

The Sacred Seven Decades

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THE SACRED SEVEN DECADES

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Dear Beautiful Hearts,

"Trust the kind universe!"

- Light -



CHAPTER ONE

Toronto. March 20, 2019. Wednesday.

*Dear true love wish:
You could have warned me
I would find her today
My heart grits would crack
through a piercing challenge
and my entire life would swerve
into a staggering turn—
in NINE DAYS!*

“It looks like serious puke,” the *Luster* attendant examines the brown stains smeared across my white satin top, judging my ritzy reputation off my pile of dry-clean drop-off. “I’m not sure if they can remove it, though,” she continues, looking away.

Why do I feel like—making pasta for you now? Or fluffy pancakes!

“Well, I hope they would,” I reply, resting my half-emptied cup of coffee on the counter, “‘cause I’m flying back home to Vancouver Tuesday next week, so will you please—just punch it in?”

She pouts and bites her lip. *Oh my goodness, woman. You make me tingle. Don’t ever make a move out of your oblivious dithers there, or I would turn myself into a disfigured dumdummy in no time.* “Three tops.” She flicks away on the computer keyboard, eyes glued to the screen. “Two suits and a pair of denim pants—Uh—Monday, okay?”

“Today’s Wednesday,” I complain. “Can’t they get it done in a couple of days instead? And if I could—pick it up this Friday afternoon—that would be fantastic.”

She rolls her eyeballs away. *Hmm. Charming!* “Fine,” she sighs. “It’s just that—it’s been really swamped with loads of priorities all week long, but I’ll let them know, anyways. Name?”

“Ace Hansel,” I gasp.

“Phone number?” she asks in a brisk tone. I enunciate it to her, then she prints off the receipt and hands it to me. “Have a nice day.”

“You, too.” And I stomp away.

“Miss Ace Hansel!” she calls out.

Her gentle voice bops right through my dormant heart. I pause and turn around. “Is there anything else?”

“You forgot your coffee,” she says, fixing something under the desk, still avoiding my presence.

I walk back to the counter and snatch off my morning ego trip. “Thanks.” And I zoom out with a slap of overflowing cramped glow. In front of a lovely diva *who recoils my stomach and sucks me into wonders that I wish to dive in.*

Let us freeze for a moment and allow me to rant about my cursed and hollow existence.

The magic formula for human conception: symmetry, grace, and synchronized moods shoved into one splash of passion. And my parents DID JUST THAT! Thank you very much, Mom and Dad, for blessing me with—this—pulchritude—(Oh, god. Pardon my arrogance. I’m sorry!), which grants me with all the delightful privileges that this fiendish life has to offer—except for—true lllloovvveee!

Oh, the adoring eyes have no idea how mutilated I have been inside, like off-key jingles swinging out of adverts and rapping away instead—with abhorrent rhymes that spell hypocrisy and denial.

Relationship stat: one. Stacey Peckinham, a striking photographer. Three hideaway years. Relationship status: engaged to my

boss—Alexandra Avery, a famous Vancouver socialite, who owns luxury clothing brand stores in the city. Relationship signature: DISCREET!—Blah! Okay—not in love—just in love with the idea of being abducted by a heart that throttles all the true-love-drug-tinges inside of me—Just like the entrancing rhythm reach of *All of Lush* lyrics and melody tickling my dancing veins since I was twelve years old—And well-heeled Alex shuns away from *the 1953 song* with a dreadful puff! I know—I must be a desperate 30-year-old sapphic fowl for plunging myself into this hitch!

Until my major conundrum is toppled off by the sight of the lovely diva—who works at a dry-clean service in downtown Toronto—loathing all *women* like me! The *walnuts* as I prefer to call them. Why can't she just see me as a walnut, anyway—and flag off the nutshell surface? Argh!

Thanks, Mom and Dad! Really!

There has to be something *dreamy* and special *in* her that I must find out before I ditch Queen city. Or I would wonder about it for the rest of my walnut life.

