiser when he smiled. Fortunately for everyone surrounding him, Daniel kept the man on a leash and quelled the rising cruelty. Whether Daniel knew of his role, Karol could not tell, though it had been obvious to him Vincent relied on his calm nature to soothe the inner beast.

Honestly he was no different from Rhys, but at least Vincent had his sanity.

"You're right," he admitted. Paul Allendale did a poor job at handling his son and grandson in regards to the business and Daniel, but what was done was done. No need to live in the past.

Karol drank the rest of his drink. "Well, Rhys is on the move."

"I'm aware." Vincent removed his arm and focused on his phone. "Keep an eye on him when you can, and text me anything new. Let's have dinner next time. Excuse me sir, I'm ready to close the tab."

"Can't you spare me another drink?" Karol smirked, tilting an empty glass back and forth.

Vincent paid the tab in full and got off the barstool. "Your liver weeps."

Chapter Eight

It was a dark and stormy night.

Allendale poked through his curtains to view the torrent tearing through the streets. Chuckling, he poured himself the expensive champagne into his favorite teacup and sipped it while watching the rain. The bubbles tickled his nose. He grimaced and continued on, adding more to his cup. Sparkling wines affected his sobriety, but having a legendary, overpriced drink would be nice for a change. Vincent used to drag him to the off-licence and pointed at the priciest spirits and promised one day he'd afford the "good stuff" for them to enjoy.

Would Vincent dare follow him? A meticulous, self-absorbed man like him hated to leave the security of the indoors to venture out into the rain, no less at night. Daniel remembered the time he threw a fit back during their early dating days over his loafers becoming waterlogged from running through the rain and, in his rush, slipped and landed on a large puddle. Laughing had probably not been the wisest action. Frustration and hurt stared back, shutting down Daniel's laughter. Vincent grunted and sped back to his dorm room, ignoring the barrage of "I'm sorrys!"

"Those were my only good shoes!" Vincent hurled them across the room, scaring his current roommate off his chair. A splash of muddy water launched out from the force and splattered over Vincent's designated bed. He stripped himself of the soggy clothes and punched the wall before sitting on his bed and laid, face red and tears welling.

"Piss off, Daniel!"

At the time Allendale assumed that incident would trigger their breakup. After all, they had only dated for about two months. Laughing at your partner's distress would be enough to make any recent couple call it quits, so why wouldn't it for him? Vincent hadn't called or texted. They didn't meet or wave at one another. To anyone watching, they'd assume the relationship was over.

Another day had passed and Daniel went to Vincent's dorm and asked his roommate for the shoes. Taking them out of the rubbish bin, he took them back to his own room and began to wash and dry them to the best of his ability and got a temporary job at the university book store. He never bothered to message his boyfriend during the first struggle, not when Vincent didn't glance in his direction, kicking his worn-out trainers through the fallen leaves on the pavement. And certainly not with his busy schedule at the store and his attempt to fix the shoes.

Eventually Vincent texted his usual "Good morning =]" message, though it, too, went ignored. If he texted back, would Vincent want to talk amicably? He had heard the heartless things Vincent would say about others, what if that awaited him? This had been his first relationship with anyone – what was he supposed to do?

On the fifth day of the good morning message, Vincent sent another one right after.

[We need to talk. Meet me after my shift at the chip shop tonight]

But Daniel hadn't gone to the chippy that evening. Slept never met him that night.

The following day Vincent sent him the usual text and then another.

[However long it takes I'll wait an hour after my shift]

It took a week of extra hours and choosing deliberately different walking paths before Vincent sent his final message.

[I understand...]

So this was it. This was how he and his boyfriend ceased to speak to one another and carry on as if nothing had ever happened? Coward. Pathetic coward. The least Vincent deserved had been a response, be it to make amends or end it.

If present day Daniel could change anything, it would have been for him to make the first attempt at contact and hug his past self. In his silly eighteen-year-old head, he wrongfully assumed there would be a magical reconciliation, that things would fall into the right pieces and everything would go as planned and Vincent would forgive him for his silence.

The prospect of Vincent sneering at him, spitting at his face with his sharp words and look of contempt had scared Daniel. Yet now there would be no disdain glaring at him or an aloof dismissal, only a melancholic young man making his way through a foreign school without family or a comforting shoulder to lean on.

Granddad had always remarked on Daniel's hesitation. His biggest disgrace, the black stain that would lead him into the path of ruin. Men were not supposed to doubt and cower in fear and rest in their laurels, allowing delusion to take hold while their foundations crumbled beneath due to the neglect and hubris. Life was not a movie or a novel or a whimsical fairytale. Every action had a consequence. Hesitation hastened the downfall.

Gathering his courage, heart bursting in its seams, Daniel dashed to the chip shop before the end of Vincent's shift. Even if forgiveness was too late, the least Daniel could do was apologize and give him the resolution he rightfully deserved!

Daniel caught the sight of Vincent waving to his boss goodbye and called out his name.

Vincent startled, eyes wide and uncertain of the person approaching him. He took a step back. "It's a bit too late for that, don't you think?"

