

Walking on a Dream

By : [littleillusionmachine](#)

Lila Grace Flowers runs away from her home in San Francisco to Hollywood, California to start a new life for herself. She's tired of her abusive Christian parents and their high expectations, and flees to sunny Los Angeles right after high school ends. Out busking one day, she meets the enigmatic Hollywood actor, Gabriel Avery, who offers her food and a place to stay within minutes of meeting her. Initially thinking him a proper, sympathetic man, Lila Grace is shocked to discover Gabriel's dark secretâ his BDSM lifestyle, and his intent to 'break' her into submission.



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[CHAPTER ONE]

The glorious California sun is finally setting on me after the longest day of my life, and I feel incredibly lucky that I can now manage to stay fed for another week.

Life as a bum is treating me well enough, I guess. Today was my first day going busking. I'd finished all the leftover money I had on food and spare guitar strings and then found myself with no other choice but to sit at the Hollywood and Vine train stop with my guitar, hoping to God I'd make some decent money.

I don't even want to think about what Mom and Dad must be saying about me. They're probably swearing to all their friends that I've been possessed by the devil, that they have no idea why I would do such a terrible thing, running away from home. God forbid they got a clue that I was trying to get away from them.

Homeless or not, I'm glad to be rid of them. And I don't care how awful that sounds.

My butt against the hard concrete, I smile wanly as I pat the wad of cash tucked in the front pocket of my jeans. I haven't been playing for about twenty minutes because my fingers were really starting to hurt, and also I wanted to count all the money I made. Fifty six dollars and seventy five cents, to be exact-it's enough to last me for a while. As I sit cross-legged near the station's escalator, a rather short man catches my eye. He winks suggestively at me and saunters over.

"Well, let's hear it," he tells me, lips twisting wryly.

I hold back a frown as I grab my guitar from the case and place it in my lap. With an anxious glance up at the man, I begin to play. I've always liked this piece; it's almost my favorite one. Cavatina. It's fairly long and slow and romantic, and I used to save it for starry nights back home in San Francisco, which in fact weren't actually starry nights at all, of course, due to all of the light pollution. So I had to picture them as I lay underneath the night sky, alone on my front yard. I'd have my guitar by my side, and eventually I'd pick it up and play it, longing for someone, anyone who'd have me, to curl up beside me and appreciate the starless sky as much as I did.

As I play the song, the steel strings feel like they are slicing my raw fingertips open. Nevertheless, I manage to get through it without any major mistakes-but I can feel my heart pumping wildly in my ears. I relax marginally when I look up and see the small crowd of people forming around me; there's no better feeling than seeing their pleased faces.

When the song finally comes to a close, I end it with a flourish and the surrounding crowd gives me polite applause. I can't fight the grin plastered all over my face. "Thank you," I say.

As they continue on their way, several of them toss cash into my guitar case. When they've all cleared out, I pull it towards me, eager to count the rest of the money. A crisp hundred dollar bill floats into the case as I am leaning for it. I gasp and look up.

A tall man with golden hair is looking down at me, his soulful blue eyes crinkling as he smiles. He looks oddly familiar, much to my surprise. I can't will my lips to speak.

"That was beautiful," he says to me.

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I gulp.

He chuckles as if he's laughing at some inside joke and then shakes his head, smiling even wider. "Really, really beautiful."

"Um," I say. "You know I can't take that, right?"

He frowns immediately. "Why not?"

"It's a hundred dollars." I run my teeth over my bottom lip, instantly uneasy. "I wasn't *that* good. You're better off spending that Benjamin on a new pair of Chucks." I nod slightly in the direction of his dirty, beat-up old black Converse shoes, which have various band names I recognize scrawled all over the sides and toe.

The golden-haired man laughs amiably, throwing his head back and closing his eyes. I find myself smiling at the sight of it—it's my favorite kind of laugh. When he catches the grin on my face, he beams, revealing a perfect set of gleaming white teeth. I swear I recognize that smile.

"I thought you were amazing," he says then, shoving his hands in the pockets of his worn out jeans. I tense up when I notice the modest amount of soft, curly chest hair revealed by the buttons left undone at the top of his white linen shirt. He catches me staring and drops down to my eye level, and I can feel my heart race.

