

Greensleeves

By : **TheNightmareNobody**

Finally off to college! A time for excitement and fun and being free! That is, of course, assuming you aren't stalked by a stranger! Follow Anja as she tells you from her point of view about her experience as a freshman in college, stalked by a handsome stranger with a possessive streak!



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Table of Contents

Greensleeves Chapter 1

It started with a stare

The storm rises

Safety

Shattering boundaries

Trapped

Confused

Sweet dreams

No rest for the hunter

Warming up

The taste of sin

My Tigger

Madness

My name is Misery

Complications

Another player

Ghost

Rescued

Scars from our pasts

White lies

Tension

A proposal

Greensleeves

Vacation

Beachside

Confrontation

Greensleeves : Chapter 1

It was my first day on my own, alone at college, ready for the world to hit me full force. I was nineteen, and I felt pretty damn invincible. I had been specially assigned to a single-person room, and I had already unpacked my trunk of clothes, the single desk now cluttered with textbooks and composition books, sketch pads, a case of pencils, a bag of my always growing Sharpie collection, as well as the painted carousel music box my grandmother had given me as a going-away present. Eager to review what classes I had, I pulled out my schedule from a notebook and looked it over, humming under my breath. So far I was signed up for chemistry, calculus, English-the basics-as well as several art workshops and a dance class to help keep off the weight I had managed to lose over the last eleven months. Not bad for a freshman.

The first night in my new room, I spent hours simply staring up at the plain white ceiling, winding the carousel up over and over again until I had drifted off asleep to the slightly off-key tune.

My first class of the day started at nine-thirty, so I had set my alarm to go off two hours beforehand, my usual waking time back when I was in high school. Once I had rubbed the sleep from my eyes, I took a quick shower to wake up further, then got dressed in my lucky holey jeans and my favorite Celtic-knot-patterned t-shirt. As I ran to the dining hall, I tied my hair up into a braid, using my trusty dark purple hairband to hold it together. I was snagging an orange juice bottle to accompany my plate of fruit and eggs when I first felt like I was being stared at. I tried to ignore it at first, but years of living paranoid finally forced me to turn around, ready to ask if my jeans were too revealing or something like that... Except there was no one there when I turned. Great.

With a self-conscious sigh, I stalked outside to the patio tables and sat down, rubbing my eyes again before I finally dug into my breakfast to silence my growling stomach. Maybe these jeans were a bad idea for my first day...

Chapter 2: It started with a stare

By the end of Chemistry, my first class, I felt much better. I loved the tiny class size, the teacher who reminded me so much of my witty, sarcastic teacher from back home, and the fact that the students in my class seemed genuinely interested in the material. It was a two-hour class, but it felt like only a half-hour, so much fun packed into the block that it simply flew by. When I stepped out of the science wing, the sun had finally broken through the dreary clouds of the morning and flooded the expansive campus with light and warmth. Unable to stop myself from grinning like a fool, I started skipping down the sidewalk toward the arts building to find my next class.

Application of Visual Arts was held in a huge studio-like room, with a raised dais in the middle and easels spreading out like rays of sunshine. There were nearly forty seats, yet only fifteen were filled with students, not including myself. My already grand day got even more amazing when the professor declared that we were diving headfirst into painting, a free-for-all meant to show our current skill levels. Excited beyond reason, I grabbed four brushes of varying sizes, the five basic colors-red, blue, yellow, black, and white-then seated myself by the window to get to work.

Ever since I was a little kid, I had loved art. I would draw with anything I could get my hands on; crayons, pends, pencils, Sharpies, even charred wood from a fireplace. If it could write, I made art with it. I was absolutely engrossed in my depiction of a Cherokee creation myth, the one about the turtle, but I was slowly becoming aware that the watched feeling from before had returned. Using the not-bristled end of my brush to mix red and blue into a deep indigo, I glanced furtively about the room, praying it was only the teacher checking my progress. But no, that would have been too normal. It was a boy, big and tall enough to pass for a junior at least, but the Hello My Name Is tag on his shirt clarified that he too was a lowly freshman like the rest of us. The curling script of his name was impossible to read, and my gaze flicked up to his face out of habit.

His eyes were concealed behind his bangs, but the curve of his luscious supermodel lips told me that I had gone from sneaky to openly staring, and he knew it. Blushing furiously, I jerked back to hide behind my canvas, trying to finish my painting while pretending none of that had just happened. Even though I hadn't seen him this morning, I just knew, deep in my gut, that he was the one who'd been staring at me earlier. Of the thousands of questions buzzing in my head like ADHD-afflicted flies, the biggest, scariest question was why.

Chapter 3: The storm rises

By the end of my last class, I was trembling with apprehension, desperately wishing my dorm room wasn't all the way across the campus. The sun was already sinking down, half-hidden by the line of trees in the courtyard, and without it I felt cold, exposed, alone. He was still following me, thick, dark blonde hair always covering his piercing eyes, that damned half smile still curving his mouth.

Finally at the end of my rope, I bolted down the alley between the library and another building, ducking in through a side door and racing up the steps of the library. I found myself in the World History section and, wasting no time, hid beneath one of the long tables between shelves. One arm was clutching my books to my chest, the hand of the other pressed tightly to my mouth to stifle my panicked breathing down to nothingness. Curled up like a bunny in her warren, I waited for the big bad wolf to come get meâ

Ten minutes passêsâ

Fifteen minutesâ

Twentyâ

Everything in the library was silent except for the whisper of the A/C unit. Relieved, my hand fell away from my mouth and I pressed my forehead to my textbook. Maybe I'd lost him in the alley. Maybe I had escaped. Maybe he didn't know I was hereâ Maybe those slow, deliberate footsteps climbing the stairs was just a security guardâ The calm that had settled now deserted me and my heart banged painfully against my ribs, so loud that I was sure I'd be discovered by it. The footsteps grew closer, heavy boots that rang through the library like the gong of Death's bell. Unwilling to watch him find me, I squeezed my eyes shut and held my breath, praying for it to be over with quickly. First day away from home, hours away from my friends and family, and I was going to be mugged or raped or killed in a dark library. They would never know what happened until the body bag came homeâ

I braced myself for the worst.

Chapter 4: Safety

Once my reverie was exhausted and my heart slowed down enough to let me hear, I realized that the footsteps were gone. The library was silent once more, just blessed, soothing silence. Even still, I remained utterly frozen, listening intently without breathing or blinking, trying to hear someone else's breathing, trying to find a sign that someone else was in the room. When nothing presented itself, I squirmed out from under the table and bolted down the stairs, exiting the library and sprinting the whole way back to my dorm.

Never before had it felt so good to sink onto a hard spring mattress and curl up into a ball, the door firmly locked and a chair propped against it for extra security.

That night I fell asleep listening to my iPod, blasting an instrumental version of Greensleeves, the same song I had been listening to my whole life, the one song capable of soothing me no matter how upset I was. In the last dregs of conscious thought, I sent out a small little prayer that tonight was the only time I would ever have to go through this. A sense of peace gradually crept over me and I took it as a sign of hope, finally drifting off with a smile.