All right. Should I keep sitting on the fence or—

JUMP OFF????!!

Darn it. I'm only in town for the grand opening of Alex's new branch. The job is done, and now I can prowls away—Back into *Luster*—to bug the lovely diva—to flap my tenacious wings. But wait! She hates me! With every yielding chemical flying off her revolting principles. Or maybe she's straight. Regardless—I must escape into my moxie to sneak off her truths. But how am I supposed to do that when she wouldn't even look at me????!!

My humdrum day scope is all about jiggled romping around the city—*Waterfront, the Aquarium, Nathan Phillips Square*, and lounging at a quaint coffee shop. As the lovely diva's imaginary habitation has been distracting my thoughts, like a shrine of love lockets blocking highways all over the world. Argh! I might as well just knock my head

against a concrete wall to wake up. Or worse, fly into a volcano somewhere in *Hawaii* to be scorched alive.

That's it! I have to swirl away in the name of universe itches. I have to be an accomplished human. I have to accept the alarming fear: the possibility of finding my *All of Lush true love* in the middle of my discreet engagement to a vicious—*mmmmonster*—who happens to be my boss. Though it is a disgraceful walnut testimony that I must grip on. With intestinal fortitude. What have I got to lose? Uh—Shoo! Here we go!

Only my ritzy reputation—(Though I couldn't care less about it! Really!). The job that I have loved for three stunning years. The vicious monster, who has tricked me into a—relationship dungeon, with her obsessed pursuits and fake quirks just to roost up my *cockling fears*. Goddammit. Doesn't anybody worry about something meaningful anymore? Why can't I just be an orzo instead of that fancy gnocchi served at a high-end restaurant in Paris or New York?



I SWING BY *Luster* for a pretend follow-up. Thank god, she's still in. She catches me with a quick look while stapling tags on a pile of shirts. "Hi," I say.

"Yep," she replies, taking her task seriously, "guaranteed pick-up on Friday. I got it."

"It's Ace Hansel," I remind her.

"I know," she snaps, looking down, still devoting her attention to a yecchy clothing.

"You know what?" I grouse. "I find it rude that you don't look at your customers."

She freezes and lifts her face, then we look into each other's quizzical eyes for a moment that festers my heart's loon. "I'm sorry," she mutters. "I didn't mean to be rude, really."

"It's okay." I extend my hand for a twitchy formal introduction. "I'm Ace Hansel."

She meets it with a reluctant wiggle. "Dylan Dawson."

"Nice to meet you, Dylan Dawson," I say, smiling. And she shrinks her shivering hand away.

"Nice to meet you, too," she mumbles.

"How has your day been?" I strike off with a casual conversation.

"Just another day in pathetic paradise," she answers.

"Hmm. I could say the same thing about my day as well."

"Cool."

"So—are you off soon—or—"

"In about 45 minutes."

"Good. Um—are you in tomorrow?" I know. This is me—being a burnt marshmallow. Suck it up, Miss Ace Hansel. The fuddy-duddy clock must stop ticking—NOW!

She is amused. "I work Mondays through Fridays. What's your deal?"

"Just having a conversation," I lie.

"No," she insists. "You got a deal slinging around there."

Okay, lovely diva. Here it goes. Honesty flag. Argh! "I just find you revolting and intriguing, that's all."

"I like *revolting*," she giggles.

"That's a euphemism for—"

"—prick—"

"God," I smirk. "You got me there."

"No, it's cool," she replies. "Well, I gotta finish this before I take off. Is there anything else that I can do for you?"

"Nothing more," I sigh. "Thanks."

"See you on Friday," she says and plunges back into her work load.

"Okay. See ya." And I yank myself out the door.

Oh, god. I want to spatter out heartbreaking liquid jolts to express disappointment and degradation. I can only wish that she would be just

like my sweet darlings at work, then it would have been a fingers-snap to make her see me beyond the walnut facade.