His face up close is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. His pale sapphire eyes remind me of a pleasant daytime sky, making me ache, making me feel. His pink lips are curved into a mysterious smile as he gazes at me, and I so badly want to reach out and trace the sharp line of his jaw, then press my lips against the slightly crooked length of his nose, which definitely looks like it's been broken before. I can't resist licking my lips as I imagine what it'd be like to be touched by him, kissed by him.

He definitely notices. I watch as his kind expression turns a touch too fervent, making my heart hammer in my chest. His soft blue eyes darken carnally and his lips part. A rosy flush spreads across the fair skin of his cheeks.

I can feel a delightful tightening at the pit of my stomach.

And then, entirely too late, I remember who he is.

"Jesus Christ," I say very quietly. "You're Gabriel Avery."

Gabriel fucking Avery. The actor. *The* Gabriel Avery. Whose movies I've never seen, not a one, but considered ridiculously hot anyway. I hope to God I'm wrong, that this guy just looks a hell of a lot like him, but there's no mistaking the smile he flashed me. And God, the way he's *dressed*. His mussed-up hair that I just want to take a nap in. I can swear I've seen it all before.

My excitement dies a bit, however, when he looks slightly disappointed at my reaction. I bite my lip and look away, embarrassed.

"It's sort of refreshing meeting someone who doesn't recognize me. Well, not until eventually," he says then, his voice teasing now, and I manage to relax a bit. I know they must hate it when people fawn all over them. But I'm not fan, not really; I figure it's lucky that I've never seen him act, because if I had, I'd be creaming myself right about now.

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"I do recommend booking a show at the nightclub Devilish, they'd love to have you there," Gabriel says, and his hands are in his pockets again and only then do I have a good look at his overwhelmingly hot forearms, revealed by his rolled-up sleeves. Up until now, I didn't know watches could be sexy. But the one on his right wrist is making everything down south clench. Hard. He continues then, and I miraculously manage to comprehend what he's saying.

"I figure a lovely young woman such as yourself would have better things to do than sit on concrete all day. And Devilish is constantly seeking out new talent."

I flush furiously and continue to gnaw at my lip, feeling a pang of humiliation. "And how do you know Devilish would have me?"

"Because I own it." He flashes me a smug smile. "And I would love nothing more than to see you there."

Oh.

The cheeky smile on his face makes me want to do unspeakable things to him, and I feel awful, because I'm not even sure if I want to violate him because he's really famous or for the right reason, because he's just unbearably hot. But I'm no fangirl, and there is no denying his deliciousness.

"Um, I'll consider it," I choke out.

Gabriel grins. "I'm dying to know your name, Miss."

"Lila Grace Flowers," I tell him, feeling my cheeks grow hot again.

His pink lips pull into a deeply satisfied smile. "You're biting that lip again."

I quickly avert my eyes, stammering, "I'm sorry. I-I tend to do that when I'm nervous."

"Miss Flowers, you're nervous?" He's taunting me now, his velvet voice like a soft caress in the mention of my name. And I am blushing wildly, and I do hate to look like a blushing idiot, but I've never really been approached by a Gabriel Avery before, and if he did happen to think me a blushing idiot, he'd have to know it was all his goddamned fault. So.

Gabriel coaxes my eyes to meet his and then leans in a bit closer, his warm breath like soft kisses across my face. He's got a tender smile in his eyes. "Lila Grace is a beautiful name," he says.

I want to tell him it's Just Lila, but something in his expression tells me I need to thank him for his compliment instead. I smile weakly in gratitude.

"Are you homeless?" he asks then, and my jaw drops. Unaffected by the offense I've taken, he continues, "I mean, I pass by this street every day and I always see you here."

"So what if I am?" I huff, and become terribly afraid that my face gives away the ridiculous shame I am beginning to feel.

His electric blue eyes soften in sympathy as he inches towards me; he's entirely too close now. My eyes are darting around in all directions, desperately trying to avoid his. "Miss Flowers, please understand I don't mean to offend you."

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"I'm not offended," I snap.