Things would get better, I just knew it.

Thing is, they didn't.

Chapter 5: Shattering boundaries

The grievous experience continued on for another week or so. I got better at hiding from Mystery Stalker, sometimes hiding in the library, other times in the Agriculture greenhouse. My hiding places were infinite and always varied; predictability would surely get me caught. I learned all the secrets to getting to my classes in the shortest amount of time, and I had shorted an eight-minute walk across campus to a two-minute run. I figured that if I was never caught alone or stationary, then surely I would be safe.

My delusion of safety was shattered after my final class of the day, Technical Ballet, which was held only on Wednesdays and Fridays. I was the last to peel off my tights and leotard. I had stayed back a few minutes to work on a difficult move, and by the time my jeans were zipped up and my halter-top on, I was alone in the locker room. I hadn't had an incident with Mystery Stalker all week, so I didn't feel as panicked to be so late in leaving. I shut off the lights and strolled out, humming Greensleeves under my breath as I slung my bag over my shoulder. I intended to jog leisurely back to my safe, cozy dorm and enjoy the balmy night, but when I reached the middle of the hall, I froze. His footsteps preceded him, echoing down to me and jump-starting my heart to full gear.

He turned the corner to find me locked in place, shaking with fear, and that damnable half smile he always wore only made my tremors worse. Like any healthy wolf, he could smell the terror coming off his rabbit prey, and the smirk turned into a full-fledged predatorial grin. He sauntered closer, languid and lazy, knowing he had me trapped in the dead-end hallway. Expecting violence, I squeezed my eyes shut and braced myself for impact.

A hand, big enough to cover my entire face and then some, gently caressed my cheek, the calluses on his palm lightly scraping my skin and drawing another shudder out of me. This was so not what I had expected. When I finally mustered up the courage to open my eyes, I looked up to see a pair of dark blue-green eyes, staring back at me with unfathomable tenderness. He was handsome, with a strong jawline and smooth, lightly tanned skin, complimenting the burnished gold of his hair. So captivated was I by the face of my hunter, it was surprising that I didn't even notice he was leaning down until his lips gently brushed against my forehead.

Naturally my first reaction was to flinch and run away, but the hand on my cheek reached around and gripped my braid with none of the gentility he had a moment ago. A pitiful little whimper escaped from me and a pained look crossed his face. Quickly he released my braid, then he cradled my face between his palms, kissing my forehead again. In a soft, pleading tone that made my heart skip several beats, he whispered, "Don't run away from me any more."

Then he let go, turned around, and walked away as if nothing had happened. I stared at his back, still frozen on the spot, and tried to figure out what the hell had just happened.

Chapter 6: Trapped

Looking back on that day he had pinned me in the hallway, I smack my forehead every time I realize I never asked what his name was. I figured he must already know mine, being my stalker and all, but to me, he was still just Mystery Stalker. Even still, I gradually came to think of him as MINE, just as he clearly thought of me as only his. It wasn't a love thing, or some long-distance version of Stockholm syndrome; it was simple familiarity. I was a creature of habit. If something stayed a certain way long enough, I would become so used to it that it was normal.

He hadn't cornered me again, but that didn't stop him from stalking me as usual, following me to every class, smiling at me across the room in the art studio, and more than once I noticed him snooping around the dance rooms between warm-up and actual practice. Obviously I wasn't happy with being followed at all times, but like I said, I had grown accustomed to fleeing across the campus at night after my final class. This game had been going on for three weeks, and I was treating it with the same indifference as I treated most things.

Unfortunately for me, while I was content keeping things the way they were, Mystery Stalker was not.

I was in the library, studying for an upcoming chemistry test, when I heard heavy footsteps climbing the stairs to join me. My first thought was the male librarian's assistant was coming to check on me, but I wasn't surprised when it was really just Mystery Stalker. Though I had recognized him in my peripheral vision, I did not actually look up at his approach, though I was wondering why he dared be so close now. I kept ignoring him, pretending to study—Pretending I didn't see him striding purposefully toward me—Pretending I wasn't imagining a thousand horrible things he could do with me tucked into my little library chair, surrounded by piles of thick, heavy books ranging from Atomic Structure to the Periodic Table Through History.

Mystery Stalker stopped right behind me and laid his large hands on my shoulders, making me shiver as their warmth leeches through my flimsy purple t-shirt. When had it suddenly gotten so cold in the library? I swear it should not have dropped thirty degrees in the last few nanoseconds.

He leaned down, his lips brushing softly against the outer curve of my ear, light and tender as a lover's kiss. His voice was the same soft whisper as the first time he'd spoken to me, except this time, his voice was hard and full of venom. "You've been ignoring me. I don't like it. It seems I need to up the ante a little in our game."

I did NOT like where this was going.

Chapter 7: Confused

Upping the ante of the game, it seemed, was not what I expected. Granted, part of my brain had expected him to turn into this raging, snarling wolfman, but I told my brain to shut up and paid attention to the less B-grade horror movie version of what was happening. His hands moved to the back of my chair and yanked it away from the table, nearly spilling me to the floor with the force of the pull, then he *picked up my chair* and spun it around. Once I now faced him, trapped in my chair and cowering as I had the first time he had me cornered, he leaned down, hands resting on either arm of the chair, his face an inch from mine.

"I'm tired of only watching, of seeing you flaunt yourself in front of me like this." His voice was as cold as the frosty glare he had pinned on me, his knuckles white with the grip he had on the chair. I felt my brow furrow in confusion. Flaunting myself? I wore jeans every day except during the dance classes, and never did I wear those slutty tops most pretty college girls liked so much. Not to mention I generally avoided make-up and such. Personally I thought that most people who wore make up looked like monkeys anyway! ;

Shut up brain.

Snapping back to the present, I looked up at him, eyes wide. Something about my expression caused his to soften and his head tilted forward to rest his forehead against mine. "I dislike that others can see what only belongs to me." One hand slid up my arm, past my shoulder, until it laid flat against the side of my neck, his fingers in my hair. The heat of his palm raised chills up and down my spine, and I resisted the urge to shudder. Forcing my voice to work, I stammered out, "Wh-what do you plan to do ab-bout it! ;!"

My question seemed to amuse him, the corner of his mouth tilting up, then slowly he pushed forward, those sensuous lips pressing to mine for the briefest span of two seconds, then he pulled back again. "Don't worry about that, my darling rabbit. Let your wolf take care of this."

Am I the only freaked out by the fact that he made the same comparison that I've been using to portray the dynamic between us?

By the time I had found the nerve to speak up again, he was already moving away again, vanishing behind a bookshelf and leaving me in frustrated, confused, terrified-out-of-living-hell soup.

I left the library a few hours later, nervous that he would pounce on me, but nothing happened. I made it back to my dorm room without incident, locking and barring the door and usual, then I threw myself onto the bed. I curled up, pulling the covers over my head, and I tried to fall asleep without thinking about the way my lips *still* tingled from a kiss given by my stalker.

Chapter 8: Sweet dreams

This torment had to stop.

I wasn't sleeping.

I was barely eating.