"I know it's over, but you at least should hear it and not have to think about how a bloody asshole stood you up and didn't have the nerve to break up with you like a real man." Daniel panted from the run and handed Vincent a large shopping bag.

"What is this?" He took the bag, opening it with tentative hands. "Daniel, listen—"

"I'm sorry for laughing at you. I'm sorry for not talking to you or doing anything. I thought..." His fists shook beside him. "I thought if I did something nice instead of just saying anything that all this would go away. But I'm so stupid. I should have just told you from the beginning what I was planning. We'd be getting ready for Bonfire Night and you'd laugh at how weird British people are to celebrate the failure of a coup from four hundred years ago. And I would laugh and still take you there anyway."

“And then you’d be telling how Bastille Day is more noble—”

“I’m not French.”

Daniel shook his head in disbelief. “Huh?”

Vincent rubbed his mouth to hide his amusement. “My family is from *Wallonie*, not France. *Le 14 juillet* is not Belgium’s national day.”

“Oh, erm, well, that is my mistake.” The ground should make itself useful and swallow him whole. “I must go.”

A strong hand grabbed his arm and pulled Daniel back. He turned to see a wistful smile on Vincent’s handsome face, curls plastered over a sweaty and greasy forehead from the long hours frying the fish and chips. Even at his most ragged, Vincent was beautiful to him.

“Daniel,” he said, voice gregarious and patient. “What did you bring me?”

Hiding his burning face with his hand, Daniel muttered, “Just look.”

Letting go of Daniel, Vincent opened the bag and pulled out brown loafers. Its suede had been cleaned and brushed, only a few dark stains remained on the shoe. New shoelaces were placed and garish bright blue insoles lined the interior. Putting them back into the bag, he removed a shoebox, opened it, and snapped the lid shut.

Throat bobbing, eyes averted. “Are you serious?”

He couldn’t look at Vincent either. “I couldn’t get all the mudstains out, so I saved up to buy you new shoes. Black, since black goes well with everything.”

Loud customers and passing vehicles whizzed by. The stench of greasy fish, petrol, cheap perfume wafting through. Street lamps blared its lights, some bright others fading or flickering. The two remained silent, unsure what to say.

“I have to go,” Daniel had said, wishing he could take the days back and do this very same thing earlier. But nothing ever could. “Goodbye Vincent.”

“We are not done talking.”

They had gone back to Vincent’s dorm room and reconciled on the bed through sex at the chagrin of the roommate who walked in on them.

Allendale shook his head. Yes, Vincent would follow him. The man admitted it himself that morning and would do it again if given the chance. Fingers brushed against his lips. The memory of a relieved Vincent from the night of reconciliation came and went. Such softness. Sweet lips pressing into his skin, searching for love and confirmation that their relationship had not truly ended. Such a reluctance between the two of them, young and completely new to emotional intimacy. To bear one’s heart and entrust it to another, to promise to be true and never hide from each other. They trembled in one another’s arms, overwhelmed by the silent vow and gush of emotions rampaging like a broken damn.

How could he have forgotten the tenderness?

Blaming Vincent and his penchant for scorn was the easiest thing to do. Shift it all onto that man. The man who had hurt him, wounded his heart and never spoke a single word to him since then. The man who flaunted his newfound wealth to the public, arms wrapped around a lovely woman of status, wearing the most expensive watch from legacy fashion houses and driving the hottest luxury vehicle, drinking the finest wine, all while Daniel toiled under the sun, skin hardened into stiff leather, hands and fingers thickened from manual labor, drowning his sorrows in his empty manor whilst clinging to his late mother's favorite teacup. The man who had kissed him with love, radiant eyes full of affection and devotion, and swore to never let him go.

But he let him go.

Allendale wiped his eyes.

Not once since before his exile did Vincent ever insult him.

"Stop trying to rationalize things," he told himself. "You end up running anyway."

His right hand reached for his left ring finger and found nothing. Collapsing into his bed, he wept himself to sleep, uttering, "I still love you."

* * *

Gurgles of liquid echoed throughout the home. The earthy, rich aroma of fresh coffee reached Allendale's nose. Pleasant half-conscious dreams of quiet moments huddled beside a creaking window on stormy evenings. Fluffy blankets and the heat of thighs pressing against one another, hot coffee and tea growing cold as hands touched and explored into exciting territory. He opened his eyes and sighed, wishing the dream could continue.

The coffee scent intensified.

This was not a dream.

Jumping out of his bed, Daniel reached for his gun and treaded carefully down the stairs, each step methodical and silent, just as Granddad had taught him. No sign of broken glass or wood near the entrance. Ever since he had resigned himself to the life of exile, his sleep grew heavier, no longer able to discern the tiniest of sounds, almost as if inviting his grandfather's syndicate to take him out at any moment. Now his senses sharpened, fully awake and using his muscle memory to sift through the subtle noises coming through the kitchen.

Dishes rattled from the cupboards.