Wait a minute. I'm *the* walnut, for god's sake. A kind, good-humored, boring walnut. The walnut that any female can vibe with. And that is all it takes for the lovely diva to notice me!



I BRAVE MY WAY BACK into *Luster*. She is still stuffed with the same laundry swamp, and her flabbergasting eyes shoot through me, along with a shuddering motion. "What's my deal?" I bolt on, "I'm a walnut."

She bursts out laughing. "Pardon me?"

"I'm a walnut," I repeat. "You see me otherwise, I know. But inside—I'm a walnut."

"Where is this walnut introduction going, Miss Ace Hansel?" she cackles.

"Ace," I pant. "Please, call me, Ace." My jumbo walnut flash-on is causing her uptight veins to crack up. I have triumphed. Whew. "I know this might sound ridiculous—with all the humiliating blurs circling around here, but—"

"Coffee?" she suspects, interrupting me.

And she can plough into my mind?! "Is that realistic enough?" I say. "I mean, you know, 'cause we've just met—and—"

"And I'm a prick," she quips.

"More like, a diva, really," I mutter.

"That's comparative enough," she admits. "No, not exactly. I'll take that back. Diva is when you've got your sassy hat going, and you scare the hell out of everybody. That's diva. And I'm not like that at all."

"You were a diva to me this morning," I counter.

"I'd only do that once attacked by—*somebody*—like you," she reasons.

"Hey," I retaliate, "I did not attack you. You attacked me with instant hostility upon our first eye contact that you zinged away with a pout and a lot of eye-rolling."

"Because I have a problem with—beautiful—*hearts*, all right?" she confesses, quavering.

I smile. And that has just settled my stings. I can win this. "I'm just a walnut, Dylan."

"Okay!" she yelps. "Are you for real, though? I mean, the coffee thing?"

"I galloped back in here to reveal my walnut crack to you, didn't I?" I reply.

"You are unbelievable." She checks her wristwatch. "I've got 21 minutes left. If you can't wait that much longer, you can parade your way outta here. Again. And just come back on Friday to pick up your laundry."

"Dylan," I sigh, "do I have to take the walnut pledge to you again? Really. You can make a big deal out of it, but I'm gonna be waiting for your diva thug outside, so we can get on with the coffee gesture. How's that?"

"Miss Ace Hansel," she grunts, "you are just about to murder my life."

"Hurry up already!" I order her.

"Okay okay," she snaps. "Wait. Are you doing this 'cause you haven't found a friend in the city? 'Cause you're bored, and you need a local guide? That's why you're preying on someone like me instead? Someone who's plain, vulnerable, and harmless? Someone who works at disgusting places like this—where people like you dump their glorious and extravagant fabric?"

"Dylan, I swear to god," I plead, "I would never introduce my walnut crack to you if I were here just to mess around or prey on a local guide. I've told you—your revolting charms have shackled me up, fly-

ing me back in here to attack your diva-ish whimsy. Does that sound convincing enough?”

“Oh my god,” she mutters, fazed. “You really are about to murder my life, Miss Ace Hansel.”

“Ace! Please, call me, Ace.”

“So what’s this walnut deal, anyway?”

“Claim your walnut attacks later. I’ll wait for you outside. Clinched?”

“Claimed.”



“SO WHAT MAKES YOU SMILE and happy, Dylan?” I ask the moment we’ve sat down at a coffee shop nearby *Luster*.

“You really are for real, aren’t you?” She sips her coffee, eyeing me under her dainty nose.

“It’s just a random question,” I defend my *attack*. “Just take it as a friendly stride. C’mon.”

“Well—I don’t have a—conventional answer—to that—” she murmurs, faltering—“It’s something—Um—it’s just between me—and my childhood—daydreams and dreams—so—”

Oh, god. *Childhood daydreams and dreams!* My heart pinch is on a sublime wheeze—even more critical than the romantic first glance energy panic! “Try me, Dylan,” I insist. “My answer could be just as unconventional as yours. So what’s hidden in your childhood daydreams and dreams? What’s in there that makes you smile and happy?”