He was ALWAYS watching.

It was time for midterms already. With a sigh, I sat down in Chemistry and laid my head on the desk with a thunk. The professor, clearly worried about me, came over and gently nudged my shoulder.

"Anja, are you feeling well? You've been getting paler and thinner every week now."

Peeling my cheek off the desktop, I pasted a smile on my face.

"I'm fine, doctor Mathews. Just tired after studying so much."

He must have seen the lie on my face-I always did suck at fibbing to adults-but with a nod, he let me lay my head down again, moving back to the front to start the lesson. We were basically reviewing everything we'd learned the last half semester, and an hour of class time was left for us to study on our own. Translated to me and a few other kids studying, while the rest played on phones or iPods.

I took a fair amount of notes on what I read, and with fifteen minutes left, I figured I'd earned a little break. I laid my head down and told myself I'd wake up five minutes later and finish the chapter. *One Mississippi* | *Two Mississippi* | *Three Mississippi* | *Four* |

Five minutes became fifteen, and in the time, I had fallen into a deeper sleep than I'd had the last three weeks. There was a bunch of shuffling and stools scraping over the floor, then it gradually became silent. Happy in my slumber, I crossed my arms under my head for a softer pillow and sank into unconsciousness once more. If doctor Mathews was still in the classroom, he didn't seem worried about waking me up yet.

"Anja, my love | Time to wake up."

My blood ran cold when *his* voice slithered into my dreams. I didn't want to open my eyes, but his hand was on my shoulder now, hot and heavy like an August sky in Florida. I felt him lean in, his breath brushing my ear, and he whispered in that soft, wicked voice of his, "If you don't wake up and come along, I will carry you over my shoulder all the way back to your dorm room."

Needless to say, I opened my eyes, however reluctantly, and forced myself to sit up. My shoulders were sore, my back hurt from hunching over, but my heart was pounding as it always did in his presence. With trembling knees, I stood from my stool and gathered my bags, purposefully not making eye contact. His hand slid from the back of my neck down to my elbow, holding it with deceptive tenderness, then he led me out of the room, smiling all the while.

I tried to turn left, to go to our next class, but he pulled me diagonally across the courtyard, heading for the building where my dorm was. Hoping I didn't squeak with fear, I asked, "Where are we going..?"

Greensleeves

He smiled down at me, the sun catching in his gold-ish hair. "We're going someplace where we can be alone, with no chance of being interrupted."

Oh boy.

Chapter 9: No rest for the hunter

Trapped, pinned, locked up, metaphorically chained. He had my back pinned against my locked door, his lips trailing up and down my neck in slow, torturous kisses. It was sudden and demanding. And I really, really liked it. Somewhere in between nips on my skin, he had removed both our shirts, revealing the crescent-moon-shaped scar across my stomach. He pulled away when he saw it, kneeling down and grinning, his long tongue rolling out of his mouth to drag across the puckered skin. With a shudder, I began to melt.

And then I woke up, sitting bolt upright on my bed and gasping for breath. My heart was racing, palms sweaty against the bedsheets. At least I was in my own dorm room.

I looked around, blinking when I noticed a dark shape in my desk chair, idly going through one of my sketchbooks. After a few blinks to clear my blurry vision, I was jolted with recognition and immediately scooted as far away on the bed as I could, my shoulder knocking into the wall. Mystery Stalker looked up, smiling coyly at me and setting the book aside as he stood up.

"I'm glad to see you are awake, my love. You slept quite deeply for someone in the thrall of an erotic dream."

My cheeks flamed with embarrassment, pulling the sheets up to my chest like a startled cartoon character. My reaction amused him, his chuckle soft, almost endearing. Mystery Stalker moved closer until he sat on the opposite edge of my bed, reaching out and brushing the backs of his fingers against my cheek.

"Such beauty, highlighted by such lovely color." His hand moved to cup my other cheek, forcing me to move closer again, then he leaned in. My attention was fully on his approaching mouth, the heat on my face burning hotter, but he stopped himself just before our lips met. I should have been happy that he hadn't forced me into a kiss, but a soft little whimper broke free from my throat. My brain was convinced he was still bad news, but my body had had enough of his teasing, wanting more.

He was smiling again, those damned full lips curled somewhere between mocking and adoring. I hated him for that. "Why do you keep tormenting me like this?"

The question seemed to surprise him, his smirk faltering a bit. "Torment? Do you consider this torment?"

His own question made my heart stop for a beat. The tone of his voice was not remorseful, it was curious and a bit playful. He thought I liked being his prey as much as he loved playing the hunter. I blamed Stockholm syndrome for this, but yes. I maybe kind of sorta might like it.

Soft lips brushed against my forehead while I was trying to come up with a retort, then he pressed a kiss against my temple. His mouth then slid down to my ear, whispering, "Do well on your midterms, and I will reward you, my dear. I promise."

Before I had time to nod, he stood and opened my door-guess it hadn't been locked after all. "I'll be back with some soup for you. Stay put." Then he was gone, the door closed behind him. I lacked the desire to get up and lock it.

Chapter 10: Warming up

Midterms were upon us now. I'd been studying so much the week before that I felt comfortable with everything I had to test on. Chemistry was a breeze in the morning, and the afternoon was nothing but painting our "emotions" as the teacher played four endless hours of Mozart, Tchaikovsky, and Beethoven. Mine ended up looking like a circus scene, with lots of color and motion, and I grinned like a fool when I showed the teacher. He whispered how proud he was of my work, patted my shoulder, then resumed circling the room to watch everyone else's progress. Using a black marker, I labeled the back of it with "Cirque du Colour", then sat and watched Mystery Stalker across the classroom as he worked. For once, he wasn't staring at me, but was wholly focused on his painting, brow furrowed slightly.

There was half an hour left, so I simply sat back against the windowsill and let the sunlight pour through, warming my hair and making the shadowed parts of me shiver with cold. Like a dork I tried to curl up on my seat and be enveloped in sunlight, sighing happily when most of me was warm again. I dozed, cat-like and lazy, staring out the window at the freed students below in the courtyard, on their way to dinner or to their dorms to unwind.

I started to remember my first day of college, realizing how short the time had really been despite how long it felt. I smiled a little, following the trail of memories up until this morning.

I'd been sitting at my usual outdoor table, soaking in the early morning sun while I nibbled a granola bar. It was a lovely morning, perfect weather to take exams. I was lost in admiration when he sat down. No warning or formality, he just sat across the table from me with two plates of scrambled eggs, handed one to me, then started eating. I had stared at him, dumbstruck, until he looked up, head cocked. "Something wrong, my love?" I shook my head, trying to hide a smile. "Nothing, Mystery Stalker." I started to eat, surprised to find the eggs lightly salted, the way I liked them. Then again, what was I surprised about? He knew everything about me.

Speaking of him I opened my eyes, looking across the room to find Mystery Stalker staring at me with a strange half-smile on his face. It was the same smile he always gave me, but this one felt different, less scary and more like a parent who caught their child asleep.

The imagery was a little creepy, but I felt myself smiling back.

