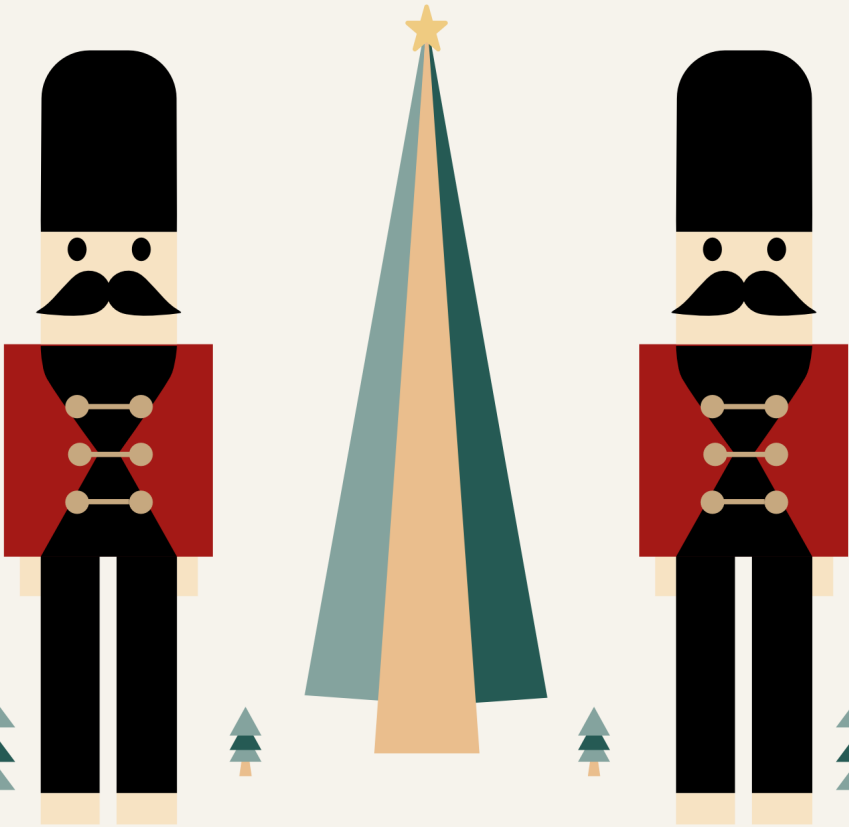


# Secret Santa



 Ellie Owen 



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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello there, I hope you enjoyed reading this (disgustingly long) extra scene about Thea and Aaron.

I wrote this in hopes of making people feel less lonely if holiday seasons aren't always the easiest on them—they surely aren't easy on Thea and the turmoil of emotions she feels when visiting home. You're not alone in the chaos of life with family and when everyone else seems to be so utterly at peace.

As for the bonus content, I think it's important to point out that this takes place a year before the events in Ellipsis. I wanted to give a glimpse into their relationship before Adrian came along and changed the direction of Thea's life.

If this seems rushed toward the end, that's because it is. I was aiming for this to be a maximum, of 15 pages long, clearly, I didn't succeed in that, but I did want to give some hints about a story I'm planning on writing eventually.

I hope you enjoyed seeing more of Thea, Aaron, and Jules, they are faces you'll see for a long, long time.

Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanzaa, Happy Boxing Day, and Òmisoka!!!

P.S. If I missed a celebration that takes place in December, my most sincere apologies, I didn't mean to. I do hope December is an incredibly kind and gentle month for you.

# SECRET SANTA

Airports during holidays always had a way to be overly stressful and oddly enchanting as Thea liked to wonder about where each person was headed, giving strangers a backstory she would never have any way of knowing if she'd gotten it right.

“Remember the rules, Mariani?”

A smirk blossoms on the edge of Aaron's lips, green eyes move over Thea's body as she drags her sheepskin boots against the polished airport floors, leaving him to push the cart loaded with their luggage.

Albeit, most of the suitcases belonged to him as Christmas had always been his favorite excuse to spoil the people he loved—unfortunately for Thea, she would have to wait until they were back in New York for her to receive most of her gifts.

“No looking at your ass, no looking at your tits,” Aaron repeats the rules Thea came up with on their flight. “No kissing, no sneaking into your room to make out, and more importantly, we can't be left alone or all the rules will implode.”

“Good boy, I trained you right.”

Biting down at her lips, Thea's gaze wanders toward Aaron, savoring the way his blond hair is tussled from sleeping in the airplane and from taking his beanie to give it to her as soon as they landed in Seattle.

“Just one week and we’re back to being filthy animals fucking behind your brother’s back, right?”

“A very long week, Mariani.”

“You know what else is long?”

A laugh flutters between them, muffled by the thrumming sound of people chatting and running to catch their flights, of children crying out of boredom while their parents regret traveling with toddlers and babies.

Thea hits Aaron’s chest, yelping when his long fingers wrap around her wrist, pulling her close to his chest as his eyes dance around her face before landing on her lips.

“Can I kiss you?”

“We are in Seattle,” Thea reminds him, yet she moves a hand toward the nape of his neck, unbothered by the people moving around them. “That’s against the rules, Mr. Mariani.”

“Aren’t airports considered international territory?”

“Isn’t that a myth?”

“Well, love, I’d believe in Santa Claus if it made you kiss me. So, I’ll ask again, can I kiss you?”

Narrowing her eyes at him, Thea pouts as she thinks about his request. Enjoying the way Aaron leans closer and closer the longer she debates on it.

“I think you’re on the naughty list this year.” Thea moves her hand down his neck as she lifts her fingers toward Aaron’s lips, tracing their shape with her thumb.

“You didn’t make it to the nice list either, love. That’s why you’re so very good to me.”

“Gross.”

Aaron chuckles dryly, a devilish smile adorns his handsome face when Thea scrunches her nose before hitting his arm.

Hand wandering down to her ass, Aaron explores the curves he has mapped out to perfection as he buries his face against the crook of her neck.

Imbibing in her scent, Aaron grows intoxicated with how Thea's hair smells after spending the night in his place, after showering together in the morning after rolling in his sheets all night long.

It's something that fulfills some innate need to mark Thea, to have her scent be a mirror of his own as if she too can't stand the idea of not having his presence, even if it's only the ghost of his memory.

"I know." Nibbling on her sensitive skin, Aaron runs his fingers through her hair, caressing the nape of her neck as if they were cuddling in bed and not in a busy airport. "May I have my kiss, now?"

"I don't think so."

"Why?"

A nearly guttural sound bubbles past his throat when Thea shrugs, slipping away from Aaron's embrace with a saccharine smile as she smooths down his tousled golden locks.

Sometimes Thea wondered if it was physically painful for Aaron to not have her within his line of sight if he needed to be able to find her in a throng, almost as if Thea is a harbor, a haven for him to seek.

"You could try begging?"

There is a slight arch to Thea's brow as she relishes how lust darkens Aaron's eyes. Giving his angelic face the darkness of



sin as his gaze traces the planes of her face, flitting from her chapped lips to the curve of her ruddy cheekbones.

“And why is that?”

“I quite enjoy the sight of you on your knees.”

Aaron leans down, lips brushing against the shell of Thea’s ear, eliciting a shiver that travels down south of her body as his warm breath tickles her.

“I’m happy to obligate, my little sinner,” Aaron whispers in a soft grunt, noticing how her hands flit toward his biceps, clinging to him as if Aaron is her lifeline. “You’re welcomed to rest your legs on my shoulders.”

Heat spreads over her cheeks.

It tints the tip of her ears pink as Thea slips away from Aaron, fidgeting with the sleeve of her sweater as she pivots toward the automatic glass doors at the arrival gate.

With hurried steps and her head low, Thea carves a path between the pedestrian traffic, moving quickly after years of living in New York and mastering the art of demanding space for herself to exist.

*Always so naughty*, Aaron muses as he follows after Thea, shaking his head while trying to think of her as his best friend's little sister, trying to remind himself of the forbidden fruit she had always been.

Thea is the only woman he shouldn’t lust after, the one he should never know the sight of her naked body contrasted by the white silk sheets of his bed, the one whose moans he shouldn’t know the sound or whose lips he shouldn’t know the taste of.

Yet Aaron had always been a sinner.

Someone fated for damnation for simply caving into the temptation of honeyed lips, lured by the fantasy of her kisses being able to make him the ruler of heaven instead of condemning him to hell.

He fears losing Thea.

Fears losing the nights beside her when their laughter would keep his neighbors awake, losing the not so veiled flirting that the rest of Ether has already picked up on, but Aaron knows he cannot lose something that was never his.

Welcomed by the sight of uninterested faces and the smell of freshly brewed coffee, Aaron pushes the cart toward Thea as her steps become leisurely, glancing at the people waiting around the arrival gate with a bit more care in search of Jules.

“Can you see him?”

“No,” Thea mumbles cutely.

“Is he in the back?”

Thea rolls onto the tip of her boots, stretching herself to her full height as a tiny crease forms between her brows before a smile adorns her lips.

Following her gaze, Aaron finds Jules waiting for them further back, holding a cardboard travel tray with coffee and hot chocolate as he slips his free hand into the pocket of his cashmere long coat.

Aaron lingers behind, amused by how Jules stands a little taller when he sees Thea running toward him—pushing his shoulder back and straightening his back as if needing to be threatening to the world when his sister is near.

Oblivious to how imposing he looked just by wearing the navy blue costume-made suit Aaron guided him through the

purchase while on FaceTime, while those around him are clad in comfortable pieces that could pass as pajamas.

“Oh fuck,” Jules grunts when Thea jumps into his embrace, wrapping her arms and legs around him as she buries her face in the crook of his neck. “I missed you too, Theodore.”

Jules smile at Aaron as he rests his head against Thea’s, squeezing her against his chest for a few moments before letting Thea slides down.

“Is the reunion over already?” Thea probes with a pout as she steals the hot chocolate from within Jules’s fingers. “One hug and you’re already looking longingly at Aaron?”

“Of course not.”

Tilting her head back to look at Jules, Thea expects him to say something in defense of himself but his eyes are laid on Aaron as if they were long-distance lovers.

*In a way, they were,* Thea broods, watching a smile slowly unravels on his handsome face when Aaron waves at him.

“Go be reunited with your husband who returned from war,” Thea jests, kneeing Jules's butt as he grins like a little boy on Christmas Eve watching as his toy train comes to life.

A squeal that is half a giggle slips past Jules’s lips as he marched toward Aaron, reminding Thea of how the tiny plastic soldiers in Toy Story would walk in the movie.

Sipping on her beverage, Thea watches as they hug with the obligatory tap in the back before doing tiny little excited jumps while swaying from side to side.

“It’s good to be back,” Aaron declares as if he hadn’t flown to Seattle to spend Thanksgiving with the Scriven while Thea had joined Marine’s family that year.

“Please tell me you aren’t too tired from the flight? I’ve been dying to finish up the Lego set we started.”

God, they are so embarrassing, Thea lifts the hood of her sweatshirt over her eyes.

Glancing around to see if people are staring, only a few older ladies look at Aaron and Jules with a mix of yearning for bygone days, and appreciation of their good looks.

“Are the princesses done?” Thea interjects. “I want a shower and a bed, preferably sooner rather than later.”

Jules arches a brow at Thea in an expression that is all too familiar to her as she often looks at Aaron and confuses patrons with the same puzzlement.

“Yes, Theodore, let’s get you home. How about some pho before bed?”

“Are you paying?”

“Are you driving?” Jules retorts, grinning as Thea marches toward them, slipping around the men as she plants her hands on Jules’s back.

“Why? You don’t even like being in the car when I’m the one driving, you act like I’m one breath away from hitting the gas and driving straight into a truck.”

“That’s half the fun, Theodore.”

Thea slaps the center of his back with all of her might, grinning contently as Jules moans in pain, arm twisting backward as he tries to reach where she slapped him.

“I’m telling mom about this.”

“It’s not like you can become even more of her favorite than you already are.”

Putting Thea in a headlock, Jules musses her hair, rubbing his knuckles against the crown of her head with a smile on his face as he begins to walk away.

Loitering across the busy airport with Aaron trailing after his footsteps toward the parking lot that'd taken Jules the greater portion of an hour to find a spot.

“Let go of me,” Thea bemoans, fingers sinking into Jules’s wrist but her brother doesn’t relent in his hold on her. “Juju, stop! Let go!”

“Will you respect your elders?”

Thea remains silent, dragging her feet as Jules hurls her toward the black sedan he’d bought a few months back—still preening with joy whenever he presses the unlock button on his car key.

“No.”

Jules knocks the side of Thea’s head before letting her go to open the trunk of his car, leaving her be as Aaron creeps in closer, leaning down to whisper in her ear.

“Always so naughty, my little sinner.”



Cradling a bowl of pho against her knees, Thea slips her attention between watching her favorite Christmas movie that wasn’t a Christmas movie—P.S I Love You— and watching Jules and Aaron in their matching pajamas assembling what she swears is the largest lego set she has ever seen.

Yet, she has no idea of what they are assembling.

“I think there is a good chance of me getting an assistant,” Jules murmurs, adjusting his reading glasses as he works on

some small section while Aaron separates the pieces by different loots that seem to follow no particular order.

“They should. You’ve been killing in court.”

“You still look up my court cases?”

“Of course I do. You’re my pupil, Scriven.”

Jules snorts a laugh, stretching his neck as he hits his achy back. “You didn’t even graduate, I’m not your pupil, and the only reason you passed some classes we had was because of me.”

“I’m still your mentor.”

*Oh god, do they ever stop flirting?* Thea wonders as she slurps on her noddles, wishing she’d gone home instead of taking Jules’s invitation to stay at the apartment.

“You’re not my mentor, Professor Thomas is my mentor.”

“Professor Thomas is a quadruple times divorced man, all of which because his wives cheated on him with his pool guy, which is still the same dude from the first marriage. Well, I suppose he kinda is your mentor.”

“He could be sued if he fired the guy!” Jules protests.

Cheeks grew ruddy as they often did when defending his favorite professor and the man that gave him the most emotional recommendation letters for law firms.

Thea snorts a laugh, peeling her gaze back toward the large TV as her brother turns to glare at her. “What are you laughing at?”

“Oh, it’s the part where Holly falls down the karaoke stage, it’s kinda funny,” She lies, ignoring the glimmer of danger that adorns Aaron’s eyes.

“So you aren’t laughing at your poor brother’s terrible relationship choices and history?”

“I would never,” Thea declares in a horrified gasp. “Especially after he did pay for my pho, and bought me a new house slipper.”

“There is nothing bad about my relationship choices, they are the ones cheating on me.”

“And you’re the one forgiving them and allowing them to do it again,” Aaron murmurs.

“Exactly.”