"I'm sorry, Lila Grace," he says very quietly, taking my hand. Too, too close. Very carefully, he lifts my chin to meet his gaze, and I feel close to bursting. I am so ashamed.

"Lila Grace, you can trust me," he says, his silky voice dropping down to an earnest whisper. I look into the pools of sapphire in his eyes and feel my heartbeat quickening, realizing his now *very* close proximity. Too, too, too close.

I jerk away from his touch and focus my eyes on the distant palm trees, swaying with the gentle summer breeze. I want to run far, far away. Until I meet the horizon.

I'd rather die than have him feel sorry for me.

"Miss Flowers, please," he tells me. "Please, listen. I'd like you to pay very close attention to what I'm about to say to you, because it might seem a little strange, considering we've just met."

There's no mistaking the desperation underlying in his words, his tone. For a split second, the humiliation becomes tolerable.

I sigh and say, "Yes, I'm listening."

He exhales, relieved, and then takes my chin again to bore his eyes into mine. The heat of his touch sets my skin on fire.

"Since you are currently without a home," he begins, brows furrowed in uncertainty, "I'd like to... Well, I'd like to provide you with one."

"Um. What?"

"I want you to live with me, Lila Grace."

What?

"Um. No."

"Why not?"

He looks a little frustrated now, maybe even a little hurt. I instantly feel remorseful. "It's just-well, like you said, we've just met. And I really don't want to be... well, a bother."

"You wouldn't be," he says immediately. "I offered. I want you to come live with me."

"But that's weird."

What in the hell are you supposed to say to someone who's just offered you a place to live? Especially when they've just met you? *On the street.* I can't even fathom his level of crazy, and *I'm* the runaway.

"Lila Grace," he says curtly, as if talking to a child. "I often get what I want. Because I seek it out. And I don't want to have to spend my nights thinking about you after coming across you and letting you slip away. So I'm going to have to insist. You shouldn't be homeless. You're much too young. And... and..."

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"And...?"

He sighs. "You deserve a home, Miss Flowers."

"Thank you for the offer, Mr. Avery," I tell him as politely as I can, "but no. I can't."

"Yes, yes, you can," he insists, tugging at my hands now. And I do have to admit, his long fingers fit perfectly in mine. With their warmth, they squeeze my hands tight as they interlock with them, and it's like nothing I've ever felt before. The feeling of safety and security I get from holding them in mine feels too good to even fathom letting go. "Lila Grace, please move in with me," he pleads. "I'll get you clothes, food, a warm bed, a safe place to be." He's looking straight into my eyes now, and I can see the pure honesty, the intensity that lies in his.

Maybe just for a couple days, a little voice squeaks. Just until you can get back on your feet.

Then I find myself nodding in resignation, knowing full well I'll regret it as soon as the words come out:

"Alright, Mr. Avery."

He sighs and shuts his eyes, relieved. "Thank you, Miss Flowers."

...

Apparently Gabriel takes the train every day to get to the set for the new film he's doing and his penthouse is only a block away from the Hollywood and Vine stop. He's glaring at nearly every man who looks at him for too long. I suspect he doesn't have the patience for ogling fans.

"You know, you would do well to be a little nicer to your admirers," I tell him when we're going up the elevator in his apartment building. He cuts a look at me.

"What are you talking about, Miss Flowers?"

"You shoot daggers with your eyes at every man who stares you down."

He scoffs. "They're not staring at *me*, Lila Grace, they're staring at *you*."

And he doesn't say anything else after that, and so I'm left feeling very confused when he leaves me at his front door saying he'll be putting my guitar in my new room. I look around at the vast living room, decorated brilliantly with its subdued class in its effortless coziness and simplicity. There are beautiful paintings on the wall, classic sculptures scattered about, bookshelves stuffed with British literature. God, how pretentious. And might I add, sexy.

The color of the walls is a soft maroon, and it's also the color of the incredibly comfy-looking L-shaped couches, which contrast beautifully with the pastel green plush carpets. I notice there are no actual personal photographs anywhere in the living room-not even a family photo, or of a possible girlfriend, or even of just him.