Dear god, what was happening to me?

Chapter 11: The taste of sin

He came to watch my dance class for our "exams", which was really just to perform the solo pieces we'd been practicing for this half of the semester in front of a small crowd of peers, the instructors, and a few students. I knew he was there in the back even before I stepped on the stage and spotted that thick blonde hair of his. Grinning like a fool, I slid into my starting pose.

My song started to play, and with my body and my expression, I told the story of a music box ballerina longing to be free. It was fairly short for a solo, but my instructor had complimented it several times for how powerful such simple and forlorn movements looked on me. At the end, I was supposed to land in an arabesque and freeze, the ballerina locked back on the box, but I changed my mind at the last moment. My body moved on its own, arm stretching out while lowering into a kneeling position, my gaze moving past my fingers to land on those eyes I was coming to know so well, pleased to see the surprise in his expression.

There was silence for a moment, then everyone burst into applause, and even my instructor stood as she clapped. She was difficult to impress, but she had tears in her eyes as well as a huge grin on her lips. For once, I wasn't looking at anyone from my class. I wasn't worried what they thought. His gaze was burning me, boiling my blood in my veins.

I must have looked more flushed than I thought, because the instructor took my arm and gently ushered me back to the dressing room to rest and get some water. I had gone second out of seventeen dancers, so I had plenty of time to sit and relax. Or plenty of time to be startled by the sudden appearance of arms around my shoulders, one hand grabbing my chin and turning my head to the side. Mystery Stalker was there, smirking as his lips brushed against mine. He tasted like warm, melted chocolate, and I wondered idly if he'd eaten it just for this kiss.

Somewhere between the third and fourth performances, he had lifted me off the bench and pinned my back to the lockers, my right leg wrapped around his waist and his hands running up and down my sides until I shivered. He was forceful, tongue invading my mouth and claiming it, hands gripping my thighs and lifting my feet off the floor so I was helplessly trapped between his chest and the lockers. I really, really liked it.

Part of my brain expected him to peel off my leotard and try to take more of me, but he never pushed it, though his hands did cup my rear to keep me from falling. Despite all his possessiveness, despite how dominant he was, he seemed almost afraid to force more from me than I was willing to give.

The final song ended with a round of applause and he finally released me, gently setting me back on my feet, then he kissed my forehead like the first time he had me so close. "I'll see you tonight, my love. Go, enjoy your freedom now." He gave my butt a playful pat, then he was gone from the locker room before I had time to cool the blush on my cheeks.

I could still taste his mouth for hours afterwards.

I think I could grow to like the taste of chocolate.

Chapter 12: My Tigger

Things were settling down once midterms were over, going back to normal except for one thing; Mystery Stalker was much more open about his interest in me. He now sat and ate breakfast with me everyday, and he even joined me for lunch in the courtyard. After a week or two of getting used to the sudden change, I found myself enjoying being so close to him. It felt nice to have someone so protective.

We were in the courtyard again, bathed in the gold glow of the setting sun. I was done with classes for the day, and he never seemed to do anything in the afternoons when I was free. I had become comfortable enough with him that my head rested on his shoulder, his hand running through my hair lazily as I read another chapter in my English novel.

It took me a while before I got bored, then I fished in my mind for something to talk about. At that moment, it occurred to me that I still didn't know what his name was. Scowling, I looked up at him. "Hey, what's your name? After all these weeks, you never told me."

He blinked a few times, then a chuckle shook his shoulders under my cheek, causing heat to flush in my cheeks. "Goethe. My mother was an avid literature enthusiast." I felt his head rest against the top of mine, and I felt him smiling.

I frowned, rolling the name around in my head, but I couldn't quite pronounce it the way he had. After a few minutes of silence, I shrugged one shoulder and closed my eyes. "I'mma nickname you Tigger."

Silence.

More silence.

The quiet was quickly growing uncomfortable and suddenly calling him Tigger seemed like a horrible idea, but it was too late to retract my words.

At long last, he chuckled again. "I don't know how you got a cartoon character's name from mine, but for you, my love, I will suffer it."

I grinned and snuggled closer to him, humming happily as he wrapped his arms around my shoulders.

"My Tigger."

"Of course, my love."

Chapter 13: Madness

I never expected things to go the way they did. I still can't believe it.

"What'da'ya'mean gone? He was here last night! He can't be gone!" My hands were gripping the edge of the art instructor's table so hard that my knuckles turned white, my heart pounding in my chest. Poor professor Reid had the misfortune of telling me that Goethe had vanished, two weeks before the semester was going to end. We had gotten so close since midterms, and now here I was, lost without this man I used to be frightened of.

Professor Reid put his hand on my arm, shaking her head gently. "Honey, I know it's got to be hard for you, but sometimes people do have to leave. From what I heard, Goethe has been planning to leave since day one."

A fist, ice cold and made of steel, closed around my heart and I abruptly pulled back, my eyes going wide and burning with tears. He planned to leave... All along? Why? I wanted to ask so badly, but the pity in the teacher's eyes made my throat close up. My pain was too visible, too exposed, and before anyone could grab me, I bolted out of the room, down the steps, across the courtyard. Everywhere there were memories, newly made and infinitely precious to me. Everything seemed so empty now, a gray monotone of sorrow and despair.

I don't remember consciously returning to my dorm, nor do I remember locking the door and grabbing the decorative letter opener from my desk beside my music carousel.

More memories came to me, darker memories, ones to amplify my pain beyond reason.

I was nine when I had my first episode. It started as a simple blackout. I'd gotten into a fight with an older girl at school, then punches were thrown and I thought I'd been knocked out. When I came to, however, the older girl was on her side, curled up in a bloody, whimpering ball, and my little fists were covered in red.

My parents dragged me to a therapist, who told them I had violent tendencies, and that I should be put on medication. They spent ridiculous amounts of money on trying to "fix" me, but it didn't work. When I was twelve, it happened again. This time I took down a football player who tried to grope me at a pep rally. I knocked him flat out, then pounded his face and kicked him viciously until I was yanked off and hauled to the principal's office. All I remembered was blackness.

I was sent to "rehabilitation", which was nice-talk for the nuthouse. I stayed for two nights before I had my third blackout. I had escaped my cell, knocked out an employee, then scaled the fence. I nearly got away, too, but a coil of barbed wire at the top snagged around my waist, nearly ripping me open. Even though I was stitched up at a hospital within half an hour, I was now left with a crescent-shaped scar across my waist, a permanent reminder of my sins.

I was allowed back into society when I turned sixteen, after far long, lonely years in a more secure nuthouse, and I behaved myself now. Mostly.

Remembering my past brought a fresh wave of agony, and I remembered staring at the letter opened with an intensity that made every inch of me ache.

And then I blacked out.

Chapter 14: My name is Misery

It was mid-afternoon when I woke up, sitting at my desk and idly toying with one of the horses on the music carousel. My forearms were both bandaged up neatly, even though I could have sworn I left all my bandaged in my dance locker. Feeling light-headed and dizzy, I looked up at the window and squinted against the dusky sunlight filtering through the blinds. Seeing nothing really out of the ordinary, I stood, both hands on the desk for support, then turned to look blearily around my room. My bed was neatly made, the door still shut and locked as I left it, even the closet was untouched. I looked down at myself and made a face. I was still wearing my clothes from yesterday.