“Since when do you and Aaron agree on anything?” Jules demands to know, crossing his arms in a contained tantrum. “Since when do you two talk peacefully with each other?”

Thea pretends to not hear Jules as she chews very slowly, turning her attention back toward the movie that she knew like the back of her hand, yet it never failed to make her cry from beginning to end.

At least when she wasn’t distracted by Jules and Aaron acting like little boys over some legos.

“*You* made us work together,” Aaron argues, blond brows knit together in confusion. “We had to learn how to tolerate each other because of you, but it’s not like I’ll trade you for Thea. Don’t worry, you’re still my best friend, Scriven.”

“That’s the least of my worries.”

“You don’t have to worry about that, Thea is like...she’s Thea, there is nothing to worry about when it comes to me and Thea, ever.”

Jules looks at Aaron with his tongue poking the side of his cheek, eyes narrowed in annoyance as he crosses his arms over his chest.

“Why do you make it sound like my sister is somehow undesirable? She’s not disgusting looking, sure there are way prettier, sexier, curvier, funnier, more intelig—”

Thea throws a pillow toward her brother, who grins sheepishly at her as she turns the TV off, kicking away the blankets she’d been buried under.

“I can fucking hear you, you know? Are you trying to defend, or offend me?”

“A bit of both, Theodore.” Jules shrugs as he fluffs up the pillow she threw at him. “But you get the point, Aaron, my sister is not disgusting for you to act like she is.”

“I know! Thea is a fine girl, but she’s your sister. As beautiful as she is because I love and respect you, Thea might as well be a cockroach to me.”

“A *cockroach*?” Thea shrieks, smacking her pho take out against the green onyx coffee table before another pillow at Aaron. “I live with those, they are not my equals.”

“It’s Aaron, being undesirable to Aaron is a good thing. He would be terrible to you,” Jules explains himself, flinching when Aaron punches his arm. “What?”

“I’m not terrible, I would romanticize Thea to perfection.”

Knees cracking loudly, Jules stands up and snorts a laugh that becomes full-blown laughter as he seems to think deeper about Aaron and Thea together.



“Remember when you tried hitting on our Anthropology teacher and she laughed so hard she cried? Thea is smart enough to have the same reaction.”

“Yes, I do remember that.”

“Do you also remember when I then had sex with her?”

“You had sex with a professor?” Thea asks in an accusatory tone, narrowing her eyes as she ambles toward her brother, raising a finger at him. “After you promised mom to never do such a thing?”

“It was after the semester ended, so I didn’t break my promise.”

Thea smiles, turning her back to Jules and Aaron as she ambles toward the bigger guest bedroom, caroling in victory, “We’ll see how mom feels about that tomorrow, thank you for the brownie points, Jules. Sleep well, my dearest brother.”

“Please don’t tell—”

Closing the door behind herself, Thea chuckles as Jules’s pleas fall on deaf ears. She hums contently as she ventures toward the full bathroom with a lovely bathtub and a view of Seattle’s harbor lit up with Christmas lights.

Home, she muses while denuding herself of the clothing she wore on the airplane, trying to ignore the anxious pit in her stomach.

Something she often felt when it came to being home as she no longer felt welcomed by the city she grew up in, yet she still loves Seattle, loves the comfort of being back until the airplane lands and Thea realizes she can’t run away from the ghosts that city carries.

“Home, I can’t wait to go back home.”



A knock on her door steers Thea awake, hiding her head under the pillow with a grunt, Thea doesn’t hear as Aaron pushes the door open, peering into the dark room.

“T?” He calls, walking into the room, beelining toward the blackout curtains blocking the view of yet another grey morning. “Wakey wakey, T. Jules went out to buy breakfast.”

“What are you doing here?”

“He asked me to wake you up.”

Thea grunts once more, laying still as Aaron perches himself on the edge of her bed, lifting a hand toward her back and another to take the pillow from over her head.

Eyes still closed, Thea curls into a ball as she moves closer to Aaron, laying her head on his lap with a satisfied grin as he plays with her long locks of hair.

“You aren’t mad at me, are you?”

“I’m no longer a cockroach?” She asks, content to spend her morning with Aaron caressing her, running his thumb over her cheek.

“Don’t be like that, you know it’s hard to deny how crazy I am for you. I hate lying to Jules, it feels unnatural.”

Smiling in a sleepy daze, Thea hums in agreement but her mind is distant, lingering on her sweet dreams where her one true love is beautifully placed on the bookshelves around the world, adored by complete strangers that have found themselves in her stories.

“You aren’t paying attention, are you, T?” Aaron weaves his fingers through her hair, moving back and forth to lure her back asleep.

The minutes pass all too quickly, making Aaron’s heart beat faster as he knows Jules will get back at any moment and his blissful morning with Thea will come to an end, but for now, he doesn’t dare stop his caress.

Allowing Thea to fall back asleep with her arms curling around his waist. Clinging to him as if he’s a teddy bear—or better, as if he’s Jolly since the cat is spending Christmas with Marine.

Beautiful, Aaron muses with a gentle smile of his own, with every beat of his heart belonging to Thea, clamoring for her and aching for the moment they have to go back to acting distant, cold toward each other.

“What I wouldn’t do to have you be mine, T, for you to love me as I love you.”

Grunting, Thea rolls away from Aaron, slipping past his embrace as she reaches toward her discarded pillow, clinging to it as she had clung to him.

“Brat,” He murmurs before shaking Thea once more. “Wake up, T, after breakfast Jules is driving us to your mom’s house.”

Thea sits up at that, she looks at Aaron from over her shoulder with her eyes open wide while sleep lingers on the corner of it.

“Already?”

“We came to Seattle to spend Christmas with your family, didn’t we?”

“Yes, Jules consists as part of my family.”

“Being his sister usually means you’re family, but not your entire family. Besides, your mom loves me, I want to be loved for as long as possible, so go take a shower.”

“Will you wash my back for me?”

Aaron smirks, dropping his head with a chuckle on his throat as he stands up, forcing his legs to carry him out of her room instead of toward the empty bathroom.

*Coward*, Thea broods, plopping down in bed as she stares at the white ceiling that lacks the black mold stars adorning her apartment, and likely killing her slowly.

Going home had always been difficult for Thea, making her feel as if she was still the bubbly high schooler that’d been constantly compared to Jules, who had always been the golden son, the one person she ought to rival but Jules had always been smarter than most.

Jules had always been willing to learn something new, rather it is tap dancing or playing the cello, learning every step of photographic development—from mastering photography to holding expositions in school with his final products—while managing to be the captain of the track team.

Yet, all Thea was ever truly good at is writing.

Even at that she never felt as if she was good enough. Never felt like her words carried any meaning and impact as people cared about seeing the world through her eyes.

Thea had always felt as if nothing and herself meant the same thing to every person in the world, well people would likely prefer nothing over her.

So, Thea didn’t like going home.

She doesn't like feeling like a child, of being reminded of the person she was when she saw her old favorites still adorning her dusty bookshelves.

There is a bitterness that comes with the reminder of the promise she made herself when cops had closed down the street while a mother wept for her dead daughter.

*If what I read is a reflection of who I am, what I write is who I am,* she thinks her mantra.

"Blood stains are always difficult to wash away," Thea mutters with a deep sigh, rolling out of bed with tears pricking the back of her eyes.

Walking to the foot of the twin-sized bed, Thea flicks her wrist and the duvet fills with air before descending slowly toward the mattress, leaving dust mites to dance with the filtered sunlight.

Thea tries to smooth down the duvet several times, but with each of them the fabric pools either too much to the left or too much to the right, not once does the duvet lay somewhere in the center of the mattress.

"Oh for the fucking love of God," Thea curses, stomping her feet around the right side of the bed to pull the duvet toward that side. "There, it's good enough."

Fluffing up the plethora of pillows, Thea arranges them back to the pristine yet no longer dusty arrangement they'd been before Thea tossed them to the floor on the night before.

"Why does Jules need so many pillows in the guest bedroom?" She murmurs, dragging her feet clad in fuzzy socks against the hardwood flooring as she skids into the living room. "Is Jules trying to impress a girl?"

Aaron lifts his head from the back of the couch, looking at Thea through narrowed eyes as his hands slide down his thigh as he beholds her for a few moments.

“Why do you ask?”

“He had like 5 throw pillows in my bed.”

“And?”

“How many pillows did your bed have?”

“You know acts of service is Jules's love language, right?”

“How many?” Thea demands again, crossing her arms over her chest as she waits for an answer.

Aaron offers her a grin that always makes her weak in the knees, which left her craving for a kiss—or two. He rests his elbow against the back cushion of the black cloud couch.

“10.”

A bitter laugh reverberates over the apartment, echoing endlessly against the thick window panes as Thea ambles toward the kitchen, eyes turning toward different cupboards.

“With that many pillows Jules might want you to be smothered in your sleep?” She jests, oblivious to the pout forming on her lips as she tries to remember what Jules keeps in each cupboard. “He might know you’ve soiled his beloved little sister against his wishes.”

Aaron shifts in his seat, turning around to watch as Thea opens the hidden dishwasher cabinet, seeming impressed that the plates and cups had all been unloaded already.

“That’s a terrifying thought. What do you want, T?”

“Hot chocolate?”

“There is no milk, and hot chocolate made with water is a criminal thing, isn’t it?” Aaron quotes something Thea had

said just a week ago when she admonished him for making her a cup of hot chocolate with water.

“Does he have tea?”

Golden brows knit in confusion, and an amused smile adorns Aaron’s lips as he asks, “Since when do you drink tea?”

“I don’t, but my throat is scratchy so I want to drink something warm.” Aaron crooks a brow as if making an indecent offer to Thea. “Don’t be disgusting, where is your jolly spirit, Mariani? I’ve swallowed enough of your children this year,”

Aaron lifts an accusatory finger at Thea as he slouches down the couch, prowling toward her with that predatory smile she loves so much.

The very smile he shouldn’t offer her when they are in Seattle, where the dangers don’t overweight the gains. Yet, Thea doesn’t pull back when his hands slip around her waist, pulling her closer as Aaron lifts her off her feet, allowing Thea to bury her head against the crook of his neck.

“You want me dead, don’t you?” He whispers, smiling to himself when Thea purrs like a happy cat.

“No, you’re useful to keep around.”

“How so?” Aaron probes, always seeking ways to stroke his ego when Thea is so stingy with compliments, making him work for her praise.

“First you spared me the effort of looking for hot chocolate when there is no milk.”

“What else?”

Thea laughs, nibbling on his neck as Aaron stretches her body a little bit more, popping her back and stealing a relieved sigh from her.

“What are you doing?” Jules demands.

Lingering by the entrance to his apartment, Jules curls his fingers into a fist. Bleaching his knuckles white as he glares at his best friend.

“Anxiety,” Thea says.

“Her back,” Aaron speaks in tandem with her, trying to not grimace when he realizes they both have different answers.

Jules arches a brow, he takes a step into his apartment, allowing the front door to swing close with a soft click as he tilts his head to look at Thea, completely ignoring Aaron.

“So which one is it?”

“I was feeling anxious because my back is hurting, it’s been bothering me since last night and I began to worry so Aaron offered to help me stretch to see if would help.”

“Did it?” Jules hides behind his lawyer mask, offering no insight as to how much he believes Thea. Remaining cold enough to hide his suspicion or anger from them.

“Not really, I think it’s because of all the pillows you put in my bed.”

With each step Jules takes toward them, Aaron takes one away from Thea, giving a wide berth between the two, allowing Jules to settle the white plastic bag over the Carrara marble on his kitchen island.

“Next time you tell me, and I’ll hire a masseur or a chiropractor,” Jules’s tone is gentle, reminding Thea of when they were much younger and he’d always been the one to protect her—always would be the one to protect her.

“You weren’t home, Jules. After breakfast I’ll soak in the bath, then if it’s still hurting we can ask mom to help, how does that sound?”



In a curt nod, Jules drops an arm around her shoulder, pulling Thea into a hug while he turns his back to Aaron as his blood still sizzles with the idea of his best friend taking advantage of his sister and Aaron's employee.

Both things border on criminal for different reasons. There would be no coming back if Aaron ever used his position to coerce Thea into his bed.

"I got your favorite, Theodore."

"Creme brûlée french toast with pastry cream and strawberries?" Thea sounds hopeful as she tilts her head to look at her brother.

"And hot chocolate that is mostly melted chocolate."

Thea squeals with happiness, smiling when Jules musses her hair, tugging her head against his chest as he rests his chin on the crown of his head.

"What about me?" Aaron gingerly inquires.

"You can eat cereal."

"There is no milk."

Glaring at Aaron from over his shoulder, Jules hisses, "You're welcome to go buy your own milk."

"It's fine, I'll just eat an apple."

"As I said, you're welcome to go buy your own stuff."

"Really, Jules? You even took my breakfast order?"

"Does it look like I'm in the mood for jokes?"

Unraveling from Jules's embrace, Thea tiptoes around the kitchen island, approaching the cupboard where Jules keeps his growing collection of handmade plates.

“Oh, pretty plates,” Thea chimes in, lifting an earthy-toned marble ceramic plate for them to see in an attempt to diffuse the tension. “These are new, right?”

Jules nods slowly, keeping his eyes on Aaron as he rolls his shoulder back, puffing up his chest while his best friend just arches a brow at him.

“I’m going to go buy milk,” Aaron declares with a smirk tugging on the edge of his lips. “When I come back, we’ll have a peaceful conversation so we can work on your attitude, okay, Julien? Do you want anything, Thea?”

Little shit, Thea broods as she shakes her head while she tears the plastic bag in half, pulling the flimsy cardboard box and the cups holding the strawberry and pastry cream.

From the corner of her eyes, Thea watches as Aaron disappears into his room, leaving the door open as he pockets his phone and wallet before venturing back into the common area, wiggling his brows at Thea as he leaves the apartment.

Silence falls between the siblings, something disturbed only by Jules’s sigh as he turns his attention toward the box left in the white bag.

“What did you get for yourself?”

“Eggs in spicy tomato sauce and sourdough bread.”

“No avocado toast today?”

“No.”

“Hot chocolate, Jules?” Thea offers, pulling the white lid from the travel cup as she dances across the kitchen, reaching for that same cupboard where she’d taken the plates.

“Yes.”

Cradling a mug from the marbled set for Jules, Thea rolls onto the tip of her toes as she reaches for a black mug with

golden stars sprinkled around it—her favorite mug in Jules’s place and one he bought for her during one of her rare visits.

The thread of silence wraps tightly around them, making Thea’s skin prickle with discomfort as she spreads the pastry cream over her french toast.

Waiting for Jules to speak is weighing down on his mind—a conversation they had once when Thea had gone to Ether for an interview before she began working for Aaron.

But she has yet to see any evidence of what Jules had warned her about, of the terrible man Aaron apparently was to every girlfriend he’d had in college, yet he’d only ever been good to Thea.