I feel slightly queasy when I wonder if a random girl might just stumble out of one of the doors and demand to know where Gabriel is, and who the hell I am. Maybe he's got a girlfriend living here, or God knows what else. I almost jump in the air when he pops out of the other room, saying, "I don't think you can sleep in there tonight, Lila Grace. I want to move everything out of there first."

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"Um, what's in it?"

He pauses. "Just some stuff I never use anymore. You'll be sleeping in my bed tonight."

"Uh, Mr. Avery, I don't think-"

"Lila Grace, my name is Gabriel," he interrupts. "Don't worry, I do not wish to deflower you on our first night of acquaintance." He grins wickedly. "I'll take the floor."

I want to ask him why he doesn't just choose one of the couches, since it'd probably be a whole lot more comfortable than the floor-but then I realize it's most likely because he wants to sleep in the same room with me. Why else?

So I keep my mouth shut.

And then I panic, because he suspects I'm a virgin.

Which is something I really, fucking really really, do not want to talk about, so I keep my mouth shut about that, too.

He ushers me into his room, which is warm and nice and beautiful with even more paintings and *posters* of bands and films I adore; the walls are so covered with them that I can barely make out their color.

The hand on the small of my back as he shows me around drives me insane. I'm burning for him, and the whole thing of him inviting me to stay to live with him-it just completely hits me, and I find myself panicking entirely. What if I say the wrong thing? What if he realizes I want him so badly? What if he eventually comes to his senses and kicks me out?

I know he's going to realize I'm not worth the trouble, but I'm too afraid to tell him before he figures it out himself.

"I keep some spare toothbrushes in the bathroom," he says softly from behind me. I've been gazing at his Clash poster for quite some time now, and when I look back at him, I realize he's already stripped down to his boxers. Holy God.

I nod weakly and enter the bathroom within his room, quickly brushing my teeth and ignoring the little voice in my head saying how awful I probably look. I release my ponytail and run my fingers through my long hair, since I can't find a brush anywhere. I look over at the claw-footed bathtub wistfully, appreciating how impeccably clean and expensive it looks and wondering if Gabriel would allow me to have a nice bubble bath in it. My mind wanders to thoughts of him sitting in it with me, gently scrubbing my back, trailing wet kisses down my neck... I shudder. I just need some sleep. Some part of me is still hoping I'll wake up on the street in the morning, as if this all had been but a dream. It still sounds pretty good to me. It'd be easier, knowing I wouldn't have to face him.

But I just change into the jammies I've pulled out of my duffel bag and steel myself and walk out the door. Gabriel's lying on the carpeted floor with his hands behind his head, his tight abs delicious and his scruffy face irresistibly gorgeous in the lowlight. It takes all my willpower not to just curl up beside his warmth and drift off to sleep. He smiles softly at me and says, "Cool pajamas."

I look down at my Yummy Sushi pajamas and frown.

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"No, really, they're great," he says immediately, his face breaking into a grin.

The side of my mouth pulls up into a halfhearted smile and I then tuck myself under the covers of the bed, rolling to my side to face him. "Gabriel, you should be able to sleep in your own bed," I say. "I can take the floor."

"Don't be ridiculous, Lila Grace," he replies dismissively, pulling his large blanket over himself and closing his eyes. "Goodnight."

"Gabriel," I say.

"No, Lila. I promised you a warm bed. Now go to sleep."

"But *Gabriel*," I repeat. "You deserve a warm bed, too, you know. I'm only the guest."

"I do suppose that bed would be warmer for you if I were sleeping right beside you," he answers.

"Um, that's not what I meant."

"You're not sleeping on the floor."

"You're not, either," I tell him.

"Fine. Suit yourself."

"Wait, no, Gabriel, seriously." I make a move to get out of the bed, but he's already over here before I can. He tosses his blanket over us and snuggles into his pillow, his eyes fluttering closed again. I sigh. "You aren't going to turn off the lamp?"

He shakes his head. "I don't like sleeping complete darkness. Don't ask."

I smile. "I don't, either."

He smiles back sleepily and says, "Goodnight, Miss Flowers."

"Goodnight, Gabriel," I say, and I don't know how long I lie there watching him sleep, but the last thing I remember is the sun rising and my mind finally crashing from the insurmountable fatigue of a night well-spent in overthinking.