"Must have fallen asleep!" I grabbed some fresh clothing, then made my way to the bathroom for a nice warm shower to wake myself up. Once I was dried and dressed, I stared at myself in the mirror, noticing the dark circles under my eyes and a smear of red near my hairline I hadn't gotten in the shower. I wiped it off on a paper towel, then looked at my bandaged forearms.

I wondered what Goethe would say when he saw them, then I was hit in the chest with a falcon punch of emotion. Goethe was gone. He was likely never coming back. I was just a game to him and he'd won me, so no more reason to stick around. It was highly illogical to think that, but hell, I was feeling pretty damn illogical.

Forgetting about the bandages, I returned to my room and sat on the bed, rubbing my eyes. Despite all the sleep I must have gotten, I felt so exhausted! Before I knew it, I was laying down, the normally uncomfortable bed suddenly feather-soft, the pillow wrapping my aching head in a hug. I was down for the count before I had time to dream.

By the next morning, I was able to wake up on time, and it was a chilly day, so I pulled on a long-sleeved sweater to hide my bandages. I was too chicken to look under them yet, so I had settled to just hide them from everyone else. The day proceeded as normal, no one noticing anything out of the ordinary except how tired I seemed, but they just brushed it off as me being distraught over Goethe. His leaving and my reaction were the juiciest morsels of gossip in every class, but they all kept a respectful distance from me. I was even excused from dance to go and lay down to sleep.

As I passed through the locker room, I paused and stared at locker 42, the one Goethe had pinned me against weeks ago. I could feel the lock against my side again, tears welling up in my eyes, then I bolted from the room. I didn't stop until I was in bed again, curled into a ball and finally sobbing until I passed out.

Chapter 15: Complications

He came a week after Goethe's abrupt departure, like a sign from some god somewhere, telling me to move the fuck on already. I was in English, slouched in my seat and thumbing through Othello when the teacher cleared his throat, his nasally voice announcing that we had a new student, transferred in from out of state. I looked up and did a double take. It could have been Goethe, but at the same time, it most definitely wasn't.

Goethe was built like a willow tree, tall and lean, but strong. He had thick blonde hair that he wore long enough to cover his eyes, and he seemed to be permanently smirking.

This guy had the same tall build, but he wasn't as streamlined, built more like a bear than a tree. His hair was dyed black with lime green streaks throughout, spiked up in the front and left wild in the back. His brilliant green eyes sparkled, mirroring the huge grin on his face.

Every female in the room except for me swooned in their seats and sighed, batting big ol' Bambi eyes at him.

The teacher introduced the boy as Aaron, and the boy gave a goofy wave that made all but one girl's heart melt.

I was unimpressed, though I had to admit, he was kinda' cute.

The seat beside mine was NOT the only free chair, but it was the one Aaron chose. He flashed a charming smile my way, holding his hand out. "Hi. I'm Aaron."

I squinted at him, then gingerly shook his hand. "Anja. Don't ask what it's short for. I won't tell you." Then I pulled my hand back and turned to read my book again, pulling my hair around to hide my face.

"I already know what it stands for." I whipped around when he said that, staring openly at him, and he smiled brightly. "Your legal name is Janaya. But I like Anja better. It's prettier, to suit your beauty."

Flushing with color, I looked back at Othello, trying to focus. In the corner of my eye, I saw him frown, but he left me alone after that, though he kept peeking over. If he were trying to be sneaky about it, he'd make a sucky CIA agent.

As it turned out, Aaron had another class with me, though I hardly expected it. He was in the same dance class as me. He was the only male dancer, and despite his muscled build, he was a pretty good dancer, using his strength to leap further and lift his partners higher. When it came my turn to practice lifts, I noticed his hands sat a bit lower on my waist, his touch lingering a half-second longer.

Maybe I was imagining thingsâ Then I overhead a few girls whispering about how Aaron was staring at me, their voices tinged with jealousy. I looked over my shoulder and sure enough, Aaron was watching me stretch. It was bad enough to have Goethe watch from the sidelines when he was here, but Aaron would be dancing with us, touching us, practicing with usâ

Bloody hell.

Chapter 16: Another player

The new semester was almost here, and while all my other classes will switch to new ones, my dance class only gets bumped up a level. We had begun working on the final routine for the semester, and (to everyone's great shock), Aaron and I were paired up for the finale. We got to pick our own music, so naturally I chose something I thought he would hate.

We were alone in the studio. Everyone else had finished practice, already gone to get food or sleep, leaving Aaron and me alone. Together. Fuck.

"Alright gummy bear, this is what our finale will be. You don't like it, tough." I had my back to him. I didn't expect him to put up a fight-he never did, just standing and smiling and nodding like a bobblehead at everything I said. He may be cute, but he was boringly agreeable. As Greensleeves filtered over the speakers, I turned back to him and sighed softly. "Alright. Let's do this."

My stomach clenched when I finally realized how intently he was staring at me, but I mentally shook myself. I was nuts.

Two and a half hours later, we were both drenched in sweat. I was bent over, hands on my knees, while Aaron sprawled across the floor with a groan. "It's so cool down hereâ Can't we dance on the floor?" Despite my earlier irritation, I chuckled at his almost childish whine. He was a damn good dancer, indeed.

Exhausted, I slumped onto my back on the floor, arms spread apart and staring up at the ceiling. I remembered the first time I ever stepped foot on a dance floor, thirteen years old and ready to try something new. I had loved dance from the start, smiling and closing my eyes as my first recital played through my head, surrounded by little girls in frilly tutus, then there was me, in a simple pink leotard and playing a boy's part with lifts and spins.

I felt more than heard Aaron move closer, on his hands and knees, then one hand cupped my cheek, tilting my head up. My eyes opened again, widely, to see his lips barely an inch from mine. "Anjaâ You're so difficult to corner, but this victory is sweet."

Ohshit.

Trying to keep my cool, I squinted at him in confusion. "Victory? You make it sound like you've captured something."

His mouth twisted into a grin, and my blood ran ice-cold. That sweet, slightly aggravating boy from ten minutes ago was gone, magically replaced with a wicked monster. When I tried to push myself away, he grabbed my wrists and pinned them over my head, his hand big enough to hold both my wrists one-handed, the other sliding down and running over my breast, protected only by my thin leotard.

Ohshit ohshit ohshit.

His mouth brushed my neck, trailing down until he bit the bustline of my leotard and tugged it playfully, making me shudder. "Anja, Anjaâ The more you fight, the less fun you'll have. Don't make me drag you to the basement for our fun." Then his teeth sank into my skin, drawing out a whimper.

So lost were we, him in his conquest and me in trying to deny it was happening, we almost didn't hear the footsteps approaching. Giving me that devious smirk once more, he pulled me off the floor and pinned my

Greensleeves

back against his chest, my arms now forcefully folded over my chest, and his free hand covered my mouth as he dragged me toward the locker room.