“You shouldn’t get too close to Aaron, he’s a good person but not the kind of man you should get close to.”

“Remind me of why?”

A tinge of shame makes Jules peel his gaze from Thea’s, focusing instead on the slice of bread sodden in tomato sauce with a bit of crispy egg whites on top of it all.

Jules would always feel shame when he thought about how Aaron had been before dropping out of Law School—treating women as something disposable, believing he could use them to fulfill his desires before tossing them aside when he grew tired of them.

Being the exact kind of man Jules had been raised to not be, he couldn’t help himself from staying away from Aaron as the auric-haired man had something magnetizing to him, a way to lure people closer and closer even when they knew the danger behind his saccharine smile.

“Did you know that on his first year of college Aaron slept with 72 girls throughout the year?” Jules probes, wiping the

corner of his lip with the back of his hand. “That was the least amount of girlfriends he had in undergrad.”

“I can’t say I had that many partners in my freshman year, but I’m not too distant.”

Jules shakes his head with a deep sigh, growing tired with the very memories of how Aaron had once been.

“He would lead them for as long as he wanted, playing with their feelings, and then he’d dump them for something new. You and I have both slept around in college but we were never cruel, never fooled people.”

“Why did you befriend him?”

Thea drops her hands to her lap, fidgeting with her cuticle as she grows nervous to learn how Jules sees his best friend when Aaron had given her something no one, not even Jules, had ever given her.

He’d given Thea a glimpse of hope.

A taste of how it would feel if her writing could mean something to someone if her books were to ever be important to someone other than herself.

Clinging to hope had always been the most difficult part.

Something she found too difficult as she grew more tired, and Thea has been exhausted for so long, craving oblivion whenever the burden of hope became too great for her to bear.

*It often is,* Thea muses, pushing away the memory of how her fingers clung to the railing on the Brooklyn Bridge while her soul craved peace.

“I just wanted my roommate to not hate me, I feared the conflict would disturb my studies.”

Thea snorts a laugh at that. “Really?”

“Yes, but with time I saw a different side to Aaron. He’s loyal to a fault, I think there is no law he wouldn’t break for someone he loves, but he doesn’t love easily. I think the only women he truly respects and loves are his mom and sister.”

“And our mom.”

“Yes, our mom too,” Jules concedes. “Thea, I don’t know if Aaron knows how to be in love with someone like he is in love with being in control.”

Guilt lodges itself in Thea’s throat.

Stealing her of the means to tell Julien how wrong he is when Aaron would relinquish all control to her, giving Thea the power to pull on the strings of his heart—something she avoided doing when there was less than a year for her ultimatum to collect a blood debt.

“In a lot of ways Aaron is a scared little boy, and while I think Aaron has grown out of the mentality he was brought up with, you’ll always be the last person I want to see caught up with Aaron if he hasn’t changed enough to be good to you.”

“Anything else I should know?” Thea’s tone comes off as unserious, hinting at how she doesn’t believe in Jules.

“He’s too guarded, T. You deserve to be loved wholly, without guards and walls between you.”

“I don’t care too much about being loved, Jules. I could die happily without experiencing true love if that allowed me to fulfill my dream.”

“Writing can’t be the only thing that matters in your life.”

Thea smiles at her brother, not deigning to explain something Jules has no means of understanding without ever loving something to the point where it becomes a curse.

At times, not even Thea understood why she cared so deeply about words inked in a creamy paper, or why she would be taken by sadness when she grew closer to writing the ending to a story.

She simply did.

It was an all-consuming love, becoming a part of her very being that left her blinded to anything else, that deprived her of joy and happiness as she had yet to find something that made her heart fill with as much happiness as writing does.

Yet, everything has a price, and that price came with a sense of hopelessness, of fear that she wouldn't ever be able to do the thing she loves.

*A blessing and a curse*, Thea muses.

Turning her attention toward her breakfast she wishes the heaviness in her heart could be smothered by a different passion, but all she felt when she thought of doing something else was pure dread.

“Could you be happy working with anything else, Jules?”

“I often think about doing something else. It doesn't feel like the work I do matters.”

“I'm the opposite, I don't feel like I matter without the work I do. Do you know what that does to a person?” Thea asks, hating how her voice dwindles into a whisper. “It's a slow death, but the death of a soul is crueler than natural death. It leaves you cold in the warmth, breathless with a gasp. You're lucky to not love anything as I love writing, that's torture I do not wish upon anyone.”

“You're more than what you write.”

“No, Jules, I am what I write. But it doesn't matter, because I don't think many authors understand how I feel, I don't

think many people, in general, are consumed by what they love.”

Worry clouds Jules eyes as a small crease forms between his dark brows, and his lips become tight with the restraint it takes for him to not spill his fears onto Thea.

A part of him will always want to protect her. It’s an instinct as natural as breathing, something as uncontrollable as the very beat of his heart.

If it was within his power, Jules would have Thea loved something easier to achieve. Perhaps a career that didn’t depend on others for her to progress into it.

“What?” Thea asks between bites of french toast.

“Promise me you’ll be all right?”

“I promise I’ll try.”

“That’s not good enough. Sometimes I wish I had never begun reading to you when we were kids, I wonder what you’d love otherwise.”

“Sometimes I wish the same thing, but for now, I’ll take breakfast to the bathtub.”

Blowing a kiss at her brother, Thea tiptoes back into her room, kicking the door close with the heel of her foot. Only in the privacy of the bedroom is that Thea allows her facade of calmness to crumble, allowing the tears to well in her eyes.

Thea blindly sets her plate down on an Ikea dresser, pressing her shaky hands over her mouth as a sob lodges itself in her chest, leaving Thea’s head spinning as she runs into the bathroom.

Knees buckle under her weight when she reaches the white bathtub with silver faucets. A cry slips past her lips as water pours down.

Liar, liar, liar, her mind bellows, screaming at Thea as her memories drag her to that night when the wind caroled its agreement over a blood debt.

Thea closes her eyes to see the images her mind crafts, showing her body free-falling down Brooklyn Bridge. Hair whiplashes her cheeks, slipping into her open mouth as she screams with eminent terror.

Water fills the bathtub as Thea curls up into herself, biting down at her knee to keep herself from crying—or maybe from screaming as all she sees is dark water and bubbles raising to the surface as she sinks further down.

Her nose and throat burn as if she's breathing water, searing a path toward her lungs when in truth it's just guilt for promising something that is out of her control.

I'm so sorry, Thea begs, wishing her brother could feel how remorseful she is for deceiving him, for lying to his face with a smile on hers. *I'm so sorry, I wish things were different.*



Head resting against a fuzzy pillow and wrapped in a thick blanket, Thea watches as the city passes them by, feeling as if the grayness of the world matches her blueness.

She pretends to not notice how Aaron drums his fingers over the steering wheel, sighing every so often as he has no one to talk to when Jules is in the backseat of his sedan, typing away some document.

Apparently, lawyers don't have holidays when they are fighting for the opportunity to make into partners—maybe they don't have holidays even after reaching their desired position.



“I’m so lonely,” Aaron murmurs, glancing at the head unit while wishing he could fill the silence with 60’s and 70’s rock bands he learned to love from being Jules’s roommate. “So lonely.”

Her lips twitch with a fleeting amusement that topples down into the ever-growing abyss. A place so silent that even her mind is shrouded in voidness, lacking the merciless thoughts of guilt and the consuming fear of death.

It’s not death Thea fears, is the idea she won’t be able to comfort the people she loves the most. Perhaps she’ll get to visit their dreams or maybe death is true oblivion, but one way or another Thea won’t be able to hug Jules at her funeral.

Won’t get to tell her parents to not be too sad or cry for too long as she won’t be sad to give up on life when she couldn’t live her dream.

Yet, going home was also a reminder of why she so desperately wanted to be a writer. Reminding Thea of the day when her small dream consumed her being as she watched from the window in her bedroom Mrs. Hauch throw away the books her daughter had adored until her death.

“Can I turn left here?” Aaron asks, flinging the back of his hand against her shoulder in an attempt to be nonchalant. “There is a bit of traffic.”

“You’ve been to Seattle more times than I have since I left home to go to college, you know these streets better than I do.”

“I forgot.” Aaron turns the steering wheel as he glances at Thea. “Are you feeling okay?”

Thea nods, peeling her eyes toward the grey sky as she adjusts her head against her pillow. “I think I’m a little sick from the flight.”

“Should I stop at a pharmacy for some med? I can stop to get you some tea?”

“It’s fine, there should be meds at my parent’s. You know my dad has a little pharmacy in the kitchen cabinets, he owns an EpiPen when no one we know has severe allergies.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Mr. Mariani. I’m just achy.”

“I wonder why,” Aaron murmurs with mischief sparkling in his green eyes as a smirk tugging on the edge of his mouth.

It’s a mask Aaron wears to hide how worried he grows when Thea isn’t chatting, hating her silence as it often meant her mind was too loud for her to bear.

“You can sleep if you want to, I’ll drive slowly.”

“Please don’t,” Jules chimes in from the back seat. Squinting his eyes at the computer screen before he searches through the pile of papers beside himself.

Thea tunes them out as she watches the tall buildings shrinking in size, the glass facades crumbling into a snow-pilled window sill with every mile Aaron drives out of Downtown.

Eventually, the horizon loses all of its manmade architecture to favor the snow-dusted trees, its branches mostly devoid of birds who have long migrated to southern regions of the world.

Colors meld together.

Becoming an indecipherable blur that makes Thea feel dizzy as if the world had begun spinning around her as if she’d been an outcast in her own body until the Christmas lights bring her back to life.

Barely managing to plant a curl on the edge of her lips as Thea basks in the suburban houses bedecked in a full winter wonderland—ridiculously tall inflatable snowmen, with sculptures of reindeer hopping in snowed rooftops.

There are giant nutcrackers guarding homes, angles woven from led lights, and yet, the lights had always been Thea's favorite part.

Strung between houses to light up the entire street, wrapped around the large trees that now lack their greenery in favor of the blinking red lights, illuminating the carved slabs of wood that indicate Santa Claus the direction to the north pole.

Thea startles when Aaron honks as he pulls up to their family home. Brows knitting closer together, she tilts her head to the left in confusion.

“Is that an igloo?”

“I believe it is,” Aaron says, head tilted to the left before the glances over at Thea. “Is it a real one or a plastic one?”

“No wonder mom asked all her gifts this year to be in cash,” Jules murmurs with a sigh as he jumps out of his car.

Aaron smacks a kiss against her cheek before joining Jules outside, casting a shadow into the vehicle as her brother lifts the trunk, leaving Thea to dawdle in her cocoon of blankets.

Eavesdropping on their conversation, Thea tries to make sense of what Jules hisses about, but the wind howls and the clattering of their luggage make it hard to hear anything other than her own name.

She swivels in her seat, eyes meeting Aaron's gaze through the wing mirror as he rolls his eyes, taking the suitcase Jules pushes into his chest before closing the trunk of his car.

“Come on, Theodore,” Jules demands, marching toward their childhood home while Aaron walks to the passenger seat—opening the door for Thea with a content smile as he rarely had the opportunity to do so in New York.

“Is he mad?”

Snorting a laugh, Aaron makes a face that says, *Lived*.

“Does he know we are, you know?”

“He doesn’t. Jules just warned me to stop flirting with you.”

“Are you flirting with me, Mr. Mariani?” Thea jests as she steps out of the car, clinging to her blanket while pressing the pillow against her chest.

“Should I try harder to woo you? How about I close Ether for the New Year and make that a date for us?”

“That’s the most lucrative day, isn’t it?”

Aaron nods, staying a few steps behind Thea—close enough to catch her if she slips on the iced pavement leading to the doorway, but not close enough for Jules to knock his teeth out.

“It’s also the most annoying day with all the patrons seeming to believe a hangover is the best way to start a year.”

“And a date with me is the best way to good year?”

“Thea,” Aaron whispers so only she can hear.

His voice elicits the same shiver that travels down Aaron’s spine when he wakes up beside Thea, yet he knows Thea won’t feel her body growing tingly with the excitement he feels by getting to start his day with a kiss from her.

“I don’t care to have a good year when I want a lifetime with you.”

A smile is accompanied by the heat spreading over her cheeks as Thea glances over her shoulder, taking a split second to behold Aaron in the sweatpants and hoodie he stole from Jules, yet her gaze lingers on the handmade beanie her mother had given him over Thanksgiving.

“That’s a long time, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think it’s enough time with you.” Green eyes move to her lips as Thea licks them before biting down on them.

“No kisses yet, T. You’ll have to wait. Miss Scriven!”

Aaron slips past Thea, kicking his shoes away as he ventures into her house, sweeping her mother off her feet while the older woman laughs like a little girl.

Wrapping her arms around Aaron’s neck, she clings to him for a few moments too long, oblivious to how Jules rolls his eyes every 5 seconds.

“Ok, that’s enough,” Jules chides, glancing down at his watch with a deep frown between his dark brows as Aaron lets go of their mother. “Mom, where is dad? I gotta head back to the office.”

“He’s watching Black Hawk Down.”

Jules saunters toward Thea, nearly closing the door behind her while sprawling his on her back as she uses one foot to remove the sneaker before repeating the process

“Theodore, tell dad I’ll see him later.”

Smacking a kiss on her temple, Jules slips outside before Thea can even answer him. Leaving her no alternative than to greet her mother, who narrows her eyes at her.

“Hi mom, remember me?”

The woman approaches her slowly, reaching a hand toward Thea's long strands of hair—a perfect match to her mom's hair which is now sprinkled with grey.

“I might remember you better if you came home more often. Your father and I miss you.”

“You can complain to my boss about not giving me enough time off to come home,” Thea jests, ignoring how Aaron chuckles to himself. “I love the decor mom, you really went all out this year.”

Her mom preens, pushing her shoulders back a little. “The HOA agreed to give a cash prize to this year's winner. \$500 dollars.”

“And how much did you spend, Miss Scriven?”

“Five thousand, but our family pride is in the line here. It's about winning. How do you like your beanie, sweetheart? I've been knitting a new one for you, for all of you.”

Mabel nudges Aaron toward her crafts room, where what once had been a bookcase had been converted into storage for her endless assortment of yarn.

“Bye.” Thea waves at them, well, she waves the blanket at them. “Have fun, knitting gang.”

Pretending to understand what Mabel means about the different kinds of stitches, Aaron tries to not laugh but his shoulders lift a little as he flips Thea off while keeping his hands behind his back.

*Alone, at last,* Thea muses, skipping down the hallway cluttered with luggage, Thea walks past the staircase adorned with a red glittery carpet and fairy lights wrapped around the handrail.