His mistake: not subtle at all. Whoever had been there wanted Allendale to know of their presence. Liam never bothered to visit the manor unless Cassandra were coming, and he had already settled the matter with Cass last afternoon. The only person with access to his home

was his grandfather, a stern reminder of who truly determined his right to live, pariah or not. If it were any of Uncle Henry's men, he'd already be dead. And Rhys would have made a bigger spectacle by riding his cock while he slept.

He patted his pockets and realized he had forgotten to bring his mobile with him. Shrugging he figured it wouldn't matter anyway. The police were useless and most of them were bought out by his family, and it was not as if Allendale wanted them involved anyway. Whoever decided to mess with his sleep would not be there for long. He knew how to hide bodies.

Creeping into the kitchen, any fear or apprehension he had felt instantly drained and replaced itself with searing, boiling rage.

Standing beside the stove was a blond man wearing loose grey pajama pants and no shirt. He buttered the toast and placed them on two clean plates and poured the hot coffee into mugs, whistling an off-tune song to himself and to the homeowner. The audacity of that man! Making breakfast as if it were the most normal thing in the world!

Someone needed to put the fear of God in him! Allendale pressed the gun into Vincent's head, finger resting over the trigger guard.

Vincent tensed for a split second then relaxed, flipping the eggs on the skillet. "I didn't think you'd be into that sort of thing."

"Didn't think you'd be so stupid as to invade my home."

"Our home."

"It's my grandfather's manor. I have no ownership of it."

"If my husband lives in the home, then it's mine too, even if it's for a borrowed moment." Vincent scooped each and placed it over the toast. Turning around, he playfully swatted the gun from his face and pointed to the dining table decorated with freshly cut blue hydrangeas in a glass vase, salt, pepper, cream, and sugar.

"Let's have breakfast," he said.

"What are you doing here?" asked Allendale, the gun aimed and unyielding. He had no intent to shoot, but it felt good to have the upper hand for once in a long time. Whether he pointed it at the right person did not matter. Just having that slight advantage satisfied him.

"You left." Vincent frowned. "I thought we had enough instances in our university years for you to have learned your lesson, but I suppose bad habits are difficult to break."

"You didn't need to follow me then. You already know I'm a coward not worth saving."

"I would have signed those papers a long time ago if I had ever felt that way."

Vincent took several steps forward until the barrel of the gun touched his chest. No hesitation from Daniel or a sign of inexperience. The gun remained firm in his hand and finger solely on the trigger guard. What did that horrible old bastard do to his dear husband? Had he been

blinded by his ambition and hatred for Rhys that he failed to notice how far the Allendale roots reached? Had Daniel already been tainted when they first met?

“Why hold your gun at me like that?” He took a step closer, gaze focused on Daniel’s eyes. “Do you think I’m here to kill you?”

“No.”

“Then put that gun down and eat. Save those bullets for people who deserve it.”

Placing the gun on his side of the table, Daniel sat and watched him gather the food and drink. The man made it look so simple, pedestrian even. They had been estranged for eleven years and he stood there underdressed and comfortable, bringing him all the utensils and saying *bon appetit*. That cocksure smile paired with his naked torso – stop distracting him!

“How did you get in?”

“I have my ways. You know I’m quite surprised your kitchen is well-stocked. I assumed it would be full of alcohol instead of essentials.”

“I still like to cook.”

“I’m genuinely happy to hear that,” he said softly. “How are the eggs?”

Allendale looked at his meal and bit into the egg on toast. Slightly runny with a crisp around the edges, more pepper than salt, and plenty of butter on the bread. “Perfect... as always.”

Chapter Nine

Had there not been such heavy news clouding his mind, Vincent would have dropped to his knees and deepthroated his husband the very second he entered the kitchen. Morning wood was an urgent matter demanding to be tended to under normal circumstances. Daniel, so *big* and *strong* behind the mask of a gun, would be wrapped around his finger crying and begging for release. His husband needed a reminder of who was really in control of their relationship, though that would have to wait for another day.

Seeing his husband in a familiar setting showed Vincent the minute, intimate details of how his husband has changed over the years. A sterile hotel room does well to hide secrets and problems at home. Despite grief and alcoholism consuming his husband, and their separation adding to his pain, Daniel's home proved to be well maintained. Beautifully built wooden furniture, utilities in working order, no signs of mildew to be found. How in the world did he manage to keep up with all this maintenance by himself?

"Well," Daniel broke Vincent's train of thought, "you're bold as always. Thought I wouldn't notice you wearing my pajama bottoms?"

Vincent couldn't help but giggle.

"And you're perceptive as always. I figured if I slept next to you, I'd wake up with that gun of yours pressed up against me."

The pair finished their breakfast more or less in silence. How in the world could he smoothly tell his husband the information he became privy to? He had long made peace with the fact that he would be bringing "I've been watching you from afar since the day I left" to the grave with him. "Show me around your place even though I've searched it twice over while you slept" wouldn't do him any favors either. Or perhaps he should tell him to avoid any inconsistent reactions from whatever Daniel decides to tell him that he already knew about.