Heavy footsteps kept coming.

I was doomed.

Chapter 17: Ghost

Three weeks.

Nine dances classes.

Nine more times that Aaron pinned me down.

Nine more nights of him carrying me to my room and tucking my sore body in.

Every night I begged God to kill me, or to bring Goethe back.

Every. Single. Night.

I noticed nothing nowadays. I moved from every new class to the next like the living dead, each step sending shockwaves of pain through my muscles. Every time Aaron was in my vicinity, he made it a point to wrap his arm possessively around my waist and kiss my cheek. I learned after the first day that cringing away would result in harsher treatment the next time he had me after dance. I also learned that if I tried to tell someone what was going on, Aaron always found me and dragged me away before I ever got the chance to cry for help.

I had one chance. I'd endured the torture long enough. I went to the school nurse and told her I was having trouble sleeping, and she gave me a two-dose package of sleeping pills, telling me to come back if I was still having troubles. I made a convincing show of thanking her and being grateful, and inside, I really was. She'd just handed me my escape.

At breakfast, before Aaron made it to the cafeteria to find me, I had already gotten breakfast for us both-including apple juice for me and the usual cup of coffee for him. He seemed surprised when he found me sitting and waiting for him, a shy smile on my lips. When he sat down, I slid his half of the food to him, along with the coffee. At his questioning look, I looked down, as if hiding a blush. "Gâ !Good morning Aaronâ !" "

A huge grin broke out on his face and he leaned over, kissing the top of my bent head before sitting back to eat. I faked another smile and ate my cereal, forcing it past the bile in my throat from playing the subservient captive. Head tilting down so he wouldn't notice how closely I was watching him, I waited for the ground-up sleeping pill I'd put in his coffee to take effect.

Sure enough he started yawning and blinking blearily, at which point I lifted my chin to pretend innocent curiosity. "Did you get enough sleep? You look tired." Then I flinched away from the vicious glare he shot at me across the table. No faking that reaction.

"I'm not tired. I just feel a little under the weather is all." Then he leaned back, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hand. Gathering up my nerves, I asked timidly, "Would you like me to go get some medicine from the nurse? I'm sure she has ibuprofen, at least."

He considered it for a moment and I held my breath, then he reluctantly nodded. "Be quick about it. We have class in half an hour." Nodding with genuine excitement, I hopped up from my chair and ran away from the table.

Lucky me, the nurse's office was in the same direction as the campus police office.

Chapter 18: Rescued

I made it halfway past the nurse's office when he caught up with me. I should have put the sleep powder in his eggs, not the damned coffee. What if, what ifâ

He grabbed me around the waist and dragged me into the little lane between two buildings, then slammed my back against the brick wall. My breath left in a gasp and I crumpled into a pile, clutching the back of my head as the world spun. Over the roar of blood in my ears, I could hear almost drunken fumbling of button and zipper, then his hand coiled in my hair and yanked it hard to pull my head back. Spots flickered in my eyes and I noticed gray blurs at the edges of my vision.

"You shouldn't have done shatâ!" He was slurring slightly, fighting the effects of the sleeping pill. "Now I hash to punish youâ!"

He pulled me up by my hair and turned me around, grinding the right side of my face against the rough brink. I tried to scream as the abrasive bricks tore my skin, but his heavy fist landed a few inches above my kidney. Seeing stars, I slumped in his grip, gasping for air as he fumbled with my jeans, blindly groping for the zipper.

I should have given him both pillsâ! What ifâ!

"Anja!" The voice sent a jolt through me more powerful than a lightning strike, and Goethe barreled into Aaron, knocking him away and catching me with gentle arms when I fell back. He was thinner than I'd last seen him, his skin a few shades paler, but his eyes, those beautiful eyes, were alive with fury to rival that of a god. He gently laid me against the wall and caressed my cheek with such tenderness that I began to tear up. "Tiggerâ! Heâ! Aaronâ!"

He kissed me gently, silencing the choked-up explanation. When he pulled back, his expression hardened once more. "One moment my love. I need to take care of the trash."

The fight that ensued would have been impressive if Aaron wasn't half-functioning, but for once, I didn't care that it was an unfair fight. Goethe pretty much went to town on the bastard, slamming his face against the wall until his whole face resembled bloody meat, then he rammed Aaron's bleeding face to the ground and began kicking him so viciously that it surprised me to see Aaron still alive when he finished.

Once satisfied that Aaron was finished for now, Goethe returned to me, lifting me in his arms princess-style and carrying me to the nurse's office. He had a slight limp, either from the fight or wherever he'd been for the last few weeks, but he said nothing of it, only glancing down at me to make sure I was still awake.

Tears stung the scrapes on my face, and I suddenly threw my arms around his neck, breaking down into gasping sobs. His only reaction was to hold me as tightly as he could without hurting me, letting me cry until both our shirts were soaked with blood and tears.

Once I caught my breath, I hiccupped a few times, then whimpered.

"Don't leave me againâ!"

"Never again, Anjaâ! Never."

"I love you, Tigger."

"I love you too, Princess."

Chapter 19: Scars from our pasts

The nurse examined me left, right, up, down, in and out, before determining that no I was not pregnant, yes I had been raped many times, and yes my wounds would heal with good care. She eyed the bandages still wrapped around my forearms, but I stubbornly refused to let her see them, even when Goethe gave me a strange look.

I was discharged with a promise from the policeman on duty to come back after I had rested so he could get the details. Exhausted, all I had to do was tug Goethe's sleeve and he understood. I was fine with walking, but he scooped me up off my feet once more and carried me the whole way. I didn't protest, wrapping my arms around his neck and savoring the warmth of him I'd been missing so much the whole time he was gone.

Within half an hour, I had been changed into my most comfortable clothes, the nurse's salve applied to my face, then I was curled up on my bed, with Goethe's arms around me, holding me close to him. We'd been silent the whole time, but I finally gathered up my courage and looked up at him. "Where've you been..?"

He held his silence for another few minutes, then pressed his cheek to the top of my head, his hand gingerly running through my hair so he didn't aggravate my sore scalp. "My mother's been sick for a few years. Doctors gave her until last month to live. My brother asked me to come home to be with the family when she was on her deathbed, then we had the funeralâ" Here he trailed off, kissing my hair, his arms tightening around me.

After a moment or two, I wiggled my hands free and lifted them to his face, cupping his cheeks and pulling him down, kissing him softly. At first he was indifferent, slow to realize what was happening, then he was suddenly kissing me with a passion, his hands gripping my upper arms to pull me even closer. He seemed desperate, clutching me like I'd vanish into thin air if he dared to relax his grip at all, and I let him. I needed to be held as much as he did, and whatever he wanted, I would give him without hesitation.

When he broke the kiss at last, both of us were breathing heavier, staring at one another intently-him looking more vulnerable than I'd ever seen him and me, trying to project understanding and love. It must have worked because he laid his forehead against mine and closed his eyes, running one hand over my uninjured cheek. "My loveâ!"