Instead of beholding the decor inside the house, her eyes wander through the framed photos adorning the simple grey walls—a color Thea hated but she didn't bother arguing with her mother about that—bringing back memories of her childhood.

Summers spent visiting her grandparents on Orcas Island was one of the few times when the whole Scriven family would meet up. Converging from all different parts of Washington state so the cousins could spend the warm days chasing waterfalls or playing hide-and-seek in the forest despite their parent's warnings.

It'd been on Orcas Island that Thea had her first kiss. It'd been two years before Jules had his and way before she felt ready for it, but her older cousins had been taunting Thea about it.

Pressuring her into it while they played truth-or-dare with boys that'd been visiting the island for a weekend before continuing on traveling with their parents for the entire summer.

“That kiss was awful,” Thea muses at the memory, cringing at how nervous yet proud she'd been in having her first kiss before Jules had his.

Thea remembers how her hands had grown clammy when her little 13-year-old self followed a 13-year-old boy behind the waterfall.

She had barely closed her eyes and puckered her lips when his tongue was already inside her mouth, hands groping her too tightly, wandering too freely while his tongue was somehow frozen—laid over hers as he turned his head from one side to another.

Thea's second kiss had been on the same day and from the first boy's brother older brother. Two years of experience had made the boy gentler, his hands didn't roam her body as they caressed the nape of her neck and jaw, nor did he slip his tongue into her mouth until she opened it for him.

For some reason, Thea believed kissing required tongue, but she wishes she had waited a little longer before french kissing, maybe waiting until she was 15 and traveling to France with her school.

French kissing is much better from a french person, a proven theory of hers, and getting complimented on her kissing by the french people would always be a personal achievement Thea is oddly proud of.

"Dad?" Thea whispers, knocking on the closed door leading into the living room.

Truthfully, the room was truly more like a small cinema with how often her father would be found there, watching another war movie with the curtains drawn and the volume a tad too loud for everyone else.

"My little popcorn!"

Thea smiles as her dad pulls an arm from under the blankets he'd been wrapped in, a habit they shared as both enjoyed feeling just cold enough to warrant a day buried in a pile of blankets.

He pressed pause on his movie, patting down the spot beside himself. There is a bounce to Thea's step, a giddiness in experiencing the rarity of being favored over Jules since Thea is the only one allowed to either join him or interrupt when her dad was watching a movie.



Yet, although love and care are similar, there is still a fundamental difference between them, and while Thea never doubted the love her parents have for her, she simply didn't believe they cared for her and her life.

Perhaps they lacked a middle ground, making it difficult for them to understand why she won't give up on a dream they had always deemed impossible.

But what was the point of life if she didn't try? If she wasn't willing to die for what she loved?

"How is the movie, dad?"

"Not as important as you're, *popcorn*," He says, using the nickname he'd given Thea because of her terrible tendency to run her mouth.

Sparing no one from hearing her opinions simply because Thea cared too much about honesty to consider the comfort of others.

"How was your flight?"

Thea plops down beside her dad, resting her forehead on his shoulder as he pats her knee. "It was good, no turbulence."

Maybe that's a lie since Thea didn't remember much of it when kissing Aaron made her forget about the world around her.

"Jules asked me to tell you he had to head back to work, but he'll come home later. Did you know he has to work even during Christmas break?"

"Good, your mom would throw a fit if he didn't spend the night. You know how she is."

"Yes, but it's cute, isn't it? Mom just wants the four of us under the same roof before forcing us to help her with dinner so the extended family will be in awe of how much she did."

“She does get all of the glory and the pecan pie is made entirely by me.”

“It’s mom, she deserves the praise.”

“That’s true,” her dad says, craning his neck to look at her despite the low light in the room. “Are you okay, popcorn? You’re a bit flushed.”

“Yeah, I think I’m a little sick from the—”

“Go to your room, popcorn. I’ll brew you some herbal tea and ask Aaron to take it for you.”

“But—”

“Go, shoo.”

Thea pouts as her dad unravels his blanket, grunting with the effort of standing up while pulling Thea onto her feet, and nudging her toward the hallway.

“I’m really fine dad,” Thea argues, poking her dad’s back before he turns to give her the stern look that always made her do as he tells her.

Truthfully there was little for her to fear when it came to her dad.

The man had always been unfairly patient with her and Jules, but the stern loon, the slight crease between his brows, and the tightness in his lips and shoulders had always been an indication of disappointment instead of anger.

“Promise the tea will have lots of honey?”

“Two tablespoons, I know how to make tea something you’ll actually drink. Now go and stay warm. What?”

Thea shakes her head, planting a kiss on her dad’s cheeks before spinning around on her heel. She can feel his attention on her, lingering until she reaches the bedecked staircase.

*Electricity bill will be so high this month*, Thea fidgets with the plastic string of the fairy lights that fade slowly, changing colors as they come back to life. At least it's pretty.

Muscle memory takes over, leading Thea into her bedroom. She ignores the open door to Jules's bedroom—where Aaron would be sleeping on the bunkbed despite there being a perfectly fine guest room at the end of the hall.

The knob is strangely warm and slippery underneath the tip of her fingers. The hinges moan loudly through every moment of the door swinging open, hitting the wall behind it as Thea elbows the light switch on.

For a moment Thea is taken back in time as her eyes wander through the small bookcase pushed close to the corner windows in her bedroom.

“Hello old enemies,” Thea murmurs, turning her back to the dusty tone as she kicks the door close. “Hope you’re all rotting in hell soon.”

Thea drags her feet toward her bed adorned with the same yellow duvet she had as a teenager. Laying face down, she stays like that for a while.

Too tired to move, too unsure of what she should do with her solitude when she doesn't have her computer with her, and writing on her phone usually ended up with far too many typos.

Sighing, Thea slithers her way out of the blankets she'd taken from Jules's apartment and under the duvet, plopping her head into her old pillows.

Breathing in the scent of the laundry detergent her mom uses, Thea stares at the ceiling adorned with glow-in-the-dark

stars. Legs moving back and forth as if she's making a snow angel while thinking.

“What to do? I can't read because those are trash. Dad won't let me watch a movie with him, and mom will prefer Aaron over me helping her in the kitchen, so what do I do?”

Thea moves her head from left to right, inspecting her room for anything other than the posters of bands she no longer listens to, and movies she scoffs at the idea of.

*Que Hacer?* Thea muses with her broken Spanish, cuddling her pillow as her lids grow heavy, her breath slowing down as she grows oblivious to the passage of time.

Oblivious to the soft knock on her bedroom, to how the hinges complain as Aaron slips into her room. Juggling Thea's tea and luggage as well as Mabel's laptop, he locks the door behind himself.

“I surely seem like a creep.” Aaron leaves Thea's luggage close to the door as he tiptoes to her bed, settling her tea on the bedside table. “T?”

Thea grunts, rubbing her cheek against her pillow as she squeezes her eyes shut. The grunt morphs into something deeper and more indiscernible when Aaron weaves his fingers through her hair.

“T, wake up, your dad finished your tea and your mom demanded I watch your favorite movie with you.”

“You shouldn't be in my room.”

“It's my first time here, did you know that?” Aaron slips under the covers, planting a kiss against her temple as she cuddles closer. “No pink walls for you?”

“Jules bullied me out of painting them pink.”

Smiling against her hair, Aaron moves the tip of his fingers back and forth on her waist. Content to just feel the heat emanating from her skin.

“Why is that?”

“The girl he liked at the time didn’t like pink so he didn’t let me enjoy pink because he didn’t want her to not like him because of me.”

“Is that how things work?”

“It is when your older brother is bossy and unfairly good at arguments. Even when what he’s arguing for is outrageous.”

“That’s what lawyers do, T. Did you know he’d lock your room whenever we’re here without you just to keep me from snooping around.”

Thea tips her head back, gazing into green eyes as she furrows her brows. Watching as Aaron lifts his free hand to cup her cheek.

“What do you want to see in my childhood bedroom?”

“Nothing, in particular, I just like catching glimpses of you.”

“What’s so special about me, Mariani?”

“It’d be easier to list what isn’t special about you.”

“Please do.”

“Nothing,” Aaron declares, thumb gliding along her jaw. “Everything about you is special, T. But we ought to watch your favorite movie, your mom rules.”

“You really shouldn’t be here.”

“Jules is at work, your mom made me promise to lock the door, and she promised she’d call me when he gets home. Your mom really wants us together, it’s harrowing.”

Thea sits up in bed, careful around her mom's laptop as she has no money to buy a new one if the device were to slip down her bed.

"Why is it harrowing?"

"She winked while informing me of the existence of a box of condoms on your dad's bedside table."

Growing up there was only one rule Thea and Jules abided by without question, and that had been to never venture down the hallway leading to their parent's bedroom or her dad's office.

Something ingrained so deeply into her that Thea wouldn't even glance down a portion of the hallway leading there, preferring to ignore those rooms entirely even if she didn't remember what lies her parents had told them for both children to be so scared of a mere bedroom.

"Ew."

"She also offered to leave some in the guest bedroom. For how similar your mom and Jules are, it's strange to see how she really wants us together."

"Ew, Aaron. I don't want to hear about my parent's condom pack, that's the last thing I'd ever know about. They are married, why do they even have condoms?"

"Easier cleanup? I don't think your mom is a swallower like you."

"Aaron!" Thea hits his chest, hurrying her face against the crook of his neck as she cringes at the idea. "This is why I prefer Jolly's company over yours."

"If you want I can purr and you can plant kisses on my forehead. I have nothing against those activities."

Fingers find their way into golden locks. Her nails elicit a shiver and a moan as Thea scratches the nape of his neck, moving slowly. Gently unwinding Aaron without as much of a struggle.

“About those kisses?” He asks, eyes landing on Thea’s lips when she pulls back. Resting her forehead on his, breath entangling into one.

“What about the movie?”

“It’s P.S. I Love You, we’ve watched that countless times.”

“We’ve kissed countless times. It appears we are at a standstill.”

“Rock, paper, scissors?” Aaron suggests, fighting the smile that curls the edge of his lips with how Thea’s face lights up.

Thea crosses her legs, rolling her shoulders back as she stretches her neck before proffering her closed fist toward Aaron, who moves her mom’s laptop to the floor—knowing too well how overly excited Thea can get over a simple game of luck.

“Best out of 3?” Aaron asks as Thea rotates her wrists instead of moving her arm back and forth.

The vigorous nodding turns into a pout when Thea sprawls her fingers and Aaron cuts them with scissors hands. She pulls her hand away, closing her fingers into a fist as she repeats the process, this time Aaron still goes with scissors but Thea throws rocks at him.

“Winner takes it all,” Thea declares, shimmying in celebration as she cracks her knuckles. “Ready to watch P.S. I Love You when you lose, Mr. Mariani?”

Rolling his eyes, Aaron moves his hand back and forth as Thea does her wrist rotation. “Rock, paper, scissors...*no!*” He bemoans, throwing rocks when Thea goes with paper.

Thea throws her head back, laugh echoing against the walls of her bedroom. Raising a giddy pride in Aaron, he really wants to kiss her.

“Fuck it, I’m planning a coup.”

Aaron weaves his fingers through Thea’s hair, leading her closer until their lips meet and she wraps her arms around his neck, laying down on the mattress as Aaron moves in tandem with her.

Smiling against his lips, Thea murmurs, “We are breaking rules, so many rules.”

“Remind me of them?”

“No sneaking into my room to make out,” Thea says in a breathy moan as his hand slips under her pajama shirt. “No kissing and no looking at my ass.”

Aaron kisses down her neck, slowly lifting the plaid blouse off her body. Relishing in the goosebumps spreading over her soft skin.

“No bra today, T?”

“No looking at my tits.”

“Fine by me,” Aaron grunts, kisses moving down south until his tongue brushes against her nipples. His hand flits toward her mouth, muffling the moan that raises in her throat. “Any other rule?”

Thea shakes her head, teeth grazing against the palm of his hand as hers wander down his back—something Aaron has learned means she wants more, she wants to feel things deeper than they are.



“No rules against me eating you out?” Thea pushes her legs a little further apart to accommodate his body. “Nothing on making you scream in your parent’s house?”

“Please don’t make me scream.”

“But I love how you scream my name while clenching your thighs around my head. Is a song from heaven.”

“*Aaron.*”

“There was no rule against fucking, was there?”

“We forgot about that. Well, it’s too late now, both parties have already agreed to the previous terms and conditions.”

Smiling against her warm skin, Aaron trails a path down her body. Fingers hooking around the waist of her pajama pants and her comfy yet hideous underwear.

“Sexy.”

“Shut up,” Thea hisses, pushing herself away so Aaron has enough room between herself and the headboard in her twin-size bed.

“Ask nicely.”

Thea rolls her eyes, running her fingers through golden locks that are just a few inches longer than what Aaron usually keeps his hair.

Lips rake over her naked thighs, moving from her knees down as Aaron doesn’t dare to leave any part of her unloved—nor does he dare to rush the process.

Enjoying the way she hums with each kiss, with each warm breath that caresses her feverish skin, but it’s the way Thea plays with his hair as he makes his way down to her divine that leaves his head spinning.

“Beautiful,” Aaron drones, running the tip of his finger over her wet entrance. “Ask nicely.”

“Please, Mr. Mariani, make me cum. I beg of you.”

“I’ll pretend you aren’t being a little shit, right now.”

Her giggle morphs into a moan when Aaron gently licks the outside of her slit, tasting her as if it were the first time. Green eyes focus on Thea, watching as she arches her back and bites her lips.

Aaron runs his tongue over her lips, sucking on it as he runs his tongue along the wetness before repositioning himself. Placing her legs over his shoulder and a hand over her stomach while holding her hips in place with the other.

Licking her slowly, almost lazily, Aaron moves his tongue from the bottom to the top, shying away from her clit by little. Thea tugs on his head, rolling her hips against his face as he applies a bit more pressure.

Hand drifting up and down her stomach, Aaron exposes her clit a little bit before blowing air into the bundle of nerves. He drags his teeth lightly, savoring the way Thea hisses in pleasure.

Aaron alternates between licking and sucking on her, between being gentle and hard on Thea as he presses down on her stomach to intensify her pleasure.

“I need you,” Thea pleases.

Shuddering when Aaron moves his tongue to her entrance. Thumb drawing circles over her clit as he tastes her, feeling her walls clench around his tongue.

“Please, I need you.”

But Aaron doesn’t listen to Thea, not when he takes so much pleasure in how her body writhes away from his touch,

in how she presses a hand to her mouth to keep her moans to a minimum.

Body strung up like a violin, Thea pulls away from Aaron's touch. Breathing heavily as she crawls toward him, tasting herself on his tongue while slipping her hand down his sweatpants.

"My bed is squeaky," Thea warns him with a smile at how hard he is against the palm of her hand. "Slowly or on the floor?"

"We can stick to the original plan."