Chapter 2

[CHAPTER TWO]

It's not too long before I start to hear the screams.

It takes me a while to realize that the screams are my own, however, and that I'm back at home, enduring blows to my torso with my father's voice growling in my ear.

"I can't even *believe* I ever had a daughter like you, Lila Grace Flowers," I hear my mother's voice cry out. And then my father's saying, "You want in on this, Caroline?" and I am being pulled up, my mother standing right in front of me now and slapping me hard across the face back and forth, back and forth.

This was what I was most afraid of. Being back here, with them, in this desolate home. The home with comfortable sofas and familiar photographs, but with the ever-present air of unease, the cold atmosphere that rendered me entirely unsettled. There's memories here, memories I can't let go of; like being bent over that piano, suffering several whacks to the neck and back with pots and pans. And crashing onto that coffee table after being yanked by the hair. The blood from my mouth seeping into the cream-colored carpet.

"Please, no, please," I whine as my mother's slaps turn into vicious punches.

"You're going to hell, Lila Grace," my father snarls into my ear as he grips my wrists from behind me.

"No... Please, stop, please..."

"Lila Grace!"

I try to shove my mother away, but the death grip on my arms keeps me from squirming.

"Lila!"

"Please stop it, Mom, please, that really hurts..."

"Lila Grace, please, wake up!" a desperate voice calls.

My eyes snap open and I'm no longer in the awful house, but in this foreign one, a large figure hovering over me, the sunlight seeping in through the cracks in the wooden blinds.

"Lila Grace," the figure pants. "You scared me to death."

"Gabriel?"

"Lila, I've never heard a more horrifying scream," he says, and his eyebrows are knitted together and only then do I realize I've just had a night terror. Except it's not night time, and I'm not waking up in my own bed. The recollection of the night before drifts back, and I sigh, slightly embarrassed to have panicked him.

The warmth of his hands on my shoulders hasn't released me yet, and I scold myself for reveling in it. Gabriel's eyes are piercing into mine, alarmed, probing. He's probably waiting for an explanation, but hell if I'm going to muster up the courage to give him one. I try to get up, but he only holds me down, asking, "Lila Grace, what in the world were you dreaming about?"

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"Gabriel, please, it was just a bad dream." My throat feels so thick I can barely get the words out.

"Sweetheart, you've got tears in your eyes," he croons, wiping something away from my cheek. I am crying, I realize. I was crying throughout the dream, apparently. I almost wince at the sound of him calling me 'sweetheart'; it's not a nickname I'm particularly fond of. Over the years, I've come to associate it with *him*, the only boyfriend I've ever had, who only used the term before forcing me to suck his comically small cock whenever and wherever he wanted.

He's almost as bad a memory as them.

"Tell me who did this to you," Gabriel whispers.

"No one, Gabriel," I insist. "Now please let me go, I get really bad morning breath."

He ignores me. "Tell me, Miss Flowers. Please. For the sake of my conscience."

"This isn't your fault."

"Of course it's not. But I couldn't live with myself if I didn't do everything I could to help you."

"I'm no damsel in distress, Mr. Avery."

"Lila Grace," Gabriel says, again with the tone that makes me feel just like a child. "No one screams like that in just some ordinary old bad dream. Something's wrong. I could tell from the first look into your eyes that I took-you've been hurt, badly, and there is a reason why you've run away from home."

"How do you know I ran away?"

He smirks. "I did, too. I assume you already know this from reading off the Wikipedia page."

"I'm not such a big fan," I tell him, suddenly feeling bashful. "I've only seen you in magazines and the like. I haven't really read up on you."

He smiles, delighted. "Good. But you're going to talk, Lila Grace."

"Goddamn it, Gabriel, no. I just met you. Okay? And I know it's nice that you've offered me a place to stay, but I only said yes because I don't plan to impose for too long; just until I can find a place of my own."

He looks a little angry with me now, and the tone he takes is quiet enough to make my head spin. "I'm not letting you go, Miss Flowers."

"Like hell you're not. You can't make me stay here against my will."