This time I was the one who cut him off, though I put a finger to his lips instead of another kiss. "Shhâ!" He stared at me, and I felt myself smiling, even though tears were welling up in my eyes again. "Shh, Goethe. Rest. We can talk later, I promise."

He eventually nodded and lay back beside me, pulling me into his arms once more. My head tucked under his chin and one hand resting over his heart, I knew when he fell asleep. Once he had begun to relax and loosen his grasp on me, I wriggled free, sitting on the edge of the bed, and grabbed a pair of scissors, slowly cutting off the bandages on my arms. I was scared of what I'd see, but I had to look anyways.

I don't know what I expected, but I gaped at the words neatly carved into my arms, now just scars still slightly puckered from weeks of hiding under bandages.

Together on the left, Forever on the right.

Chapter 20: White lies

I told them Aaron had done it. The lie came so easily, and given the proof of the abuse still fresh on my face, nobody questioned it. Not even Goethe suspected a lie.

Everything came easily after that.

I was sitting in Goethe's lap, leaning back against his chest and simply enjoying the last dregs of warmth in the afternoon air, listening to him as he recited Shakespeare. One of his hands played in my hair absent-mindedly as he read, occasionally gripping it to emphasize a point, though I don't think he realized he'd done it.

It was a week or two after Aaron was locked up. No one said a thing about his beaten condition, given that Goethe had been bluntly honest about almost killing him. Once the story had spread around campus, not a single person would have blamed Goethe for his actions.

I yawned and turned in his lap, startling him out of a difficult monologue, then on a whim I kissed him softly, humming lazily as I did. Without hesitation, he set the book aside and wrapped his arms around me, cradling me to his chest. After pulling back from the playful kiss, my head came to rest on his shoulder, his lips pressed to my hair. Everything was perfect in my eyes. Until my gaze fell on the edge of an R carved on my left arm. I quickly tugged my sleeve down, shuddering a little. Just like everyone else, Goethe assumed I had shuddered at the memories it brought, lifting my chin to look me in the eyes. "It's over now, my love. He cannot hurt you any more."

I nodded and closed my eyes, smiling shyly when he kissed me again. Maybe this one little lie won't hurt anyone.

Chapter 21: Tension

I grew used to waking up in Goethe's arms, snuggled in close against his chest with my arms twined around his neck. As such, it was an unpleasant shock when I opened my eyes one morning to find him gone. Slowly I sat up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. I spotted a white envelope on my desk and grabbed it, opening to flap and pulling out a small letter.

"Anja,

I'm off to the office of admissions today. My brother, it seems, is joining us here for classes and plans to stay the rest of the semester and into next year. Please do not worry. Go about your day as we usually would, and I will see you as soon as I can.

All my love,

Your Tigger."

His closing line made me smile and with a nod, I folded the letter again, leaving it on my desk before I set about getting ready.

An hour later, I sat in the cafeteria, sipping a cup of hot chocolate to brave against the nippy morning. Ever since the weather had turned cold, Goethe and I had taken our meals inside, at the closest window we could get a table at, and it was there that I sat now. It was a corner table today, but it was bathed in weak pre-spring sunlight, warming the heavy stockings I wore under my skirt.

I got up and threw out my trash, then wrapped a scarf around my head before shouldering my way out the door. Wind whistled in my ears and tried to bite into my limbs, but any chill I felt melted away as soon as I saw Goethe. He noticed me at the same instant, and I felt my feet move forward, racing across the concrete and throwing myself in his waiting arms. He spun me around, chuckling and rubbing his frozen cheek against mine, before he set me on my feet again.

"Anja, my love, this is my half-brother, Aleksandr."

My gaze slid past his face to that one behind him, then I stared up at Goethe. The two of them were of the same height and build, with similar facial features, but while Goethe had blonde hair, Aleksandr had short-cropped black hair. Even now, nearly a month after Aaron had been locked away, I felt myself pressing against Goethe, a faint whimper rising in my throat. He understood immediately and wrapped me in his arms, enveloping me with warmth to calm my shivers.

Despite that, I couldn't shake the sick-to-my-stomach feeling every time I saw Aleksandr after that.

Chapter 22: A proposal

"Wanna' go to the beach?"

I looked up from my textbook to stare at Goethe across the library table. We were the only ones on this floor, so he had spoken at conversational volume. He now watched me expectantly. He had disappeared right before the holiday season, so I had missed Christmas with the family I didn't want to see anyways, which also meant I hadn't set foot off the campus since I got here.

"Yeah," I surprised myself by saying it. "Yeah, I would like that."

A grin broke on his lips and it made my heart squeeze a little to see him to happy. Part of me still didn't understand the sudden change of heart I had, but it didn't matter to me now. I loved the beach, and I secretly hoped that going would help me escape the sick feeling I always got whenever his half-brother Aleksandr was around.

Two hours later, my stomach hit the floor and I felt ready to throw up. Goethe held me close to him, clearly worried about how I had reacted to his news that Aleks and his recently acquired girlfriend were going with us to the beach, along with two of Goethe's friends. I hugged his arm tight, pressing my cheek to his chest, and bit my lower lip before forcing a smile. "Sure. It'll be fun, having all kinds of new friends to make and hang out with."

My act must have been convincing, because I felt Goethe relax and hug me tighter, a silent thank-you for not freaking the hell out. His lips pressed to my hair while Aleks swung his girlfriend around and made fools of both of them by kissing her right there in the courtyard. My stomach twisted and I looked away, trying not to remember Aaron, trying to remind myself that they were different people. Naturally my brain didn't listen.

I don't remember how I got there, but I was on my knees in the girl's bathroom, coughing up my breakfast and the pear I'd eaten for lunch. I was so ridiculously nauseated that I would have laughed at myself if I had the breath. Aleks' girlfriend found me there, clutching my midsection, and without a word she knelt beside me, holding back the hair that had escaped my braid. We stayed that way until I was empty and I sagged against her, head on her breasts, her arms around my shoulders as she rocked me gently.

"You okay honey? Wanna' see the nurse?"

"No, thanksâ I'll be okay."

She nodded, then helped me to my feet, supporting me as we staggered to my dorm so I could brush my teeth. Once I was clean around the mouth once more, we staggered together back to where the boys sat in the cafeteria, sipping from Styrofoam coffee cups. We were laughing by the time we sat down, and I found myself able to look at Aleks without being sick again. Maybe the beach wouldn't be so bad after all.

I looked up at Goethe's smiling face, then pulled him down for a kiss, the taste of hazelnut coffee making a strange combination with my peppermint toothpaste. I kinda' liked it.

Chapter 23: Vacation

Three weeks of planning, packing, and haggling our teachers for a few days off, then we all piled into a van Aleks had rented and were on our way to the beach. It was a four-hour drive, full of laughter and sharing stories.

In the front seats were Aleks, the driver, and his girlfriend Mina, holding hands most of the way there. In the second row were Goethe's friends, same-sex couple Jesse and Ross. Between the two of them, it was obvious that the very feminine Jesse was the bold one, while Ross was quieter, though he was always smiling at his small lover. In the back was Goethe and myself, with me sitting in his lap, because who needed seatbelts when I had his arms around my waist?