"No." Thea shakes her head, eyes dropping down to the space between them as he gingerly pushes his gray sweatpants down to his knee. "I want you inside of me, Aaron. I need you, fuck. I need you so bad."

"Do you have lube? That's a dumb ques—*oh*," He startles when Thea jerks her chin toward the bedside table.

Aaron stretches himself to open the drawer, fishing out a small bottle that'd been used to half of its potential. He squirts some of the clear gel into his hand before spreading it over his cock, rubbing the rest of it on Thea's entrance.

"What?"

"Why do you have lube in your childhood bedroom?"

"You aren't the first boy I've had over in my bedroom, and that's from last year's Christmas." Aaron arches a brow. "What? A girl needs her toys in the absence of her boy toy."

Shaking his head with a chuckle, Aaron guides Thea toward him. Basking in how she throws her head back as he stretches her inch by inch.

“Wait this is complicated,” Thea murmurs when she tries to roll her hips against him, planting her feet on her pillow. “Stretch your legs out, I need to put my hand on your thigh.”

“Like this?”

Thea digs her nails into his naked skin, pulling away just a bit before moving down on him. “Close. Hands-on my waist, I don’t work out as you do, I need support.”

“Would it be easier for me to lay down and you—”

“No, the bed will squeak.”

“Standing up?”

“I want to ride you,” Thea pouts, placing a hand on his shoulder as Aaron steadies her by holding her hips, guiding her up and down while Thea rolls her hips. “Yes, this is good.”

Caught between grinding and bouncing slowly, Thea focuses on the pleasure billowing in the pit of her stomach while being careful to not make any sounds other than the ruffling of bed sheets.

“Rub me.”

“T, I only have two hands.”

With a huff of annoyance, Thea shifts her weight. Bending her knees on the pillows as she rides Aaron, gazing into his eyes as she moves fast.

A hand leaves her waist to grope her ass while the other moves toward her stomach, dragging against her sweaty skin as Aaron glides his hand up her chest.

Fingers curling around her neck, thumb caressing the quickening pulse as she moans into his mouth, yet they don’t care for the sound of skin against skin, nor for the wet sound echoing against the walls.

“Move faster, my little sinner,” He demands, hand raising a few more inches until his thumb brushes against Thea’s lips. “Just like that, that’s right. Perfect, love.”

Thea moans, wrapping her lips around his thumb, tongue caressing his digit as Aaron grunts. Tightening his hold on her waist, digging his fingers into her skin with enough strength to leave purple kisses.

Beads of sweat run down her spine, making her arch toward him, making Thea clench around Aaron a moment before the tension in her belly comes undone and she nearly collapses into Aaron.

“Yes, T. Cum for me.”

“Fuck,” she whimpers, body aching as Aaron lays her into the mattress.

Ravaging her neck, sucking on the sensitive skin of her chest as he fucks her faster, Aaron relinquishes any lingering thoughts about remaining silent.

The bed squeaks a little, its foot dragging against the wood flooring, yet his mind is consumed by the searing pain of Thea’s nails nearly cutting through the skin of his back—being the very thing that sends him over the edge.

“I’m cumming,” Aaron announces and Thea wraps her legs around him, pulling him closer, wanting him deeper so she can feel his cum.

And then, there is nothing but their naked bodies.

Nothing but their breathless breath fills the silence in the room as pleasure, and perhaps a fair share of love courses through their veins.

Allowing Thea and Aaron to bask in a fantasy of their life is simple, and for as long as they basked in orgasmic bliss, life was indeed simple.

There'd be no thoughts about writing or about disappointing Jules; no fear of losing or hurting someone they both cherish so deeply.

So, for those moments when their hearts still hammered against their chest, when every nerve in their body was still delightfully strung up, they bask in a fantasy.

“You're so beautiful, love, so incredibly beautiful.”

“Uhm, I do love hearing that. Oh, fuck.”

“What?” Aaron asks, peppering kisses on her shoulder.

“You know there is one bathroom, right? I mean outside of the master bedroom. We should take a shower so we don't smell like sex before Jules gets back.”

“And?”

“We can't shower together.”

“Oh, well, you can go first. I'll stay here and drink your tea so your dad isn't sad about you not drinking it.”



Thea walks her fingers over Aaron's abs as he rough-dries her hair, running his own hand through her strands while moving the blow drier around.

Brown strands whip her face, forcing Thea to close her eyes when she'd much rather ogle at his beautiful body, something she could swear was sculpted by the ancient gods and goddesses of Greece.

Surely no human gym could make his body so impeccably defined and strong, without making Aaron disproportionately bulky like some sort of superhero.

“Should I give you a blowjob?”

“A blowout, you mean?” Thea corrects him, amused that he’d learned how to do hair because his younger sister would pester him about it, yet Aaron seems entirely incapable of remembering the right word for it. “No, thank you. It’s not like I’m trying to impress my brother’s best friend.”

“It doesn’t take much for you to impress me.”

Thea tilts her head to the left, and a crease forms between her brows as she rolls her eyes when Aaron mimics her. “Is that a compliment or a jab at me? Is the bar too low that anything I do is impressive, or does anything I do genuinely impress you?”

“A compliment, T. My only problem with you is that brother of yours.”

“He’s so protective, right? Jules would skin you alive if he knew about us.” Thea’s tone is light and teasing, yet Aaron’s smile drops at that.

Face growing tight as his mind begins to drift far away, not even noticing when Thea stands up from where she’d been seated on her bed.

Thea wraps her arms around his waist, resting her head against his chest. Hearing the soft beat of his heart, the gentle sound of his breath that tickles her skin.

*He’s loyal to a fault,* Thea remembers what Jules had told her that same morning.

Something she knew to be true as the mere betrayal of Jules’s trust had been a struggle for Aaron to cope with.

He was often the one to either bring up the subject of them being more than friends with benefits, or claiming they should stop sleeping together.

Seeking a way to find a balance between Thea and Jules, a fight Thea knew she'd lose as her brother had become synonymous with a home for Aaron.

A safe harbor for him to drift back to, a landline to keep him whole. Jules and Aaron had become mirrors to each other, bringing out the best in them while shattering themselves to use their sharp edges to protect each other.

"I envy you two," Thea confesses something she'd felt long before she even grew to like Aaron.

"Me and Jules? Why?"

"You build legos together, each falling into a task without the other needing to speak a word. You'll video call each other while working in your offices, both completely silent and happy with the company."

"We also do that, don't we?"

"When I'm writing in your apartment I'll stop every few paragraphs to fill the silence, or you'll offer me snacks and drinks. We aren't entirely comfortable with silence between us, are we?"

Aaron rests his chin on the crown of her head, muttering against her hair, "Maybe I just like the sound of your voice."

"That doesn't change the fact your and Jules's sexual orientation is robbing the world of the greatest couple to exist. You two would be the cutest parents to the biggest brat."

"My children wouldn't be brats."



A single scornful laugh slips past her lips, growing into a giggle when Aaron's jaw drops in horror. Green eyes become slits as he leans down, resting his forehead on her.

“You think I’m a brat, don’t you?”

“Definitely a little spoiled,” Thea concedes as she slips away from his embrace, ambling toward the open luggage in search of a fresh pair of fuzzy socks. “You grumble and complain about being served a drink in the wrong glass.”

“I’m a bartender and a damn good one.”

“While that is technically true, you’re really just an owner. I mean, my dad won’t even let you handle cocktails for Christmas.”

“I’m a guest here!” Aaron complains as Thea slips out of her room, blowing him a kiss before closing the door behind herself.

*God, he’s cute but painfully oblivious,* Thea muses, following the Christmassy songs trickling all the way from the kitchen up the hallway.

The entire house smells like ginger, clover, and cinnamon with a faint hint of mandarins permeating through the air—a scent that Thea grew up with as her mother made the house smell like that for the entire month of December.

A stark difference from how Thea’s apartment has that perpetual smell of mold and the pungent aroma of roaches hiding somewhere behind the walls.

“Mom? What are you baking?” Thea calls out, stomping her feet as her mother would often get startled if Thea didn’t announce herself that way.

Claiming Thea would be purposefully sneaky to scare her, even though Thea didn’t try to be particularly silent with her

steps. Her mom would just wander around her thoughts to hear anything or anyone.

“Mom?”

The woman jumps from where stands behind the oven, glancing over her shoulder with a glare. “Are you trying to scare me to death? And shouldn’t you be with Aaron? He’s a good boy, you should give him a chance.”

“Your golden child would heavily disagree.”

“Julien is protective of you both,” Her mom explains, eyes tracking as Thea takes a seat around the kitchen island. “He fears how his relationship with you both could be damaged by your relationship with Aaron. But you’d be perfect together, so his fears are unimportant.”

“And fucking my boss is a good idea, mom?”

“No, but you can always find a real job.”

Thea nods along, no longer wanting to talk when she knows the conversation would head toward how she should give up on her dream and make something out of herself as Jules had done it.

Or how all of her cousins did, working as nurses, engineers, teachers, and accountants, all following careers that don’t depend on the unwilling kindness of others.

“We are all proud of you for trying, but maybe it’s time to stop trying?”

“Soon, mom,” she murmurs, propping her head against her fist. “Just a few more months of trying until I’m done.”

“I’m glad. You’re too old for impossible dreams.”

“What are you baking?”

Thea's nails graze against the granite countertop, eyes flitting around the kitchen adorned with garlands woven around the white cabinets.

"Chocolate chip cookies, they are for the neighbor. I would've asked Julien to take them, but Aaron offered to help me, so you should help him."

"How difficult is it to carry cookies to someone's house?"

"Aaron doesn't know the neighbors as you do. And it would be nice to spend some time with him, wouldn't it? How was the movie?"

"Very good, I think we might carry that back into New York. It's nice to have someone to watch movies with." Thea bites down on the inside of her cheek, trying to not smile at the memory of Aaron's lips exploring her core.

Her mom smiles, eyes twinkling with joy and mischievous plans for the future. Thea often wondered if maybe, even if she married someone else, her mom would just keep trying to play cupid between herself and Aaron.

"Mom, what happens if I marry someone that isn't Aaron Mariani? Will you disown me?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Her mom wanders around the kitchen, peering over the cluttered counter before letting a silent aha when she finds the oven mitts. "There is no one else who'd be a better fit than Aaron for you."

"And if there is?"

Mabel's sigh is hidden by the squeaky sound of the oven hinges as she checks on her cookies, pulling both trays out before she puts a fresh par in there.

"Mom, what if I meet the most loving man out there? What if he's so deeply in love with me that the idea of losing

me is too much to bear but not more painful than the idea of me being unhappy with him?”

“Is this fictional man a billionaire too?”

“Maybe he is, I could make a billionaire fall for me, don’t you think?”

“Thea, you’re my daughter, I think you’re beautiful enough to make the pope leave his position for you. How would you even meet a billionaire?”

“At Ether? And I don’t want my dear husband to think of me as beautiful, well at least I don’t want that to be the sole reason he was drawn to me. I want him to love my mind, to love my writing and my soul more than he could ever love my physical body.”

“You truly are a writer, aren’t you?” Her mom jests, moving the cookies from the warm tray into the cooling rack.

“There is a difference between lust and love, mom, and I want a man who drowns in both for me.”

“Aaron could give you both.”

“I could give both of what to who?” Aaron asks, wearing the same clothes he’d been wearing earlier, although his hair is darker—still a little bit damp from the shower he took after Thea.

Mother and daughter whip their heads toward the sound of his voice, eyes wide like a deer caught in the headlights. Aaron arches a brow, lip curling into that infuriating smirk that is a pure display of pride in being the conversation between women.

“Mom wants a grandchild.”

“Ah.” Aaron nods slowly, feet dragging against the floor as he prowls toward Thea. “With me as the father? I’ll speak to Jules about it, I’m sure he’d be happy to adopt a child with me.”

“I’m going to be an aunty?”

Aaron rests his hand on Thea’s back, leaning down with each breath she takes, ignoring the way Mabel watches them both with a mix of delight and curiosity.

“You could be our surrogate.”

A nervous grin unravels on her lips, eyes flitting from the green eyes she loves so much to the lips Thea knows the taste better than she should.

“I’d ask for a hefty price, Mr. Mariani.”

“*Sono disposto a pagarne il prezzo per te!*”

“I have no idea what you said but it sounded flirty. You should speak Italian more often, Ether patrons would love it if you called them ‘*amore mio*.’”

“I’ll keep that in mind, I do hope Ether won’t ever stoop so low to be in dire need of my flirting to save the business.”

“Our customers feel very differently about that,” Thea pokes his chest, pushing Aaron away but he just leans further into her space. “If staff told you every little time one of them asked for your number, that’s all you’d ever hear from us.”

“You have clever customers,” her mom chimes in, giving Thea a look that says ‘don’t you dare lose this boy to a random girl.’ “Someone should learn from that.”

Aaron slams his fist against the countertop, slowly peeling his gaze away from Thea, oblivious to how she feels oddly empty and exposed with him to watch over her.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: “I’m willing to pay the price for you.”

“I fully agree with you, Miss Scriven. Jules should try to set me up on dates when he has the chance, but are those cookies ready?”

Her mother laughs, shaking her head while searching for a Tupperware before settling on a ceramic dish to send her baked goods over in.

“Yes, they are. Thea, will you get my wallet in the living room? I need you to buy some more butter for the turkey.”

“Anything else?” Thea steps down from the bench, hand wandering down Aaron’s ass as she slips past him to walk around the kitchen island.

“You can buy anything you two want.”

Aaron watches as Thea saunters out into the hallway, humming to the Christmas her mom has to play in the speakers. He remains so enthralled by Thea that he doesn’t notice how Mabel steals glances at him.

Pretending to not see the way Aaron looks at her daughter as if Thea is some sort of miracle as if even the moon pales in comparison to her beauty.

“It puzzles me how Julien doesn’t know.”

“Know what, Miss Scriven?” Aaron always called her that, refusing to call her Mrs. Scriven as he claimed she didn’t look old enough to be a Mrs.

“That you love her.”

Heart skipping a beat, fear bleaches Aaron’s ruddy cheeks of color as he feels as if his head had been dunked into water, muffling everything but the sound of his heart.

“I won’t tell him, or anyone about the way you look at Thea. Does she know that you love her?”

“No, she doesn’t.” His voice is smaller than a whisper. “I don’t think Thea wants to be loved. At least not until she finds success, but I do love her.”

“Has anything happened between you two?”

Hope fills Mabel’s hazel eyes, giving her easy smile a bit of depth as she gazes into his eyes while mechanically putting the cookies in the white ceramic dish.

“Only in my wildest dreams.” A lie, but one that reflects how Aaron feels about Thea, wanting to give her things that she only accepts in dreamland. “What neighbor are the cookies for?”