Fuck it. What good did overthinking ever bring?

"Going back to earlier though, my dearest Daniel," Vincent started as he unhooked his necklace, "You running off causes more problems than it solves." He removed one of the two rings hanging from the chain, gently sliding it over to his husband.

Vincent sighed heavily. "Honestly, I don't even know where to begin."

"Just tell me the worst of it."

"I honestly do not believe you are ready to hear the worst of it, but if that is what you wish, then I'll say it. It saves me—"

A heavy fist struck the table, rattling the plates and cups. Enough of that fake apprehension! "Out with it!"

"...Your mother's death was not an accident."

Silence filled the kitchen. All of Daniel's bravado crumbled into dust.

"What?"

"She didn't have cancer, and she knew it. She just didn't want to tell you what was happening or else things could have been worse."

"I don't understand? Mum went to the hospital for chemo and everything. How? H-how do you know?"

"She had sent a letter to my parents' home in Belgium addressed to me before she died." Vincent grabbed his briefcase, removed the file, and showed him her letter. "These are from a private doctor."

Arsenic poisoning.

But why? Why would his mother lie to him about her health? He looked to Vincent for answers and only found a blurry face from his tears. Mum had been his pillar growing up, the one who tried to protect him and taught him to live humbly and graciously in the face of adversity and her dangerous family. Despite being Paul Allendale's favorite child, she wanted nothing of that life and wished for her only child to be safe and be normal. But... the Allendales had another plan for her?

Who could have done— But why?! She never wanted this! He had everything in his damn favor—! It was a lie! It had to be a lie but... Fuck.

"Do you remember the time I became sick after we visited her home? When I couldn't stop vomiting and you took me to the A&E?" asked Vincent, squeezing Daniel's shaking hands. "Since then she stopped giving us tea and only offered bottled water."

Allendale wiped his eyes and saw the somber on Vincent's face. Mum had smacked him good when he revealed he married Vincent in secret, lamenting how her boy could be so cruel as to leave her out of such a monumental milestone and spoiled Vincent through clothes and sweet treats in revenge, doting on her new son-in-law and calling him her son. Those silly moments were gone, never to enjoy or reminisce. It was robbed. Mum's life had been robbed.

"And why you?" Daniel tore himself away from Vincent's touch. The nerve. "Why did she send 'you' a letter and not me? Why are you privy to this information while I was left in the dark? You could have told me sooner than to wait eleven bloody years."

Vincent sighed, chewing his lips while he thought of a response. "I don't know why it was only me. I assumed she would have done the same but... I cannot make any more assumptions of someone who is no longer with us. I am truly sorry."

"Still..." he said through gritted teeth. "You still chose to keep this from me. Did it feel good Vincent? Did it feel amazing being in the lap of luxury being surrounded by the rich and famous, in bed with any man or woman you could have ever wanted? Did you think to yourself 'Perhaps I can tell him next week. Oh, maybe next week. No, I'm too busy fucking the CEO of some mobile company, Daniel can wait until my schedule is open next year. He'll understand, he always does.'"

Red hot fury with the stare of the devil himself lounged himself at Daniel without notice. His heart leapt from the sudden loss of gravity, head crashing into the floor, room spinning and a livid Vincent pinning him down by the shoulders. His fists itched. Never in his entire life did he want to cry and choke the life out of Vincent but there he was, ready to fight to the death and feed him to the pigs for proper disposal.

“Get it in your fucking head that I was being threatened! That your stupid cousin was dangling your life over my head! Do you really think I didn’t treasure you enough? That I still don’t? I refuse to give you to Rhys. You are mine and you will always be mine if you fucking so much as decide to test me Daniel, I will—”

“You didn’t deny it.” Allendale laughed bitterly. Afterall, being married to a simple, cowardly man without any prospects paled in comparison to a distinguished noble or accomplished entrepreneur.

Vincent punched the floor beside Daniel’s head. “Does it matter!?”

A soft metal clink hit the floor and rolled beside them. The ring spun into circles before coming to an abrupt stop.

Daniel allowed himself to silently cry all while smiling at Vincent. Hope – the gadfly stung at him over and over throughout the years, digging through his flesh, gnawing its teeth, chewing, chewing, itching, itching, deeper, curling and burling until it settled into his very marrow. It infected him. And there was no cure to remove that insidious hope from his body once he allowed it to nestle in and make itself home. All he had now were Cassandra and Liam and this manor. That was all he could look forward to.

“Are you going to hit me?” asked Allendale.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” he sneered. “Help your victim narrative?”

“Whatever helps you maintain your lie.” He sighed. “I’ll talk to the solicitor for new copies.”

“You!” Grabbing onto Daniel’s shoulders, Vincent shook them wildly, grunting in frustration. “I’m never going to divorce you!”

“Why do you want to keep this sham marriage then? I’ve been alone for so long, it doesn’t feel like I was ever married to you. And you... You’ve been so intimate with others that you admit you prefer their company over mine.” Daniel swallowed, throat dry. “You claimed to love me, right? You already have everything you’ve ever wanted, even Mum’s love. Let that pride go and just let me drink myself away without your shadow hovering over me. Vincent. Please let me go.”