(I'm joking, kids. Don't try that at home. Seriously.)

When the beach house came in sight, we all let out a collective whoop of joy. With a grunt, Goethe grabbed my hips and held me still, leaning in to whisper in my ear, "Careful my love, bouncing in a man's lap is never going to end well." Feeling playful, I wriggled my hips experimentally against his hands, satisfied when he gasped and tightened his grip. I glanced back, winking at him. "Maybe I want it to end badly."

Oh boy, I was in for it later, and he made that well known with a scorching stare and his wolfish smirk.

After a few more hours of unloading everything and settling into the house, including a fight between me and Jesse over who got to sleep in which room that ended in a pillow fight, we were finally ready to hit the water. The boys all wore the standard swimming trunks, though Jesse's were obviously refitted and decorated with a rainbow trim, and they went out first to test the waves.

It left Mina and me alone in the house, and she came to stand at my door while I struggled with the tie. After a moment of watching me fight with the unruly strings, she came over and tied it for me, completely shameless in her string bikini. I felt so plain next to her, in a simple lavender one-piece. Granted, the bust was rather low on mine, and there was a heart-shaped cutout on the back, but it wasn't nearly as revealing orâ ˆ ˆ Sluttyâ ˆ ˆ As the strings and scraps of cloth Mina wore.

Her smiling reflection in the mirror told me I'd been caught staring and I looked away quickly, grabbing my brush and dragging it through my thick hair, intending to braid it, but her slender fingers stole the hairband from me before I could. "Leave it down. Goethe likes it when it's down."

I spun around, intending to ask how she knew that, but she was already swaying her voluptuous hips out my door again, laughter ringing through the empty hall as she went outside. Clenching my hands into fists, I braided my hair anyways-though I secretly promised to myself that I'd take it down when Goethe and I were alone again.

After a long stare at my reflection, I finally pulled myself outside, hugging my towel protectively to my chest. Everyone waved and smiled, except for Goethe. He was staring at me with a mixture of shock and awe and desire that warmed me from head to toe in an instant. I was definitely letting my hair down later tonight.

Chapter 24: Beachside

The day had gone by quickly, given that we spent most of it in the van trying to get here, but the evening was packed full of all kinds of fun. Jesse and I were best friends already despite having met only this morning, and we'd held a sand castle contest between the two of us. We ere quickly joined by everyone except Aleks and Mina, who were making out in the waves like horny fish. When I made the comparison to Goethe later on, he'd laughed so hard that his face turned red.

I now stood in the little bathroom attached to our chosen bedroom, waiting for the shower to warm up while I rubbed at the thick coating of sand on my shins. Once steam filled the room I hopped into the shower and scrubbed myself from the roots of my hair to the bottoms of my feet, washing away the sand and ocean water with handfuls of vanilla-scented shampoo and soap.

Imagine my surprise when I got out and found Goethe sitting on the counter, eyes closed as he held out a towel for me. Thankfully I hadn't screamed like a little girl, but I did snatch the towel away and wrap myself up before giving him the OK to look. His eyes sparkled playfully as he looked me up and down, a wide grin plastered on his face. My cheeks flushed, making my hot skin even more volcanic, then backed up when he slid off the counter, his presence shrinking the bathroom tighter around us.

"Anja, come here." His tone was soft, but coupled with his intense stare, chills raised along my arms in spite of the steamy bathroom. I stepped into his arms, leaning into him as he gripped my sides, pulling us so close that we nearly melted into a solid whole. Our lips met and passion exploded between us.

I ended up sitting on the counter, somehow wearing his shirt while the towel was thrown over the shower wall, leaving his torso bare while his hands ran through my wet hair. My back was against the mirror, smearing clear streaks along the glassy surface. His lips trailed over my neck to my shoulder.

Then Aleks walked in, making me squeal and Goethe spun around, punching his brother so hard that I heard his nose crack. I had never heard Goethe swear, but he was swearing up a storm at Aleks, kicking his brother out of the bathroom and slamming the door shut.

When he looked at me again, I imagine I looked like a deer in headlights. He moved over to me, cupping my face with gentle hands. "Forgive me, my love. I should have made sure the door was shut."

I shook my head, grinning by his point. "He shouldn't be walking into our bathroom in the first place. He deserved a punch to the snogger."

Goethe gave me an amused look, then kissed my nose. "Snogger, my love?"

"Don't question my terminology, Tigger."

"As you wish, Princess."

Chapter 25: Confrontation

Movie night was apparently a tradition in Goethe and Aleks' house, because the first night at the beach, that's precisely what we did. Me and Mina made so much popcorn that I'm sure it was illegal somewhere, then we all settled into half-laying-down positions to watch James Bond, Lara Croft, and every superhero movie there was in the house.

By the end of Iron Man 2, Jesse and me ended up draped over each other like kittens, him fast asleep and me nearly there. Mina had excused herself before the movie started so she could go lay down in bed. Bleary-eyed, I looked for Goethe to pull him into the cuddle pile, but he and Aleks had disappeared. Curious, I carefully extracted myself from Jesse, though Ross quickly stole my place, then I went shuffling down the hall to find at least Goethe.

I found them on the porch, Goethe furious and Aleks with his hands thrown up defensively. Intrigued by the odd display, I hid behind the door to listen in.

"Look, Goth, all I'm sayin' is your girlfriend is super-hot!"

"My name is Goethe, not Goth, you thick-skulled idiot. And I know she is attractive, but that gives you no right to barge in on her! What if she had been naked?!"

Silence, broken by Goethe backhanding Aleks, most likely because he had been trying to imagine what Goethe said.

"You stay away from Anja, god damnit. If you dare betray Mina and try to take her, I'll rip you open."

"Aww, you'd do that to your brother?"

"I'd do it especially because you're my brother!"

"Alright! Alright! I'll back off! Jeezâ!"

I heard Goethe shuffling a little, and I took that as my cue to run like hell back into the house and jump into our bed, curling up and faking sleep.

He came in half an hour later, not saying a word, but slipped off his shoes, then dropped onto the bed beside me. His arms snaked around me, pulling my back to his chest, and his face buried in my hair. I was still wide awake from eavesdropping on his confrontation, but I didn't hesitate to kiss his thumb where it rubbed my shoulder. "What's wrong Tigger?"

He was quiet for a moment, then asked me, his voice whisper-soft, "Are you happy with me?"

I drew a blank, my face turning into a giant question mark.

"Of course I'm happy with you, honey. Granted, you did freak me out quite a bit in the beginning, but I love you too much to not be happy."

And then, an ohshit moment.

Goethe froze behind me.

Greensleeves

I couldn't remember ever telling him I loved him without some sort of traumatic experience compelling me to say so. For the both of us, it was like the first time ever.

His hand moved to my chin, tilting it to his lips could press to mine, gentle at first before pressing harder, more desperately. He'd been telling me he loved me since the first time I was cornered, so long ago in the dead-end hallway.

It was strange how quickly everything had moved since then.

With a smile, I sank into my stalker's kiss.

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