“The only house without Christmas decor. Holidays are a hard time for them, be gentle.”

Aaron picks up the dish, cradling it close to his chest as he leaves Mabel to continue prepping for Christmas dinner the following day when a few relatives would join them.

Trudging down the hallway, he finds Thea bundling up in her mom’s coat and mittens. Hair contained by a beanie her mom knitted to look like a Christmas tree with little cabasas in lieu of fairy lights.

“Are you ready, love?”

Thea raises her mom’s car keys, rolling onto the tip of her boots to look over Aaron’s shoulder before she tip-toes toward him with her lips puckered.

“A kiss?” He offers, leaning down an inch, still being just out of reach. “Kissing is against the rules, remember.”

Curling her fingers around the neck of his sweatshirt, Thea pulls Aaron down, smacking her lips on his with her eyes narrowed in annoyance.

“I’ll wait for you outside.”

She steals the ceramic dish from his grasp, slipping out of the front door. Her eyes lift toward the gray sky that seems to threaten the world with a white night.

*A hot chocolate kind of night*, Thea muses, bouncing from the tip of her toes down to her heels as her gaze begins to wander down the houses that would make Christmas movies feel ashamed for their mediocre efforts.

The air dislodges around Thea, making her look over her shoulder to find Aaron in similar attire to hers.

“Which neighbor?” She asks, watching as green eyes search the streets from right to left.

“That one.”

Following where his finger is pointed, Thea’s eyes land on the only house left without any ornaments, without even the soft glow of a Christmas tree sparkling in the living room.

Silence descends into the world as the blinking Christmas lights from neighboring houses become the red and blue lights of ambulances and police cars.

Thea doesn’t feel herself walking, and doesn’t notice the crunching sound of snow beneath her boots as Aaron leads her across the streets.

For the past eight years, Mrs. Hauch's house had been devoid of life even though the family never moved away from the murder scene, preferring to live with the stained wood flooring over leaving behind the home Bridget was brought home as a newborn.

Present and future meld into one.

Giving snow to an early November day, replacing the howling winds with the animalistic cry of a mother who



returned home to find her youngest daughter being moved from her home in a black bag.

Aaron's hand on her lower back reminds Thea of how Jules held her as they watched the commotion from her bedroom window—or maybe it reminds her of how he held Thea when she'd seen the murdered talk about how he killed Bridget because she belonged to him.

November 6th had been the moment the world became a little bit grayer, lacking the same false sense of safety that it once did. Forcing Thea to face the demons she'd once praised and worshiped as if they were gods.

*You are mine*, they used to write in the love stories she'd talk about with Bridget, but they failed to warn girls about the dangers of belonging to a man.

*"Thea!"* A woman's voice snaps her back into the present.

Or maybe it doesn't as she stares at the peach-colored frames Bridget used to wear, at the freckles that adorned her pale skin, but the auburn hair she remembered so well is now faded into a beautiful shade of blonde.

"Mrs. Hauch?"

The woman smiles at her, but Thea remembers how radiant the woman had been. Her smile had once felt warm, capable of making a wailing child stop crying with a simple curl of her lips.

"Come on in," She declares, pulling both Thea and Aaron into her house. "It's been a long time since I last saw you. How have you been? How is your brother?"

Thea tries to speak, but she can nearly feel the same hands that had kept Bridget from crying and screaming for help.

“Julien is doing well, ma’am,” Aaron speaks when she can’t. “Mrs. Scriven sent us to give you some home-baked cookies if that’s alright.”

Mrs. Hauch steers them toward the living room—a few years ago the room had been the dining room, but Thea supposes the family wouldn’t want to gather where their daughter and sister died to watch cheap television.

“Mabel has always been too kind,” Mrs. Hauch exclaims, taking the ceramic dish from Thea’s hand when she plops down on the couch beside Aaron. “How about something to drink? Some eggnog, perhaps?”

“That would be lovely.” Aaron smiles politely, waiting for her to venture out of the smaller living room before he turns to Thea, raising his hand to cup her cheek. “What is it, T?”

Thea blinks away the tears welling in her eyes.

Leaning closer to Aaron, she weaves her fingers through his as if to anchor herself in his presence rather than in the memories plaguing her mind.

“Should we bolt to the door?”

“I’m fine.”

A lie and one Aaron can see through the tightness in her lips, in how her grasp of his hand nearly crushes his bones.

“Say the word and we’re out of here,” He promises, known better than to force Thea into doing something she doesn’t want—even if it would be for her good.

Thea rests her head against his shoulder, closing her eyes as she pushes away the memory of Mrs. Hauch hurling her daughter’s books out of the window, littering the front yard before throwing every tome Bridget had once loved into a fire pit.

Mrs. Hauch had never approved of the stories Bridget felt drawn to, warning her daughter about how unrealistic, or rather, how deceiving those stories were.

She tried to make Bridget aware of the danger woven into what both Bridget and Thea believed to be the ultimate love affair.

“I haven’t seen you since you left for college, have I?” Mrs. Hauch's voice grows a little clearer with each word before she emerges from the kitchen, carrying two large mugs filled with eggnog.

“I’ve been busy in New York.”

“With your...”

“Boyfriend.” Aaron preens, knowing it is a lie, but in the privacy of those walls devoid of any signs of Christmas he felt as if he could speak his wishes into existence.

“That’s delightful. What are you two doing in the big city?”

Mrs. Hauch looks at Thea, waiting for an answer but the lump in her throat hasn’t moved. Stealing her voice, and nearly depriving her of air.

“I own a bar and restaurant,” Aaron chimes, caressing her knuckles with his thumb as he drinks a chug of his eggnog. “It’s quite a popular one, Thea works with me while writing.”

“Ah. Still the same genre, Thea?”

“Yes.”

Hiding her hands between her legs, Mrs. Hauch avoids looking at Thea, focusing her gaze on Aaron with a terse smile on her face adorned by more wrinkles than Thea remembered her to have.

The woman had changed far more than her house had. Other than the living room, it seems as if even the soft layer of

dust on the shelves in the living room is the same as it'd been eight years ago.

Even the very air seems to be the same.

Something puny and uncomfortable to fill her lungs with, yet Thea wonders if it's just unjustified guilt that makes her breathe shallowly and churn her stomach.

"It's funny, isn't it? I used to tell Bridget that dreams were made to be followed, but every day since then I wish several people hadn't followed their dreams."

Thea hears the words Mrs. Hauch doesn't say, hearing the way she wishes people hadn't gone out to write the books that shaped the person her daughter grew into—that she grew into loving and coveting.

*Don't follow your dreams if they'll harm others*, is what Mrs. Hauch says without daring to break Thea's heart.

Thea only wishes she could find her voice to tell Mrs. Hauch about the ways Bridget had inspired her into doing better than all of the rest, but instead, she ignores the nauseating pit in her stomach as she quickly drinks all of the egg-nogs in her mug.

"Should we get going, T?"

"Yes." Thea leaps onto her feet.

Settling the mug on the worn-out coffee table, her steps are stiff, body tense as she loiters toward the hallway adorned by family photos and worn-out furniture.

"I'll ask my eldest to take your mom's dish back to her. Thank you for the visit, dear."

Thea pauses under the threshold, slipping her hands into the pockets of her jacket as she turns around to look at Mrs.

Hauch, pretending that the woman represents mother and daughter.

“Mrs. Hauch, Bridget is someone I don’t wish to ever forget. There isn’t a single story that I’ve written that hasn’t been altered by Bridget and what happened to her. I wish I could still be who I am with her being here.”

“It was lovely seeing you, Thea.”

Feet propelling her forward, Thea practically runs out of the house, stopping only when she finds herself across the street with her knees threatening to buckle from underneath her while she can taste bile on the back of her throat.

She doesn’t feel when Aaron steers her toward her mom’s car, doesn’t feel as if he takes the key from her pocket before settling her inside, nor when he puts the seat belt around her before circling the vehicle to climb into the driver’s seat.

Seeing blood when there is none, Thea tries to lift her gaze from the lines in the palm of her hands, but her body seems to have a will of its own.

Leaving her deaf to the engine coming to life and the sound of the windshield wipers moving against the frosty glass she can still hear the Principal’s voice announcing when Bridget’s funeral would take place, asking the students to show support for a hurting family.

But the Principal didn’t warn them about how long-lasting pain and grief could be, nor how guilty would take someone prisoner with a life sentence.

Aaron drives slowly, going just above the minimum speed limit as he reaches for Thea’s hand, moving it toward his lap while giving Thea time for her body to stop shuddering.

Every once in a while Aaron will pepper kisses on the back of Thea's hand, stealing glances at her to see Thea gingerly leaning closer and closer to him.

Aaron sighs with relief when he feels Thea's head against his shoulder, her hand squeezing his when he runs his thumb over her knuckles.

“Wanna talk about it, T?”

“No, but I will.”

“Who is Bridget?” Aaron asks, keeping his eyes on the room, steeping a little more on the gas as he wants to hold Thea when she opens up to him.

“My parents moved to that house when I was just six months old and Jules was two or three years old, that neighborhood is all I had to know before moving to New York, but Bridget and her family moved there when she was twelve. It'd taken a year for us to realize we both loved romance books, so we'd talk about that, lending each other copies and giving recommendations.”

Thea inches closer.

Burying her face against the crook of his neck, breathing Aaron's scent. Filling her lungs with those notes of leather, tonka bean, and amber, sinking into the comfort Aaron brings her.

“She was sixteen when she met this eighteen-year-old boy. Every girl in our year had grown so envious of her, we all wished we could spark the interest of an older boy.”

“We have three years between you and me, and that has never been a problem, yet just two years between teenagers make me a little nauseated,” Aaron rambles to give her some relief as Thea's hand began to tremble once more.

“You know what is worse? I only grew more envious of Bridget the more she’d tell me about him. They met because he was on the hockey team and she was a figure skater, it didn’t take long for him to want to know where she was at all times, for him to police what she wore, calling her a slut for wearing a dress of a skirt, demanding to know who she hung out with.”

Aaron slowly drives into the supermarket parking lot, quickly finding a spot as apparently not many people had last-minute groceries to buy.

He leaves the car on, cranking up the heater a little bit as he undoes his and Thea’s belt before pulling her into his lap. Cradling Thea close to his chest, fingers caressing the nape of her neck.

“Eventually, Bridget was no longer figure skating as a pair, preferring to make her boyfriend happy as he wouldn’t let her see anyone who wasn’t family or a female friend, throwing fits of rage until Bridget grew small enough to just do what he asked of her.”

“Lovely guy,” He groans, inspecting Thea’s face—heartbreaking with the tears that line her eyes.

“Lovely indeed, but we both thought that it just meant he loved her so much, needing to control her every move so he wouldn’t lose her to someone else. I wanted to be loved like that, Aaron. I wanted someone who’d say I can’t exist near a male friend, that he only trusted me around women and family, I craved to be treated how he treated Bridget, and then, he killed her.”

A sob raises in her chest as Thea pushes her emotions somewhere deep within herself, hiding all the guilt and sadness somewhere she can’t reach.

“Bridget wanted to attend college in Delaware, he wanted Denver or Canada, whichever he got accepted to, but he couldn’t handle that Bridget wouldn’t go with him, that she was adamant about something. It’d been the first time that she denied him of anything, and he killed her for it. He was still stabbing her lifeless body when her younger brother came home.”

“That’s rough.”

“No one heard her, Aaron. Kids were home from school, and stay-at-home moms were in their houses, cleaning, and cooking, but no one heard her. He strangled her with one hand while stabbing her, but no one heard her or him as he bellowed that Bridget was his.”

“Is that why you didn’t talk to me for three months when I jokingly said you were mine?”

“I’m not a dog to be owned by someone else. I wish Bridget didn’t die for me to learn that, but I won’t let anyone dictate what I do, dictate what I wear and who I see. I’m not yours, nor will I ever be anyone else’s.”

There is a gleam in her eyes, a determination Aaron would only see when Thea spoke about writing—maybe, not even then. Maybe Thea was more fierce about her freedom than she was about anything else.

“I can live with that, T.” Aaron glides his thumb over her jaw, pulling her a little bit closer. “But why did you run out of Mrs. Hauch’s house?”

“There is blood in my hand. I fed her as much poison as she fed me. We both believed when those books, those stories that made out abusers to be redeemed as prince charming, neither she nor I saw that she’d begun waltzing with death



because we'd been so infatuated with his controlling nature to see the cruelty in his acts."

Thea curls her fingers, nails digging into the palm of her hand as she forces herself to keep going, to keep talking even when shame flood her entire being.

"Bridget's story could've been mine. I used to think I could've been the one dating him if only I was prettier, nicer, funnier, but now I wonder if the only reason that wasn't my fate is that Bridget was a little more naive than me I had been even at that age."

"None of it is your fault, T."

"Maybe, everyone who knows her story has told me the same thing, but if I had been the one to die the world would be better off."

"It wouldn't, you want to change the world with your writing, T. That's something that matters."

"Maybe, why are we at the supermarket?" Thea pulls away from Aaron, climbing back into her seat with her face lacking any evidence as to how she feels.

"Your mom asked for butter, remember?"

*Ah*, Thea gasps, slipping out of the car before Aaron can even turn off the engine. Her steps are heavy, taking her anger down on earth itself instead of letting Aaron try to convince her that she has no blame for Bridget's death.

Fluorescent lights are upon Thea and the cart she's pushing into the supermarket by the time Aaron catches up to her, wrapping his arms around her waist and burying his head against the crook of her neck.

"What are the Scriven's plans for tonight?"

“Christmas movies marathon, or horror movies marathon, but a movie marathon. Why?”

“We’ll need snacks, and a \$5.99 Cabernet Sauvignon because Jules has your taste for wine.”

“At least he drinks wine,” Thea scorns. “Jules has worse taste than me.”

Trusting her memory to remember where each item in that supermarket should be, Thea pushes the cart through nondescript isles without glancing at the signs indicating the items found within walls of steel.

It doesn’t take long for the cart to be filled with an assortment of snacks, from gummy bears, candy canes, and lollipops to marshmallows, caramels, and liquor-filled chocolates—an assortment so rich that it’d be more fitting for Halloween than Christmas.

They move quickly through the nonexistent line, exchanging pleasantries with the cashier despite both paths preferring to be anywhere but in a supermarket the night before Christmas Eve with a block of butter as their sole necessity.

“Have a good night and happy Hanukkah,” Aaron tells the cashier as he noticed the star of David pin on the lapel of the green vest while collecting all of the bags.

Thea doesn’t register much of the night, moving through the motions with much thought, without paying attention to the words exchanged around her, to the wind whipping her hair onto her face.

Nor does she pay attention to the drive back home, being unable to say if she had her seatbelt on or if Aaron did it for her once more as she retracts deeper into herself.