He huffs, agitated. "I'm *notholding you captive*, silly girl, I am trying to help you." He pauses, his eyes bare now and burning with some fire I can't put my finger on. "You won't let me."

"I appreciate what you're trying to do," I assure, "but it's time for me to grow up. I can't be coddled all my life, Gabriel. I knew what I signed up for once I left home."

"No, Lila, you really don't."

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"I do," I say. "Believe me, I'd rather be living on the streets than spending another second back at home."

He sighs heavily, brushing a stray lock of my hair behind my ear. His electric touch is enough to make me shiver. He doesn't seem to notice. "You're going to tell me eventually," he says sternly.

I roll my eyes, and then he smirks at me, saying, "Naughty girl. Didn't your parents teach you any manners?"

"They taught me to hate gay people and fear for my life if God forbid I ever misbehaved," I reply bleakly. "That's the truth if you want it. All you're getting."

"We'll see."

...

Gabriel leaves a short while later, off to the train station again for another day on set. I ask him how he manages to get around without getting recognized, and he replies that most of the people on the train are so detached from one another they barely even share a glance. The dark sunglasses help, too.

I only got about three hours of sleep; it's nine in the morning now, and I don't feel like returning to my dreams. I've got a beautiful view of downtown, and for a while, the sense of freedom I get from being up so high is enough to squash the memories of life back home, but all too soon I get the feeling that somehow, someday, they'll make their way back to haunt me.

Only half an hour after leaving, Gabriel's house phone rings; he promised to check up on me as soon as he arrived. The caller ID reads, "Cell."

"Hello?"

"Miss Flowers," he says, and I can hear a smile in his voice.

"Hi, Gabriel."

"Have you had breakfast yet, Lila Grace?"

I pause. "I can do that?"

I hear him chuckle. "Yes, Lila. Of course. I apologize for not serving you any dinner last night, I'm afraid I'm my culinary skills are not up to par. Ms. Natalie, my housekeeper, is only in on weekends. She dropped by this morning to prepare us food for the week. I expect you'll find something to your liking in the refrigerator; Ms. Natalie is quite the cook."

I scramble to the fridge and yank it open, gasping when I catch sight of the large *crÃme brÃle* and massive rib-eye steak. There's also spaghetti, cute little burgers, soup, shrimp, chocolate mousse, finger sandwiches, *cake.Cake*. "Holy Jesus H. Christ," I say into the receiver.

Gabriel laughs. "I know."

"This is a lot of food."

"I know."

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"How did she prepare all this so quickly?"

"She usually has it all done before she drops by, actually."

"Will you thank her for me?"

"Anything for the lovely Miss Flowers," he replies, his assuring voice like honey in my ear.

"Question."

"Shoot."

"Does anyone ever call you Gabe?"

"And lived to tell the tale? No. Why do you ask?"

"Uh, sorry, I was just wondering. I have a cousin named Gabriel—we all call him Gabe, and he's a really big nerd-slash-perpetual-virgin-slash-Jesus-freak with like huge boils on his face and actually, I really sort of hate him because this one time in first grade he refused to share his Power Ranger action figures with me and always pretended to be the pink Power Ranger because he was convinced the pink Power Ranger was a man, who, obviously, is not, and so I told him that and all he did was cry and tell me I was ugly and smelled like celery and I'm talking too much now oh Christ I'm so sorry."

Gabriel then begins to laugh so hard and for so long I begin to worry if he's getting enough air. I smile into the phone, reveling in the silvery, musical sound.

"Uh, Avery? Avery. What the hell's going on?" a panicked voice says in the background.

"I-am on-the phone," he says between laughs.

"I am glad my pathetic childhood amuses you," I reply.

"People are looking at me now," he says, and only then does his laughter begin to die.

"I'm sure they're always looking at you, Gabriel."

"It's just a pretty face, Miss Flowers. Nothing to write home about." Then the same voice in the background calls out urgently; Gabriel clears his throat. "Now, I'm afraid I have to go, Lila Grace. Please enjoy your meal. And do feel free to have as much as you want. I'll be home in the afternoon."

I'll be home.

Home.