Loosening his arms from Vincent’s stronghold, Allendale reached up to Vincent’s face. Parting his bangs revealed wide eyes and a quivering throat. He ran his fingers against his cheeks and found it to be wet.

“Why are you crying?”

"I hate how little you think of me," he whispered, nuzzling his cheek into Daniel's hand. "You have no idea how much I hated it."

"Hated what?"

"Hated to metaphorically and literally whore myself to the most monochromatic pathetic excuses of humans to ever walk the earth. A privileged sort who never had a single worry in their life minus their appearances, and even then they were a single surgeon's appointment away from removing their perceived imperfection. I had to walk amongst these homunculi in order to climb higher and higher, taking all that I needed in order to reach new heights. I fucked them but I never made love to them and it utterly disgusted me."

Daniel lowered his hand to Vincent's neck and pressed his thumb into the artery. A rapid pulse. "But you basked in their adoration and fascination. I could see it in your eyes in the photos taken at important events."

"I have many reasons to be proud of my achievements, underhanded or not. But it never stopped the slimy sensation crawling over my body when they looked at me with those dead, hungry eyes. Their touch was never warm despite their bodies being in flames. Their words were empty and lecherous. I only existed as a means to their end. It shook me to my very core."

"You are no different from them." He tightened his grip around the neck. How vulnerable and easy to rip the life from.

"Yes, but I have a goal." Vincent reached for Daniel's wrist and pulled his hand away. "They sought pleasure with a handsome man, I sought for power to free my husband from his prison. I would rather live in poverty with you than have to spread a degenerate old man's legs just to live in a mansion."

"Then why don't we live in poverty?"

"After seeing your family for the bribery, extortion, violence, and overall degeneracy, what they did to you and me, and Alice's letter? I couldn't stand idle. You of all people know what they're all capable of. You were born into something far beyond me, so I had to become far beyond them."

"You'll get killed if you remain with me."

"I appreciate the sentiments but that will not be necessary. If I were not serious about my commitment to you, I would have never bothered to return. And make no mistake: it wasn't all just sleeping around. I wouldn't have gotten where I am by sex alone. You of all people know that."

Always the schemer, always the one to dream the loftiest dreams, spending night after night studying for the highest marks, attending parties and speaking to students of the wealthy and connected, Vincent never settled for less and wished to bring his lover with him. Daniel had shied away from that aspect of his husband only to be dragged by the wrist to the endless get-togethers and grow bored of the grey crowd. He often complained about Vincent's habits and ambitions when he felt out-partied and wished for peace and quiet, while Vincent complained back at how friendly he had been to other men during the mingles.

Business not pleasure, Vincent had once said. As if Allendale found any pleasure being surrounded by stuck-up rich kids. He had enough of that at home thank you!

Yeah, he definitely knew Vincent was more than capable than sleeping around for what he needed. Beauty, brains, and the zeal of the devil himself.

“This ring.” Grabbing the ring from his necklace, Vincent reached for the other ring on the floor and hovered them above Daniel’s head. “This is the only thing that has kept me going. Every decision, every business transaction, every banal conversation with the elites was all for this. For you.”

“Flatterer.” He snatched his ring and put it on his finger out of sheer habit, looking away from Vincent.

Too handsome for his own good—! Worst of all it came effortlessly. Shirtless, pink nipples, pyjamas trousers slipping dangerously low to expose his pubic hair and adonis belt. Seeing that charming tear-stained smile topped off the desperate ruffled appearance sent his half-hard morning erection into fullness. It didn’t help that Vincent’s shapely ass intentionally rubbed his cock with every sway of Vincent’s hips.

The tart knew how to get him hot and bothered.

Rolling his hips into Daniel’s, Vincent grinned before dipping his head, lips hovering over Daniel’s ear. Hot breath and the glide of teeth around the sensitive skin. He nipped a quick bite, licking the curve of the earlobe.

“No one takes what belongs to me...”

Hooking his thumbs over Daniel’s shirt, Vincent pulled it up to reveal taut muscles. Too many places to choose to kiss and ruminate. Marks from the previous night lined around those glorious pecs ready to accept a dick in between, mouth open and hot. Vincent licked his lips. His hands roamed over the abdomen and chest. Exquisitely all for him.

“What did you even do to have enchanted that sick man to the point of obsession?”

Chapter Ten

Rhys awoke that morning in bright spirits. Father's condition worsened the night before though improved in the wee hours of the morning. No matter. If the old man survived, he'd be powerless to stop him from doing what he wanted. Grandfather would never allow such an injured man to take over the syndicate and would leave no choice but to grant him the position as the underboss. His cousin Liam held no ties to the firm and Cassandra served as the accountant. His uncle Philip distanced himself for too long to be of any use to his father. The only next of kin would be the branch families and Daniel.