Dwelling in the emotions she'd been pushing aside since morning when she first became guilty of lying to Jules, being reminded of the feathery resentment she feels in how her parents favor Jules's achievements over her ambitious dreams.

Simmering in the guilt of doing nothing for Bridget and the sadness of seeing how broken Mrs. Hauch is despite the years that have passed, Thea allows the world to pass by as those different hues of guilt paint different parts of her soul.

Changing a bit more of who she is, or rather, it is a simple but cruel reminder of who Thea hopes to become.

Warmth kisses Thea's cool skin when she ventures home with plastic bags on each of her hands, lingering on the threshold between the hallway and kitchen as she finds Jules seated around the kitchen island with a mug of hot chocolate spiked with rum.

"Why are you two together?" He crooks a dark brown, glancing over Thea's shoulder toward Aaron.

"Butter and snacks," Thea murmurs, dragging her feet toward Jules, settling the bags in the granite before resting her cheek against his back. "Did you have fun at work?"

"It's always fun going into the office because my boss is serving divorce papers to his wife as their children's Christmas gift because he found out they aren't biologically his."

"Not even my dad would do that," Aaron murmurs while helping Mabel to take items out of their bag. "Instead, they just trudged along pretending to not hate each other."

"Are you gifting him therapy sessions? It can't be easy to learn your kids aren't yours, not that it'd justify the lifetime trauma he'll give them."

“I’m staying far away from that mess.” Jules moves slightly to wrap his arm around Thea, practically shielding her from Aaron’s line of vision. “Mom, why did you send them to the store together?”

“I needed butter.”

“I could’ve bought butter on my way home.”

“You order your groceries online because you don’t like supermarkets,” Aaron chimes in before Jules glares at him. “Your mom wants me to romanticize your sister, Jules. You need to accept we might be brothers one day.”



Thea doesn’t remember what movies, or how many they watched the night before, nor does she remember how she’d gotten to bed, yet when she opened her eyes that Christmas Eve she was greeted by a Jane Austen poster adorning her bedroom walls.

She can still see the yellowy tones of the posters depicting Pemberley through the mirror before her, where she tries to add soft curls to her hair but it just makes it look as if she’d slept with her hair in a bun.

“How do girls do this?” She murmurs, giving up on the curls and running the flatiron through the strands she tried to curl. “My younger self failed me.”

The annoyance lingers when Thea begins to do her makeup, wishing she had learned the necessary skills to do those beautiful smokey eyes that make women look so incredibly powerful.

Instead, Thea was forced to stick to doing her eyeliner, sweeping blush from under her eyes up to give herself a more

youthful look and pairing everything with a Nivea berry chapstick.

*“I’m not like them, God what an annoying teen I was,”* Thea continues to chide her younger self as she ambles toward her luggage in search of her Christmas Eve outfit. “I should’ve read fewer books and gone to more parties, or just taken my head out of my ass.”

The white robe she borrowed from Jules's apartment pools around her feet before Thea shimmies into the wide-leg black jeans with frayed hems.

Plaided pajamas and white cotton tees fly toward the bed, although most of the items land on the floor around it as Thea searches for a clean bra to wear under the black tank top that would be paired with a creamy sweater that was the opposite of a vest as it only covered her shoulders and arms.

Anything Thea wore for Christmas would rarely be something she’d wear in New York, mostly because she’s too tired to care about how she looks, but partially because Marine would select Thea’s outfits for special occasions.

*The price to have Marine cat-sitting Jolly,* Thea muses, assessing her reflection on the full body mirror hung on her bedroom door and trying to not find the odd sweater to be, well, odd.

“Luckily I don’t have anyone to impress,” she grumbles, dragging her dirty socks against the floor as she loiters out of her room, a foot hovers above the floor as Thea fights the urge to peer into Jules's bedroom to see what kind of disarray his sleepover with Aaron has brought to the room.

Thea lingers in the hallway, pondering on rather or not she should let her curiosity win when a deeper voice reverberates

against the hallway, “If you’re looking for your gift I’ve moved it to under the tree already.”

“I did that one time when I was five, and my punishment was you telling me Santa wasn’t real.”

“Santa is very real for all of those who don’t sneak around to find presents,” Jules jests, crossing his arm over the pink floral apron that has a light dust of flour in it. “What were you debating on, Theodore?”

“Mom never let me have sleepovers, I’m curious about what a bedroom looks like after one.”

“We didn’t have a sleepover.”

“You did.”

Jules arches a brow, dropping his crossed arms before crossing them again as he shifts his weight from one leg to another.

“No legos were built, and Aaron went to bed before I did. That is not how sleepovers happen, Theodore.”

“We didn’t have an average childhood, did we?” Thea ambles toward her brother, looping her arm through his and hurling him down the stairs. “No sleepovers, imbued with the harms of pornography, but she did let us have ice cream as often as we wanted.”

Digging his heel into the glittery red carpet, Jules shakes his head with a silent chuckle as he untangles himself from Thea, patting the crown of her head when she arches a brow at him, curious as to why he isn’t following her.

“Mom was a bit of a mother hen, but she had the best intentions,” Jules explains much how he’d do when Thea was younger and their mom denied her of something, leaving Jules to make Thea see reason.

“I know, but come, you have cookies to bake.”

“Actually, I need to shower, family will be here soon. Don’t worry,” He adds as Thea’s eyes grow wide with a bubbling terror. “I’ve made all the cookie batter, you just need to take them in and out of the oven, and mom has everything else under control.”

It’s not that Thea didn’t know how to bake, after all, Thea used to sell cookies and brownies as a high schooler so she could buy more books than her allowance allowed.

The problem is that, while Thea was great at baking, she couldn’t cook nearly as well. Something that had been a problem even after leaving home to attend college in New York, but that changed when Aaron came along.

Teaching her all of the recipes he learned from his grandmother, teaching her how to adjust the salt when she added more salt than necessary, how to thicken a stew, and to chop vegetables so they were a perfect size.

But Thea supposes that still wasn’t a problem, learning would always be a good thing—except when her mother tried to teach her those things countless times before, so Thea continued to pretend she didn’t know anything about cooking when she was back home.

The real problem, as Thea later found out, is ignorance is a hard thing to pretend.

Sniffing the aroma of rosemary and lemon suspended in the delightful smell of melted butter, Thea trails after the sound of conversation and laughter, finding her parents and Aaron in the kitchen, the three of them wearing aprons.

“Thea,” her mom says as a greeting, but the world fades when Aaron glances over his shoulder.

His smile falls as he turns toward her. Green eyes glint with delight as Aaron's gaze rakes over her body, seeking out the curves he knows all too well while oblivious to how Thea does the same to him.

The black pleated pants don't do much to accentuate his butt, but they elongate his legs, giving Aaron a few inches of height that he doesn't truly have, yet Thea grins at the baby blue sweater and the rolled-up sleeves that give a glimpse of the dress-shirt he wears underneath—that is if the collar poking through the rounded sweater didn't show that already.

"Wow," Thea bemoans, heat flooding her cheeks. "You look good, Mr. Mariani. Trying a different style? No more suits for you?"

"You can pry suits from my cold, dead hands. I didn't have time to take my good suit to the dry cleaner, I settled on something less impressive."

A lie, Thea knows all too well that Aaron doesn't have a single low-quality suit. Claiming the honor of a man is first tested by how he presents himself to the world, so all of his suits were made of natural fibers and tailored to his body.

"It looks good, better than sweatpants."

Another lie.

The only thing Thea preferred to see Aaron wearing over sweatpants, is a white towel wrapped around his waist while his skin is skin damp from the shower and his golden locks are brushed away from his eyes.

Then again, Thea knows any mildly attractive man looks good with a white towel around their waist. It's the gift God gave men to compensate for their annoying existence.



“Do you plan on wearing shoes?” Thea’s dad asks, laughing when she peels her gaze from Aaron toward her toes. “Uncle Jon is coming, so we are all wearing shoes indoors.”

“Cheddar Jon?”

“Cheddar Jon?” Aaron echoes Thea’s question as her lips curl into a grin. “Does he have a bad spray tan?”

“His wife does,” Mabel chimes in, finger gliding down the pages of a cookbook as she inspects the next step for the glazed ham she’s cooking. “But Jon’s feet have a strong odor, which is not something we should poke fun at.”

“Mom, Uncle Jon is who started calling himself *Cheddar Jon*, and you were poking fun at Aunt Tanya’s fake tan.”

“Tanya stole your grandma’s jewelry so she could send her eldest to one of those residences for troubled youth out in Texas. She’s not a good person, and crocodile tears won’t make me think any better of her.”

“So, Cheddar Jon is your brother?” Aaron asks Mabel, head tilted to the left—something he picked up by studying Thea’s mien whenever they are in the same room.

“No, he’s my brother and Tanya stole my mom’s jewelry.”

“Honey, it is wrong of her to steal, but it is even worse for her to send her child away for a problem her parenting created.”

Knowing her parents would bicker about her aunt and uncle until they were knocking at their front door, Thea tiptoes out of the kitchen, creeping toward the living room where the Christmas tree is light up to its full glory.

Kneeling before the gifts, Thea peruses the gift tags, searching for one with her name and Aaron’s as for the past

three years her mom had made sure Thea had Aaron as her Secret Santa.

“Your gift is still in Jules’s room.”

“You got me again?” Thea asks, crisscrossing her legs as she continues to browse through the gifts.

Aaron saunters toward Thea, resting his back against the couch, being distant enough for Jules to not berate him for being close to his sister, but close enough for Aaron’s fingers to brush against hers.

“Uhum, it’s a miracle, isn’t it? Who did you get?”

“Jules, it’s my first time getting him, you know?”

“What did you get him?”

Scooting closer to Aaron, Thea rests her head on his shoulder, tilting her head to look into his eyes as he runs his fingers through her hair.

“You know how the condo he bought a few years ago while it wasn’t even construction?” Thea asks, dropping her voice into a whisper before continuing when Aaron nods. “He’ll move there after the New Year, I built him a lego coffee table. It took up so much space in my shoebox apartment.”

“When did you have time to do that? Between writing and working?”

“Oh, remember when I had to send my laptop to a repair shop? I did it in those four days. Do you think he’ll like it?”

“He will. Jules adores everything you do, he’s like those parents who praised their toddler’s craft project even when it’s poorly done.”

“I’m unsure if you’re complimenting me or not, regardless, if Jules is happy, then I’m happy. What?” Thea asks when Aaron bites down on his lip to contain a smile.

Aaron cradles her face between the palms of his larger hand, squeezing her cheeks and forming a pout on her lips as he peppers kisses across her face.

Stealing a laugh from Thea as she squirms away from him, Aaron rests his forehead on hers, gazing into her eyes as Thea plants her hands on his chest.

“What?” She repeats.

“Thea Scriven, you make me a very happy man. Don’t ever change, I don’t think the world could survive if you ever changed the person you’re.”

“Pinky prom—”

The words end abruptly as the front door bells, echoing through the entire house and parting the love birds as Thea leaps onto her feet—heart hammering against her chest.

“*I miss home,*” Aaron murmurs, grunting lightly as he pulls himself up, loitering down the hallway with Thea lingering a few steps behind him.

Despite being in the back of the house, she can hear the pleasantries being traded on the foyers, and she can feel the cold wind that sweeps through the hallways.

*Tanya wasn’t feeling well this morning, she choose to stay behind,* Cheddar Jon explains.

*That’s fine,* her mother answers, and Thea can practically hear the smile in her voice. *If there are any leftovers you can take them back to her.*

“Who is that?” Emma, the youngest of the cousins, asks with her gaze laid on Aaron.

“Aaron Mariani, I’m Julien’s best friend.”

Thea watches as he proffers his hand out, but her cousin pulls him into a hug—arching her back to press her breast into

his chest while Aaron's whole body grows taut with discomfort.

"I've heard so much about you."

"You have?" Thea asks, tiptoeing around the throng of people in the foyers, giving a quick hug to her uncle, and his three children who'd been the first to arrive among the few relatives that'd been invited.

"Yes, Julien told me he had a friend he wanted to introduce me to. I guess you're him," Emma says, seeming a bit disappointed in Aaron's height while taking the measure of his body. "You own a bar slash restaurant in New York, right?"

"Aaron is also Thea's boss," her mother chimes in, nudging Thea toward Aaron. "They are very, very close."

"We're not *that* close, Emma. I'm sure Aaron would love to make you a cocktail, he only prepares one for the prettiest of girls."

Cheddar Jon eyes Aaron with suspicion while his daughter twirls her dirty blond hair between her index and middle finger, biting down on her lips as one doesn't need to know Aaron very well to grow interested in him.

The family slowly trickles past the entryway, splitting up between settling in the living room and in the kitchen, where Aaron miraculously takes over the task of preparing the Christmas cocktails—something her father didn't allow in the six years Aaron had been Jules best friend.

Thea lingers in the kitchen, helping her mom with baking the few remaining goods while amused by how Emma flirts with Aaron, who is happy to play the game in hopes of making Thea jealous.

They might be truly awful people for letting Emma flirt when she has no way of knowing the truth between them, yet, there is no easy way to explain why Aaron, who Jules knows as a chronic player, wouldn't be interested in Emma.

Especially when she's the exact type of girl Aaron would chase after when they were still in college—blond, bright blue eyes, pouty lips, and a perfect pearly smile that has landed her jobs in toothpaste commercials.

"Ah, you've met already," Jules declares when he ventures into the kitchen wearing similar attire to Aaron but in gray tones that don't quite match how dark his hair is.

"We did," Aaron crooks a brow in a way Jules knew meant he was annoyed. "If I knew you were playing cupid I wouldn't have booked the flight home for tomorrow night."

"You leave tomorrow?" Emma and Jules ask in unison.

"Service-oriented business can't stay closed for long, and I need a day to recover from jetlag."

Amongst other reasons, Thea muses while breaking a cookie in half, popping a piece in her mouth before offering the rest to Jules.

"And you?" Her brother asks, dark brow eyes filled with suspicion.

"I'm a waitress, I have less of a break than Aaron does."

Amongst other reasons, Thea muses once more, knowing that Aaron had planned an X-rated Christmas celebration for them, that may or may not involve red velvet blindfolds and fuzzy white handcuffs.

"What?"

"I thought we'd have more time together," Jules mops a little, energy plummeting. "We didn't finish building our lego".

“We’ll do it over a video call.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Should we do Secret Santa earlier?” Her mom suggests in a meek attempt of lifting Jules’s mood.

“Not everyone is here, mom,” Thea points out, fighting the urge of rolling her eyes—an instinct at that point since her parents would often make Jules’s happiness a priority, even if it came with the enjoyment of others.

“We can do it in parts, the excitement would be longer if we did it in sessions.”