It hits me that he's referring to our home, that yes, I am really here, living inside Gabriel Avery's massive penthouse, and he's treating it like it belongs to the both of us. I don't know how to respond.

"And Miss Flowers?"

My breath hitches. "Yes?"

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"Please know that I really do want you to feel safe with me. I know asking you to live with me only minutes after having met you is... iffy, at best-but my intentions are true. I only want you safe. When I saw you on that street, I couldn't help but remember myself when I'd first finished high school and ran away from home. I was lost, starving-and worst of all, alone. I do not wish that for someone like you, Lila Grace."

"I understand, Gabriel." I can feel the tears welling up in my eyes, but I look up at the ceiling instead of letting them fall. When I don't want to cry-which is usually every time I ever feel like crying-I look up and the stinging tears fade away. A trick I picked up during all those horrific nights at home, when my father would get drunk and excessively vicious while my mother was off at work.

And then there is something inside me that is rejoicing that I am at last free of San Francisco, and that a man like Gabriel would ever take a chance on someone like me. God knows I wouldn't have.

"I'll be seeing you this afternoon, Lila," he says then, and so, really quiet, I say back, "I'll be seeing you, Gabriel," and then the line clicks and in the following moments I can't help but feel a little sad that the velvet voice in my ear is gone.

I remind myself that he's promised to be back in a few hours, which is long enough for me to distract myself with breakfast and a nice, warm bath in his tub. I remember, embarrassed, that I haven't had a decent wash since arriving in Los Angeles-a whole week. I figure diving straight for the dessert is a little selfish, so I just have the blueberry pancakes Ms. Natalie has left on the dinner table, and it tastes so damn good I find myself moaning out loud, thankful that no one is around to hear me. I strip off my clothes in his room after eating and let the water fill up the tub.

When I return to his room to fish out a change of clothes from my duffel bag, I come across this thin photo album on his dresser, the cover black leather with the word "Memories" crossed out and replaced with the words "Photos That Mom Thinks I Look Good In But Actually Just Look Incredibly Obnoxious" written with white Sharpie.

I laugh at the long title and flip to the first page. I shrink with shame when I see that the first picture is of a naked little Gabriel running around a sprinkler in a beautiful, grassy backyard. I really shouldn't be looking through this, but I can't help myself.

I turn to the next page, and there are several photos of Gabriel in his teens, some candid, some posed. Each one gorgeous. His pouty lips and strong jawline are the highlights of each photo, among others. He's got the same messy sandy hair and roughly the same height; the only difference is that he's developed more muscle and broader shoulders and his face is a lot scruffier. I turn the page: more teenage Gabriel. This time, he's grinning in each one. He's also with a girl in each one. My heart sinks, noting with chagrin that his companion is actually drop-dead gorgeous.

Her eyes an endless green, she's got a flawless, angular face and is curvier than I am, with really nice boobs and a tiny waist. *Not fair, not fair, not fair.* She is wearing a lovely floor-length gown that hugs her in all the right places and makes her chest look astoundingly classy and hot at the same time.

"Agggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh," I say to no one in particular, beating my head against the dresser.

They look like they're at prom. And having the damned time of their lives. Whereas my prom was a disaster. On top of my date standing me up only to later appear with another girl, my best friend's date puked in my hair after downing the spiked punch he brought with him. I walked home alone with sick in the hairdo I spent an hour on.

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I reluctantly drop the photo album back on the dresser and force myself into the tub, which admittedly feels like heaven. Once I get through with washing my hair and skin, I allow myself to relax. The water is warm and lovely, and if I close my eyes and let myself sink, it's almost as if nothing is wrong. Eventually I spot the little boombox on the short drawer near the tub, and when I pop open the lid, *A Love Supreme* by John Coltrane is already in the tray. I play it, and when the familiar tune fills the air, I sigh and sink back contentedly into my bath.

I wish that somehow, in an alternate universe, Gabriel and I had gone to the same school, knew the same people—it would have been nice to have known the lanky boy with the brilliant smile and be able to call him mine. I know there's no chance of that now, but picturing him and me in impossible situations is easier to bear than trying to accept the fact that I wouldn't stand a chance against any other girl after him. Not really. I can't let myself believe that I can mean anything more to him than any other random fuck he might have had in the past; he only feels pity for me, so much that he's willing to share with me his home.