Exiled or not, Daniel had been exposed to the harsh world of the firm, far more than Rhys had at his age. Grandfather likely wanted him to become his heir, groom and mold him into the perfect leader capable of shooting a man in cold blood. No doubt Daniel could inherit the position should Paul Allendale soften his heart and open his arms to the prodigal son. The man still retained the allure and likely the aloof detachment for taking a life.

A perfect alternative.

Not allowed. Not if Rhys had the final say.

"Oh, but I have plans for you, Daniel." Rhys reached beneath his trousers and touched himself. "I'll never forget what you did to me."

His breath rasped and reached into his nightstand drawer, pulling out a large dildo.

"I need you... I need you..."

Nothing could ever compare to the pain and pleasure that man gave him. If he had to kill him to wholly own him, then he would. Daniel should have always been his. He saw him first!

* * *

A warm summer evening at a large family gathering. Specifics of his memories had long since been blurred and lost to time, though some details stayed hanging barely by a thread.

"Why are all the adults giving *him* so much attention?"

What's so special about Daniel? He's still a baby! He can't even play football yet, but the adults are all cooing and aww-ing over him! Especially granddad! When did granddad ever like kids?

"Rhys, you're too old to be acting like that, aren't you?" a vague figure asked sternly.

"But he doesn't say my name right! It's 'Rhys', not 'weese'! Tell him to say it prop-ly!"

An opportunity arose when the adults all began talking among themselves, distracted by the latest... whatever it is grown ups talk about. News and business and blah, blah, blah. Nothing cool like cartoons or dinosaurs, anyway. An easy opportunity to get the anger out of his body.

"Let's play pretend, Daniel! You'll be the hero and I'll be the villain!"

A three-year old Daniel blinked as if to parse his accent and smiled shyly. "*Vale*."

"Vah-lay?" Rhys scrunched up his face. What a weird kid! "Why do you talk like that? You sound dumb!"

"*Qué es* dumb?"

"No, no, no!" He shoved little Daniel into the ground and kicked the dirt to mess up the boy's clean shoes. The boy didn't cry and wiped his shoes as he got up. Did he not get what was going on? "English! Speak like your mummy! Or are you that stupid?"

"I espeak!" Daniel said with an odd accent. He frowned at his older cousin. "I play!"

"It's I *can* speak. I *can* play! I can't believe Auntie Alice brought back a dummy here."

Sensing Rhys' discontent, Daniel had said something in a different language, lisping a few words here and there, and stomped his feet to leave his unfriendly cousin.

Not wanting to let go of the curiosity, Rhys grabbed and yanked Daniel's arm and threw him back to the ground. How marvelous it had been to use his bigger height and strength to his advantage. He was a big kid, seven years of age, and he could do anything he wanted to that silly little boy who stole the hearts of all the adults with a little smile and his peculiar voice. Rhys laughed at Daniel's whining and stepped on his hand for good measure.

Daniel sobbed. "Mummy!"

"Stop crying, you big baby!" He twisted his foot deeper into the hand. "Bad guys are supposed to be mean and heroes don't cry!"

The child cried more as he struggled to remove his hand from beneath the heavy foot. Every tug came at the price of another twist.

"Mummy!"

"Daniel!" Alice ran to her child's side. "What are you doing!? Rhys! Get off of him!"

Rhys would never forget the rage in her eyes, the utter look of disgust and contempt she had shot at him as she cradled her crying child and kissed his hand to soothe the pain away. She took Daniel away from him and complained to her brother about the "animal" he had raised. Father said nothing to him, however, Grandfather shook his head and refused to acknowledge him for the rest of the evening and doted on Daniel instead.

Years passed. Auntie Alice must have noticed he was using Daniel as an outlet for his frustrations as she always tried to separate the two boys during reunions and get-togethers, but that wouldn't stop him. Teasing Daniel for his odd lisp and accent was just too easy – though

those faded the older he grew. But his cousin's father never being present wasn't something he could ever grow out of.

Though one memory Rhys held dearly and close to his heart.

Another warm summer evening, but not one to fully enjoy just yet. School wouldn't be out for the holidays for a couple more days.

"At the end of Year 6 now, are ya Danny boy? Too bad your old man ain't here to watch you go into secondary school!"

Daniel rolled his eyes and continued to play on his Tennindo DS on the sofa. The harassment wasn't anything new. A background noise whenever he came over to his grandfather's estate and begrudgingly encountered Rhys – the very thing Rhys hoped for.

"I'm talking to you, you prick!"

"Leave me alone, I'm busy." He continued to tap on the screen and smiled at it.

The little shithead dared to ignore and talk back to him? Why couldn't he get it in his head that whenever he spoke, he had to listen? It was that simple and yet Daniel managed to find the gumption to defy him in little ways. Well, he had ways to make the dear cousin squirm. Today would be no different.

"I said I'm talking to you," Rhys said, snatching the game from Daniel's hand.

"Give it back!"

"Cry harder, faggot."

"Don't call me that, twat! Give it back!"

"What did you call me?" Rhys gripped onto the screen harder. A dull creak resounded from the pressure.