“It’s embarrassing, but—” she sighs. “Anyway, it’s a—castle in the air dance with a sad princess. To a beautiful song. A very old song. *All of Lush*.”

And it stops my ticker in an instant. There it goes. I have surrendered. Without a chancy doubt. In my heart and mind. The ultimate epiphany of my *happiness* quest. Right here. Sitting across the table. Who is clueless about her enchanting effect. On my walnut.

Is this why my pumps have given in dead on? Is this how the universe animates its tricks? Is this how destiny gushes its truth into one's yearning creeps?

I sit back and smile at nowhere. The wistful smile that aches my lower abdomen. I look at her, and she slashes me with a dissolving ogle. "Whose version?" I ask. "There's a whole lot of them out there, but—which one? *Ocean Lawrie's*? *Lou Melwyn's*? Or *Zea Schiavione* and *Kai Cannon's*? I love *Zea Schiavione* and *Kai Cannon's*, though. It's got the most *forever heart spice* in it. Don't you?"

She drops her jaw, stunned! "Eeexxxcccuuussee mmmeee???!!!"

Yeah. With a big-sharp-sparkly-metal knife slicing my fragile heart to tidbits. My provoking backbone is set for life. As I'm claiming my *true love wish*—that I whispered to the kind universe when I was twelve years old—right about NOW!!! "It's my childhood wish-scape dance, too. With a prayer of finding my *true love* attached to it."

She almost lurches off her chair. "Miss Ace Hansel! No no no no! This is scary! Too scary!" She gulps down her coffee. "Goodness. I think I've just burnt down my throat." She checks the time. "I gotta go. Thanks for coffee."

"But—we just got here," I panic.

"I can't do this, Ace," she presses. "This whole thing scares the hell out of me!"

"It scares the hell out of my spines, too," I sass back. "Do you have any idea how many pounds of guts I had to pull back there just to grab your attention? I don't know, Dylan, but for some conjuring reason, I just knew deep down in my grotty walnut cracks that I had to do it, or hot-blooded sleepless nights would terrorize me. So here I am. Without regard for any sophisticated flushes that attacked you this morning. Would you be kind enough to handle that?"

She calms down. "Okay. Though it would be a crushing hand-full for me to take on, but—whatever—Sure. We can be friends."

Friends. Yeah. I'm already heartbroken. And my engagement is buffetting on my daring virtues with shame! I'll worry about its integrity later on. As I am here to herald a wish-come-true, *All of Lush*, tormented on a lion-earthed pad. "Sounds good," I shrug.

She slips out her cell phone from her backpack. "I've just gotta call someone."

"No problem," I reply. She flicks away, and—my ringtone busts into air, with a strange phone number flashing on the screen. "Oh."

"That's me," she says and hangs up.

"Oh!" I yelp, thrilled.

"I snatched it off from your file while your walnut was patiently waiting for me outside," she confesses. "Now we're friends."

"Oh," I utter in sullen whisper.

"Acc," she says, "I've never done this before."

"Me neither."

"Asking a chick like me for coffee? Of course, you haven't. God, who are you kidding? I'm pretty sure the entire country would go heart hysterical over you. And darn it, I'm spritzing like an idiot here without pride to flaunt off. I'm renting a cheap basement suite, I work for a dry-cleaning company, I'm alone, I listen to jazz music, and I write about anything that makes me feel better just to comfort my heart. That's—the excruciating picture of my life. So don't bash at me—like I'm damaging myself here and spurting about my self-esteem drama!"

"All right, lovely diva," I challenge her. "Wanna go for a rotten-story swap? Here's mine—stirring out of the walnut nutshell. Ready?"

"Like—it would blow me out of proportion," she sneers.