But he's so easy to talk to, to get along with. I wish desperately that I had spent my high school years hanging around someone like him, instead of the shitty circle of friends I had that weren't really friends at all. (For example, a good friend would not date a yahoo who gets shitfaced only for the sake of getting shitfaced and then without shame, continue to date him even when he pukes in her supposed best friend's hair. *Without even apologizing* because of his inability to even stand on his own.) But Gabriel seems so genuine. Even if he probably wouldn't have been romantically interested in me, I'm certain we would have been good friends. I've never had one of those.

And then I indulge myself in picturing him and me lying under the starless night, only just a mild breeze in the air, with me playing *Cavatina* as he points out constellations that aren't there.

Sighing, I switch off the boombox and step out of the tub, figuring it unhealthy to feed fantasies that will never have any chance of coming true.

...

I put on my blue jeans and my ratty old Velvet Underground t-shirt after drying up, and relax on one of the maroon couches, switching on the plasma television. I notice the huge stack of DVDs sitting under the coffee table, and a particular title, *A Beautiful Disaster*, catches my eye. But really only because Gabriel's face is on the cover. He's got several other of his movies under here, too, more than one copy of each actually, which sort of really amuses me. I pop *A Beautiful Disaster* into the DVD player and sink back into the couch, ignoring the pang I get when the opening sex scene rolls around, featuring none other than Gabriel Avery himself.

I do appreciate his abs and delicious arms in this scene, however. My nether regions tighten at the sight of him biting his lip as he plows into the unnamed blonde. I feel a strange sense of satisfaction when Gabriel's character cums magnificently and then literally just dumps the girl aside onto the bed, tossing on his clothes and leaving her apartment with nothing more than a "Great, thanks, I had so much fun, Jenna," over his shoulder. The girl exclaims, "It's *Cathy!*" but he slams the door shut before he can respond.

Basically, the movie ends up just being some goofy rom-com with the main character, Jesse Worthington (Gabriel), who is initially just another douchebag womanizer, finding his place in the world with the woman who is just brave enough to tame him. Gag. The plotline and supporting actors are laughable; the only thing I take seriously is Gabriel's acting, which is impeccable. I see his dominating personality in Jesse's contempt for the opposite sex, his tenderness when he falls for the aforementioned woman, who breaks his heart before he convinces her to take him back. The lady is sort of pretty, and likable, too, I guess, so it doesn't bother me as much when they make out or whatever.

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I am glad when the end credits roll, however. In the end, Jesse and his newfound love, Sammie, get married on the beach and it all ends up okay and everybody's happy and having a damn ball and that's good for them, but it's just the kind of ending that makes me sick.

Nobody ever gets an ending like that. Ever.

I guess that's why people make movies. To show you what you're not going to get.

Shutting off the television, I glance at the clock-it's already one in the afternoon. I decide I want to practice my guitar a little before I remember that Gabriel's put it away in the room he intended for me to sleep in. I get up to go get it, but the door's locked.

In the corner of my eye, a shiny key hangs on a little hook in the wall. I grab it immediately and shove it into the lock, and then I open the door and flip on the light switch. The key falls unceremoniously to the ground when I see what's inside.

Jesus. Christ.

Canes. Whips. Riding crops. A line of dildos and vibrators sitting on top of a large wooden dresser. And Christ, the chains hanging from the ceiling. The large Victorian bed lacking blankets; just blood red bed sheets. The walls are eerily black and the room is horrifically vast and windowless and I feel like screaming but I just fucking can't find my voice.

It's a fucking torture chamber, and oh my god oh my god oh my god I have agreed to live with a fucking psycho.

God, what does he do in here?

I step inside, limbs trembling, and spot my guitar case propped up on the side of the wooden dresser. My little Sunburst, poor fucking thing. Stuck in a fucking demon room.

And then, belatedly, I find my voice and scream at the top of my lungs when I hear Gabriel's footsteps behind me, saying, in an honest-to-God amused voice, "Ah, Miss Flowers. See anything you like?"

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