Daniel's eyes widened, shirking back. "Hey I was kidding. I didn't mean it so put it down."

"Okay."

The look of relief on Daniel's face made what he had done next all the sweeter. Raising his arm, the expression changed from calm to fear. Rhys flung the handheld across the room and into the wall, smashing the screen and splitting it in half. It landed on the floor with a spectacular clatter, plastic buttons flying about.

Rhys smirked. "I put it down. Just like you said."

He could see the rage, the burning, raw hatred through Daniel's blue eyes. It had been no different from any time before when he bullied him. Every time he got the better of Daniel, he had been rewarded with a cold shoulder or the satisfaction of verbal insults and an attempt to hit him. Regardless of Daniel's response, Rhys always placed a fist into the boy's face, arms, or

stomach. Of course he had gotten in trouble for the times he had gone too far, but it meant nothing to him, not even when Grandfather twisted his arm and threatened him.

And he knew the old man meant business, but something inside found no need to fear for his life. As long as Daniel responded, as long as he could touch that boy and dominate him with his brute strength, any punishment dished was worth it. His father cared little about the bullying anyway. If Grandfather chose to smack him and lock him up in a basement, his father would be sure to free him.

Today would be like any other day, Rhys had thought. Daniel would do either of those three options and Rhys would gain the upper hand thanks to his size and age. When Daniel came charging at him, he anticipated the initial tackle, all futile but he would humor him. He braced himself for the impact and when it came, he shoved Daniel off him like a leaf. Weak and pathetic. Always and forever.

What came next was another series of pushes and shoves with a few punches to the shoulders in between. Nothing too out of the ordinary. Boring even.

Pain.

Crazy. Fucking. Pain.

Daniel's knee pressed hard into his crotch and tossed him over his body, landing hard on the floor. Hands on his balls, a hand snatched his hair, twisting it and slamming his head into the floor over and over until he couldn't tell if it were day or night. The spinning stopped but the barrage of hits to his stomach did not as Daniel kicked him repeatedly. A warm wetness hit his cheek. Opening his eyes, Rhys saw Daniel wiping his mouth with his wrist.

He had spit on him.

What happened next had been a flurry of worried adults surrounding him, bright lights, needles, and people in lab coats talking to his parents. Before he had been whisked away by the ambulance, he caught his grandfather at the door, smiling at Daniel and patting his shoulder, proud and satisfied for the work he had done.

After his discharge, after being able to see his cousin again, Daniel punched him in the gut.

"That's another one for you, in case you thought it was a one off thing, fucker."

Through the pain and humiliation, another sensation ran through Rhys' body. It had been the same feeling as he had before when Daniel beat him the first time. His dick stiffened, curious and longing for more of the sneers and punches from his cousin. Never in his young life had he ever desired something this badly. Daniel. That cute kid he loved to bully to the point of bleeding had given what he craved. He masturbated again thinking of his cousin.

* * *

“You know Danny,” Rhys sighed, patting his cousin’s shoulder, “while I was in hospital, I was thinking about the past. About what all I’ve done to you. I want to apologise for everything.”

He gripped Daniel’s shoulder a little harder. Not hard enough to hurt – just enough to show possession.

“We got off to a bad start and it was entirely my fault. I’m really sorry, Daniel. I want to make it up to you, if you’d let me.”

Daniel squinted in disbelief, clearly unsure of whether to believe his cousin or not. Rhys hoped and prayed he sounded genuine enough. He hesitated, eyes darting back and forth before eventually gazing down at his feet.

“Really? After... everything?”

“Yeah!”

“Well...” Daniel paused for a moment, recalling the pain and fears of the past no doubt, “... Alright. I suppose we are family after all.”

“See? That’s the spirit!”

He approached his plan carefully at first – inviting Daniel to hang out after school, sitting at the same table at family gatherings. Simple, innocent activities. Nothing suspicious, nothing anyone would think twice of. He knew he couldn’t rush gaining his cousin’s trust after so many years of abuse after all. Slowly but surely, Daniel began warming up to him. Emotional scars from one’s youth could be moulded into forgotten bruises with enough time and effort.

A year passed. The pair sauntered around the city centre after school, hopping between the various video game and mobile phone shops dotted along the high street.

“Sooooooo, Danny~” Rhys grinned, his hand lingering slightly too long on Daniel’s back, “is there a girl at your school you fancy?”

“Erm, well... I, ah, not really...”

Daniel’s face turned bright red, quickly turning away to hide his reaction. Cute. Too cute. Rhys wrapped a friendly arm around his cousin’s shoulders, gently rubbing circles with his thumb.

“Hey, that’s alright innit! You’re only young after all, you still have plenty of time to figure out who and what you like.”

“It’s not that... I think I know what I like.” Daniel said quietly.

A curious response, indeed. How oh how will he figure out what type of girl Danny’s into.

Ever so cautious, Rhys let some time pass after that encounter. His next plan needed some polishing before execution. But Rhys wouldn’t sit idly while waiting. School worked perfectly to push these small hints to the back of Daniel’s mind, but his intentional sprinkling of touches solidified normalcy. They’re family, after all. Family members hug each other. Nothing wrong or weird about that.