"I work at clothing stores, I spill coffee all over my tops when I'm on a rush, I don't really have friends except for my sweet darlings, I watch crappy videos, I read sappy books, I gobble up spicy pasta in the morning, and I—hand wash my underwear. Now—let's talk about beauty and life—" And true love! And happiness!

"Sweet darlings?"

"The girls at work," I mutter.

"You're still *all that* though," she judges on. "It wouldn't really matter what you'd tell me. You're still—the drop-dead-gorgeous—chick—that I dread—Far from my bamboos—But anyway—thank you for the honest toast. It was—refreshing—somehow."

"I'm just a walnut, Dylan," I insist. "Just a goddamn walnut cracking its way out, wishing for happiness."

She gazes at me, tearing up. "Ace—"

"I caught *that*," I dump my misery on the table—with a self-effacing tweak.

"Trust me," she replies, "it wasn't pity. I felt your heart at first glance. That's why I couldn't look at you."

I want to hold you now! "Dylan—"

"And it made me feel bad," she mumbles. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," I say. "So—can we do this again tomorrow?"

"I guess," she sighs—with a nervous rouse.

"Just don't attack me with the drop-dead-gorgeous tirade, though," I warn her.

"And don't attack me with the lovely diva confab either," she retorts.

"Clinched," I reply.

"Claimed. And it's *Zea Schiavione* and *Kai Cannon's* version," she professes, "is the answer. You may trace it all the way to my childhood history, spending summers with my grandparents on their farm in Alberta."

God, forgive me! She's a complete stranger—I know I know I know! But it would be foolish of me not to claim my *true love wish*—even just for the time being—or perhaps—courage would develop itself sooner—to make me rise the truth banner—for a liberating change of a lifetime! "Would you please—have dinner with me tonight?"

"You're begging," she replies.

“Cause I don’t want you to think I’m an aggressive puck.”

“You are an aggressive puck.”



“THE WAITER WAS LOOKING at you like—” Dylan says over dinner at a cozy Italian restaurant, “—*are you sure you’re having dinner with your personal assistant? Right here? At our rococo restaurant? Or maybe her guts are itching for some fast food takeout instead. Wouldn’t you wanna double check it with her first or what?*”

“He wasn’t looking at me like that,” I protest. “Stop brewing.”

“Of course he was,” she insists. “He let out a soft snort, for crying out loud. I heard it, and it provoked my human buzzer.”

“How’s the food?” I scuttle away from her rhetoric.

“The potatoes in this pasta taste like the potatoes from my grandmother’s kitchen,” she replies. “And I can’t believe this bowl is worth like 24 kilos of potatoes that I can get from that Asian store nearby my place. My goodness. This is ridiculous.”

“We’ll go to your favorite restaurant next time then,” I suggest.

“I don’t have one, Ace. I go for random stuff. Pastries, pudding, veggies, pizza, salad—anything edible—but meat! Though fish and dairies are fine once in a while. Oh, and cookies, too. As long as it revitalizes me, that’s all that matters, really. And I can get on with my day.”

“Which one are you? Potato or carrot?”

“Potato. Boring, ordinary, and bland. You?”

“Hold on. Don’t attack me yet. You’re not boring, and certainly not bland either. You’re revolting and a diva. Ordinary? Nope. You’re an old soul big crunch. You can’t be ordinary.”

“We’ve just met,” she stretches. “How could you say that? Look at me, Ace. I look like I’m about to clean your house, for god’s sake. And *that* waiter thinks so, too. So don’t comfort my potato knickknack here just to make me feel better.”

“Oh, please, Dylan,” I argue. “*All of Lush* has given me one in a billion ratio. In our generation, at least. That’s a huge deal. In an old soul big crunch kind of way that none of those walnuts out there would ever foxtrot along.”

“Yeah. But that’s not important. This—” —she points into her face— “—is important. This exterior dressing that empowers all the status glides.”