“We can do it before dinner when everyone is here?” Jules suggests, ruffling Thea’s hair. “Why do you smell like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like leather and amber.”

Thea uhm and hums at that, trying to ignore how stiff Aaron has become while she thinks of a reason for her to smell like him that didn’t involve being cocooned with him.

“Are you wearing the perfume I bought you for your birthday?” Jules asks, picking a lock of her hair and raising it toward his nose. “It smells nice, I like it.”

“Thank you, Juju, I’ll let you know when I run out of it.”

Her brother preens at that, oblivious that Thea had to regift the perfume he gave her last Christmas as Jolly would sneeze whenever she used the perfume on herself.

“I knew I had good taste.”

“You do, help me take my gifts down?”

Thea pulls Jules before he has the chance to give her an answer, forcing him up the stairs and down the hallway. She

practically throws him into her bed while planting her hands on her hips and glaring at him.

“What did I do?” He asks, eyes wandering down the mess spread across her floor.

“Are you trying to set up Aaron with Emma?”

“What is wrong with that?”

“Did you forget everything you told me about Aaron yesterday? *In a lot of ways Aaron is a scared little boy.*”

“Emma said she’s not interested in a relationship, and Aaron is a great fit for that.”

“Ok, what makes you think I’d be interested in a relationship with him for you to warn me about him? She’s a child, Jules.”

“She’s 23.”

“And he’s 27, not a very compatible age nor life stages.”

“It’s a hookup.”

“It’s immoral, Jules.”

“I’ll talk to him, not that Aaron listens to me.” Jules plops down in her bed. “Can we stay here? Between working yesterday and helping mom cook, I’m tired.”

“Me too, and I did nothing.”

Jules laughs, belly raising with his chuckle that morphs into a deep sigh as he rolls onto his side. Tucking his hands under his head while Thea takes a seat on the foot of the bed, glaring at him for occupying most of the mattress.

“Are you happy in New York, Theodore? You could move back home, there will be even more space in my new apartment.”

“With Jolly? You don’t love cats, you like them, but she deserves to be loved.”

“I could close off my balcony with glass so she couldn’t jump off the 17th floor. You wouldn’t need to work, I could pay for your expenses so you can just focus on writing.”

“I like New York.”

A lie if there had ever been one, and Thea had grown into being a proficient liar, fooling everyone around her into believing there isn’t a part of her that has been long gone.

Just rotting away, infesting her apartment with flies and maggots whenever Thea receives another dreadful rejection that made every ordinary moment of her life to be something putrid, making her very writing to be posthumous long before she’s buried under a pile of dirt.

“You don’t seem happy.”

*I’m not*, Thea muses as she plants a smile on her face.

“It’s just hard, Jules. You had a very straightforward path, get good grades, and enroll in a good university. Get good grades, and start a good job at an amazing firm. I could write something so good that William Shakespeare would rise from his tomb to read it, but it means nothing if no one else finds it worth the time of day.”

“Willy would love your books.”

“Yeah, well it doesn’t matter, because some people can be such terrible writers that Willy is in the afterlife refusing to be reincarnated, but those people write are more popular than Jesus, and they surely wouldn’t die for their own sins. So, it’s hard, and it’s tiring, but I’m happy.”

And that is not an entire lie.



When Thea is lost within the screen of her computer and the word flourishing in her mind, there is undiluted joy in that. A sense of utter peace that just steals her breath away, making her feel as if she was no longer in control of herself.

But those moments were somewhat rare, being all the more treasured for it, but misery liked company and Thea was a New York train in rush hour when it came to misery.

“Just hard moments?” He asks, narrowing his eyes much as he does when a case goes to trial.

“Just moments.”

But Thea doesn't tell Jules that some moments seem to last an eternity while others stretch themselves for all of a heartbeat.

“What have you been working on?”

“I've been trying to seduce Aaron.”

Jules sits up at that, face drained of color and pulled tight while somehow managing to be contorted into a snarl that tugs on his lips, forcing Jules to bare his lips like a wounded dog.

“You *what?*”

“Why does that bother you so much?”

“Are you trying to seduce Aaron?” Jules speaks in a commandeering tone that makes Thea shake her head before she even thinks about it. “Good. Stay that way.”

“I know why you don't think Aaron is a good match for me, but why do you hate the idea of that so much?”

Rubbing the heel of his hand against his eyes, Jules drones like an elderly dog who fell asleep with his belly up. He rocks from left to right, stalling for time while trying to explain something he never dared to look too deeply into.

“Start with the facts, Mr. Lawyer.”

“Fact number one, you’re my sister,” Jules declares with scorn. “My baby sister, to make it better. Fact number two, Aaron is my best friend. Fact number three, the idea of losing either one because of the other is gut-wrenching.”

Thea drops her gaze to the hem of her sweater, tugging on it to avoid seeing the distress in Jules’s eyes at the mere idea of her and Aaron together.

“Do you think we’d be that bad together?”

“I hope that’s a hypothetical question,” he murmurs under his breath. “At times I think you’d be the greatest couple, but I know you, and I know Aaron, something doesn’t click how it should. There is a bit of wiggle room, or maybe it’s too tight, smothering you both, but there is something that won’t go together, that’s where dangers lay in.”

“Because we’d break each other’s heart?”

“Because if you did, then I would choose you over Aaron, but that doesn’t mean losing him wouldn’t kill me. Ok, that’s a hyperbole, but it would suck.”

“Yeah, I didn’t expect you to drop dead, that would be very Romeo and Juliet-esque of you if you did.”

A smile curls on the edge of his lips, the very kind of smile Thea had to hear her friends swoon over whenever they would go over after school.

“One time at a frat party Aaron said that if soulmates are real, I was his. Then he proceeded to throw up on my shoes.”

“Romantic. Has this love affair replaced Taylor’s spot in your heart? Did you have work or did you go on a rendezvous with the cheater?”

Jules crosses his arms over his eyes, laying still as if that could make time pass quicker as if it would make Thea hate his ex-girlfriend a little less to not be interested in knowing if her brother is over Taylor or not.

“I did have to work, and I think Taylor and I are done.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“Yeah but before she was cheating on me, not using me to cheat on her fiancé.”

“Does Aaron know?” Thea scoots over, resting her back against the empty dresser as she watches over Jules’s expression.

“Fuck no, he might be the only person to hate Taylor more than you do.”

Jules had never told Thea how he’d been in the library with Aaron, working on an assignment about the American way of war when he received a text from Taylor with a video of herself being spit-roasted in a college party.

In the video, Jules could see a few cans of beer littering the floor, yet Jules knew how careful she was with her drinks, and how diligent she was to not get drunk as Taylor’s biggest phobia had always been throwing up.

He had watched the video four times, trying to understand what was blatantly oblivious to anyone else when Aaron took the phone from his hand. Aaron didn’t even glance at the screen before turning the phone off, gathering their items, and escorting Jules to a liquor store.

Getting Jules to imbibe on a wealthy selection of distilled alcohol while plotting a simple plan of revenge—creating a new email and changing it for every single thing he needs an email for, getting a new phone number.

Aaron had gone as far as to withdraw the money Jules had put on a joint account he had with Taylor to save up for their summer getaway, and schedule a meeting for the next morning with real estate agents for them to move out of dorms in case Taylor traveled from Arizona to Massachusetts.

In a matter of hours, Jules was unreachable to his cheater girlfriend, and for two years that remained the case until he felt as if he needed closure, but closure is just an excuse to grow close to someone who broke his heart.

“Whatever you say, know I’ll later get Marine’s opinion on it,” Thea declares, stretching herself toward her phone discarded between the clothes. “Most of the advice I give you I got from Marine.”

“I know, your advice usually involves committing a slew of crimes. Petty crimes, but crimes.”

“Suggesting to put Taylor’s number in hundred little keychains doesn’t strike me as a crime, it’s a *mild* inconvenience. You should be glad I didn’t reach out to cults about her interest but fear in joining them, that would have been worse.”

“I did buy you your computer to keep you from doing that,” Jules points out with a sigh, dropping his arms on his belly as he thinks for a while longer. “We’ve been going on dates for four months, had sex more times than I could tell you. Taylor said she was in love with me, that she had been a fool to throw it all away, and then, one day I see her with a man. They were holding hands, gazing into their eyes, and her face bleached when she saw me.”

“How do you know it’s her fiancé?”

“I watched Taylor say yes to his proposal, watched as he slid the ring into her cute little fingers,” He scorns.

“And you didn’t tell Aaron about it?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Aaron hates her, Theodore. He doesn’t know I was going on dates—” The words die on his lips when the bedroom door creaks open as Aaron peeks his head inside.

“Going on dates with who?” Aaron asks, holding his hands behind himself as if hiding something.

“Your cousin. How do you like that, Mr. Mariani?”

Aaron doesn’t laugh as he looks at Thea, eyes sparking with amusement while she glares at him. Her knees crack when Thea stands up and prowls toward him.

“Funny. Emma asked me the same thing when she took me outside to see the little bird feeder your mom has, then she kissed me, so it was a delightful experience. I don’t think any of my cousins are like Emma.”

“Yeah, don’t do that again.” Jules sits up in Thea’s bed. “Thea admonished me about the morality of it, I didn’t think 23 and 27 was such a bad age gap.”

“It’s less about the age and more about how Aaron is a successful entrepreneur while Emma is fresh in her career.”

Biting down on his lips, Aaron just shakes his head, trying to not bare to the world how amused he is by the mere idea of Thea being jealous of him.

“Why are you here?” Jules asks, slouching out of bed while stretching himself.

“The rest of your family is here, didn’t you hear them coming in?”

The Scriven siblings shake their heads, glancing at each other in confusion as neither of them heard anything—nor did they seem to notice the passage of time when the Christmas decor around the neighborhood poured through the bedroom window.

“Regardless, your mom is mad you were hiding from your cousins, but it’s Secret Santa time. Do you need help taking your gift downstairs?”

“No, mine are all under the tree already,” Jules answered what was meant to be a question for Thea.

Ambling past his sister, Jules squeezes the back of Aaron’s neck, guiding him down the hallway like dogs move their pups around.

Lifting the closed luggage into her bed, Thea takes apart the three pieces that makeup Jules’s gift, resembling them into a proper coffee table before unraveling over the floor the wrapping paper and tape.

“I thought I’d have more time to do this,” She murmurs, ripping the paper with her fingers since she didn’t have scissors to pack. “Oh, God, it’s a square, this should be easy.”

The edges of the wrapping are all different on the corners of each piece, bearing for all to see the shiny sheen of the tape and in one of them, the red lego block is fully visible.

Propping the pieces against her stomach, Thea walks slowly, keeping her hips close to the wall so she can feel the beginning of the staircase since she can’t see anything but Santa Claus and his reindeer flying over snow dusty homes in the wrapping paper she bought for Jules.

Starting a careful descent to the ground floor, Thea barely hears the boisterous laugh and chatter echoing through the house, focusing on the soft tap of her heel against the back of the staircase as she counts all of the twenty-one steps.

*Oh God*, she thinks, wishing she hadn't fallen asleep when watching movies the night before, that way she could've wrapped Jules's gift and left it under the tree without putting her life at risk.

"Thea, you're the last to come," Her mom declares, although no one but Cheddar Jon stands up to help her with her gift. "You can start."

The thing with the Scriven is that they did Secret Santa a bit differently, instead of opening a gift destined for them and then having to guess who the gift is from, they would share lovely anecdotes and memories so the family could guess who they were the Secret Santa for.

"Jules, I got Jules," Thea declares without a flowery story about how much she loves her brother. "Merry Christmas, Juju."

Having no room In the cough, Jules tries to not laugh as he crawls toward her. Taking the three blocks of lego that are easily as wide as his phone from Thea's grasp.

He gently settles them on the floor, being careful when ripping the paper as if to mock her wrapping skills. Jules's dark brow arches in confusion when the three pieces are unraveled on the floor.

"Thank you?"

"Here." Thea kneels beside him, quickly putting the pieces together. "It's a lego coffee table, it can hold my weight so you don't need to be careful with it."

“Oh, I get it now. Thank you, Theodore.”

There are tears, actual tears, lining his eyes when Jules pulls Thea into a hug, squeezing the breath out of her lungs. Jules keeps hugging Thea as he begins to talk about who he drew for Secret Santa, but Thea doesn't pay attention.

Untangling herself from Jules to snack on a gingerbread man cookie while nodding along, content to be over with her part of the events without needing to pay attention to anything else.

From Jules to Cheddar Jon, from Cheddar Jon to her dad, the game progresses slowly, allowing the night to settle into the world while Thea takes turns in cleaning away the ripped wrapping paper—truly it's an excuse to send Marine texts.

“Wanna hear something funny?” Aaron asks from behind her, startling Thea when she'd been typing a long text about Taylor and Jules.

“What?”

“Your mom forgot to include me as a recipient for Secret Santa. She was so excited to be sneaky once more that between all of the guests she forgot about me.”

“Ouchie, are you wounded?”

“She apologized and promised I could have all the leftovers that were supposed to go to Tanya.”

“What about my gift?” Thea pouts, sliding her phone into the back pocket of her jeans.

Aaron jerks his chin toward the empty knitting room, following Thea as she slips past the barn doors and they are shrouded by darkness, blindly finding their way into the small couch her mother would spend hours on while knitting.



It takes a few moments for their eyes to adapt to the darkness, yet, Thea can't help but marvel at how sharp his face becomes in the low light, with the curtains diffusing the light pouring from outside.

*Beautiful*, Thea muses, forcing her hands to stay on her lap instead of allowing her fingers to trace the planes of his face.

“It's something very simple,” Aaron preambles, moving his hands from behind his back as he proffers a small item toward Thea. “If there is anything you don't like I can get you a different version of it.”

Thea takes the gift from his shaky hands. She pulls on the velvety bowl tied around it, working her way into the thicker and satiny paper wrapped around the item.

A gasp raises over her throat when she reads her name written on gold foil in a leather-bound book with gilded pages that permeate the smell of new tomes when Thea slowly opens the book.

“Aaron,” She whispers, eyes lined with silver as she flicks through the one book Thea has shared as being the one she's the proudest of.

The story that made her fall in love with writing every time she opened the document containing its beauty, made Thea daydream about what life could be like if only she could hold her books within the palm of her hands.

The endpaper on both sides has a beautiful illustration of her characters, of different scenes that are pivotal to the story. Even the chapters have dainty illustrations and quotes from her other books, making Thea feel as if her story is a vintage book.

One that has been loved for countless generations while being able to stand firm through the passage of time.

“If there is anything you don’t like, anything at all I can change it later,” Aaron babbles nervously once more. “I wanted to give you the first physical copy of your book, something that you’d cherish for the rest of your life.”

“I love it. This is the most thoughtful gift anyone has ever given me, it’s like you’ve given me a taste of life.”