Finally, half term break arrived! Bonfire Night was just around the corner. Huddling around a fire would be romantic, but such low-hanging fruits were too easy. Rhys was looking forward to a different day.

Whenever Daniel would come over to his house, Rhys would make sure to dot porno magazines around his bedroom. Nice and subtly. One peeking out from under his bed perhaps a little too far out, another time one would be lazily thrown on his computer desk. His father never seemed to wonder why his magazines went missing from under the bed, but no matter – it worked in Rhys' favour regardless. This time however, he left his favorite magazine open on the centrefold spread, as though some model's breasts and pussy were nothing particularly special to a 16 year old boy. The two ran up the stairs and into his bedroom, like any other day.

"Come 'ere Danny, come 'ere! I found this site called 'Weedl's Stuff' earlier, it's hilarious!"

Daniel approached the desk and stiffened up, eyes glancing at the magazine.

Rhys flashed a cheeky grin. "What, you wanna take a look through that? Go on then, I won't tell anyone. You being curious will be our secret."

Keeping his eyes on the monitor proved to be more difficult than he imagined. The idea of *his* cousin sitting on *his* bed getting a stiffy had Rhys' mind swirling and dick rock hard. Oh the things he would do to pull it out and show his Danny how to masturbate, how to feel so good you could scream – though that would have to wait. Moving too fast might scare him off and lead to trouble.

"Any of them girls strike your fancy? There are tons of videos of them too, we could check 'em out if you want."

"Ah, I- I don't know which one I like..."

"Maybe this'll make it easier for you. Come sit over here and watch this with me."

Daniel got off the side of the bed to join Rhys, only to jolt back and cover his face as soon as he realized just what type of video he started playing.

"Rhys! Th-this is for adults! We shouldn't be watching something like this!"

"Ahh, don't worry. When you're my age you'll be watching it with your mates too! Put your hands down!"

Shit. Unsurprisingly, reality turned out to be a bit more awkward than fantasy. Sounds of skin slapping and moaning with an unresponsive boy next to you made time essentially screech to a halt. Daniel was supposed to ask why his pants felt tight, ask how he could feel as good as the two in the video, or simply whip his dick out and start pleasuring himself as if he were home alone.

"Ugh, I hate this part. It focuses on his cock for so long and I can't fast forward. Who wants to see something like that, bleh!"

Deciding he didn't want a front row view of some man's dick and crown jewels, Rhys shifted his gaze over to Daniel. Interestingly enough, his cousin kept his eyes locked on the screen. His cheeks and ears grew redder with each passing second the man stroked his cock, waiting for a tongue to swirl around the tip. No reaction from women, but immediately excited by men. That could only mean...

"Danny," Rhys lowered his voice, "are you gay?"

Daniel vehemently denied it. Naturally anyone his age would given how controversial such a subject was. Rhys pretended to accept his answer, ribbing him here and there, yet knew deep down his cousin had little to no actual interest in women. Perhaps with a little more effort and thought he could finally get what he desired from Daniel.

Rhys clung onto him even more after that incident. Small touches here and there, hand resting on a thigh and rubbing under the pretense of no thought, only a nervous quirk or habit. At times Daniel pushed him away when he became too close and desperate, often telling him how annoying he was or that his proximity had been overbearing. Every shove or rebuke only made the drive to conquer him grow further in its zeal.

Sometimes he had success, a few playful nibbles and rubs, and other times losses. Yet every victory had been savored, ecstatic sounds coming from Daniel's mouth sending waves of pleasure throughout his body. And as Daniel became older, managing to tower over him in height and musculature, the desire intensified. How would it feel to be crushed between Daniel's thick footballer thighs while breathing in his musk and watching the sadistic smirk paint the teen's lips?

They never kissed, much to Rhys' chagrin. Daniel refused, saying kissing would be taking it too far. His answer frustrated him to no end! Dry sex had been fine but kissing was taboo? The stupid idiot! And even if he wanted to force Daniel into something further, his weaker body stood no chance against his cousin's robust build. No longer did Rhys hold any meaningful power over Daniel.

And it killed him to know that.

His attendance at university destroyed any progress he had made with Daniel, or lack thereof. Time had been cruel. The shackles he had attempted to use and trap him were rusted and flimsy, as if they held no substantial weight in Daniel's psyche. The bastard. He dared. He damn dared to live his life free of him and his influence, to thrive and do as he pleased, to let himself be guided by their grandfather and rise up to his level as a potential heir to the syndicate.

Worst of all... Worst of the worst thing Daniel could have ever done...

When Daniel went to university, he made a dangerous, serpentine friend. One Rhys had foolheartedly believed it had been a platonic mate. One he thought he could manipulate Daniel into abandoning or at least distance himself from.

But he was wrong.

Instead it had been a lover.

An ambitious lover who never held back his tongue and swore to make his life into a miserable existence for as long as he lived.

"I'll fucking kill you Vincent!"