“You’re pretty and interesting,” I take a sip of my iced tea. “What are you so insecure about?”

“I don’t know why you see me that way,” she replies. “I find it appalling that you’re so eager to make friends with someone like me when I don’t have any caliber bolstering out of my life situation here.”

“I’m a carrot,” I say, leaning forward. “Not only a walnut, but a carrot. And not just a carrot, but a baby carrot. Do you know what that means?”

“You’re only soap sudding me up.”

“I wear clothes that I like ‘cause they give me wonderful thoughts. Like, when my parents took me to Disneyland for the first time. I wear makeup ‘cause it impresses the Ace Hansel ritzy reputation—the business thrill Ace Hansel ritzy reputation. And I wear my hair down ‘cause it’s the only pride I’ve got that never lies. That’s what a baby carrot means.”

She gapes at me. “Well, you’re not bad for a baby carrot at all.”

“Thank you,” I respond. “Have I shut off your insecurities yet?”

“Claimed.”

“Clinched.”

“I just don’t wanna show myself to you once a pimple sits on my face, so—” she blasts.

“Oh my goodness, babe,” I giggle. “I could help you with that. Don’t worry.”

“No. That would be embarrassing. Just stay away once it pops on. I’ll let you know, anyway.”

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Dylan. I like what I see. 'Cause it makes me feel something."

"Like what?" she cowers.

"Like," I sigh, "I wanna have the *All of Lush* dance with you."

"Ace," she utters in a warning pitch, "can we please not mention the *song* anymore? It's creeping me out both ways."

"And you think you're the only one?" I bounce back. "Claim the flashback, Dylan, but I already wanted to be closer to you even before the *All of Lush* revelation. What does that mean in your books?"

"It means we can be good friends," she replies, bursting with self-possession, "and I can be your local guide here in Toronto anytime. Yeah. No problem. I'm all for it."

"Well," I gasp, "in my books, it means—I would like to get to know you more."

"Sure. I can be great friends with a walnut and baby carrot. You're cool, anyway."

Dear *true love wish*: my crushed walnut heart must only be confined in my formidable truth—the discreet engagement! And I'm cheating on the vicious monster—with the lovely diva who refuses to have the *All of Lush* dance with me! I might as well just kiss *happiness* goodbye and skylark away with my hair down—so I would have something worthwhile to share with the world. "I'd just want you to be more comfortable around me," I declare. "It's one of the top requirements to make this whole thing work for both of us."

"Ace, I'm not stupid. I know what you're trying to achieve out of this. But I gotta tell you now—*Don't be stupid*. Because you do not belong anywhere in my world. You only belong in my beautiful dream. And even if a miracle would muscle in to lock us up in the *All of Lush* dance, I would still be haunted by fears of losing you anytime any day. We'd both be miserable, and then I would end up killing myself or something. So let's just jump into the safe net and get to know each other under friendship rules. Claimed?"

"Clinched," I gulp down my weeps.

She slips out a 100-dollar bill from her wallet and rests it on the table. "There's my share."

"Dylan, it's on me," I flit up. "What are you doing? Keep it."

"It will shut off one of my screaming insecurities," she reasons. "Please. Allow me. Okay?" She sips her drink and rises. "I'm sorry. Just beat from work. I'll buzz you in as soon as I get home. Thank you for the wonderful evening, walnut." She picks up her backpack and dashes out of the restaurant.

Dear *true love wish*: do not make me cry! Goddammit!



I THROW MYSELF INTO my murky hotel room and release the ugliest cry. I should have just ignored my dirty laundry this morning instead. I should have just—But no! It was meant to happen. We were meant to meet. Preordained by the song that binds true love and happiness. I must fight for it! I must claim my *true love wish*! I must make her mine! But—

HOW???

As I attempt to press Dylan's number, Alex whoops through.

Oh, god. I am a criminal. A sham. A humongous beastly shark that bites off the innocent sapphic hearts. I am a teeny-tiny town—so tiny—that cannot be found on the country's map anymore. Even with the aid of a sorcerous magnifying glass.

I wipe off my tears and compose a chin-up voice. "Hey, you!" I pick up her call.

"Hey, goddess," she whispers through my ear. "Please, don't relish Toronto that much. You haven't texted me all day."

"I'm sorry," I reply and plunge into the sofa chair. "I just got distracted by its—dreamy—rush—or whatever."

"Vancouver is *the* dreamy rush," she utters.

"I guess," I gasp, then feel my head, as Dylan's silhouette dances in front of my dreamy eyes.

"What's the matter?" she wonders. "You sound cold stiff."

"Migraine. Sorry."

"Take an aspirin then."

"I will. Thanks."

"What did you do all day long, anyway?"

"Oh. Just out and about."

"Out and about, and then all of a sudden, you don't feel like talking to me anymore? What the fuck is going on?"

"Alex—" I always have to find ways to invigorate her *bed of roses*. As she also shares Dylan's fears—losing me anytime any day—"—I miss—"—Oh god. I cannot pretend anymore!

She languishes. "I don't know why I have this weird feeling of you running away from me right now. I swear to god, Ace. I swear to god. I'd hang myself to death."

"I'll be home soon," I say, bringing down my tears. "Stop being so dramatic. God. Your kick is too much to bear, Alex. It's killing me."

"All right," she says. "Listen, there's going to be a formal grand opening party this Friday night—"

"How many grand opening parties do you have to throw in, anyway? Monday was already a splash. There is no need for a formal one anymore." It's jeopardizing my *Dylan moments*! That's why I'm under protest! I am so sorry!

"It's for great luck," she yelps. "Why are you pissed?"

"Cause it was not stamped on the original plan. I've already got something else in mind, and I don't wanna miss it."

"Ace, please tell me you're not screwing around behind my back."

I have to divulge a droplet of Dylan bombshell—at least! "I've made a new friend. She works nearby the hotel, and she's fun. I'd rather hang out with her than exchange fake hugs and kisses in an upscale room packed with walnuts. Would that be okay?"

“Your enormous love for humanity is getting worse everyday,” she fires up, “and I can’t fucking deal with it anymore! Now you’re making friends with some—bimbo? You better nip this in the bud right now, or I’m snatching you outta there in no time! You got that?”

“Alex,” I rage, “I’ve just met the one that I’d like to dance *All of Lush* with.”

“Your flaky—psychotic – *All of Lush*—phantom?”

My grits have just been detonated. “That’s right, Alex. My flaky psychotic *All of Lush* phantom. Also known as my *true love wish*. Also known as destiny. Also known as happiness. And her name is Dylan. Now we can break off the engagement, so I can let my hair down forever, because this walnut is already tired of tying her hair up to suit your desires. Am I fired yet? Good!”

Poor Alex. Exploding into a wail. “Okay okay! You can hang out with her! Just don’t leave me!”

“Alex,” I weep, “I—respect you. And I will always be there for you. But I’m already tired. I have to let my hair down now. It’s about time.”

“No, Ace!” she objects. “You are not going to leave me! You’d be crazy enough to do that! I’ve given you everything, for fuck sakes! My heart! A name! Luxuries! Reputation! Every fucking thing in the world! So don’t you dare spit on me like this, goddammit!”

“And I never asked for any of it,” I reply. “It was *us* making silly breakfast and catching butterflies that—that—” —no! You spruced me up with unrelenting fears! That’s why I had to dump myself into your disgusting schemes!—“—not the glitz that you’ve given me. Well, I can’t do it anymore. I’m not brave enough for this anymore. And I’ve just realized it now.”

“You can’t do this to me, Ace!” she howls into my ear. “I shall see you tomorrow!”

“Alex, please!” I beg. “I’ll see you once I get home. I just need my own time right now. Then we’ll talk—Please—?”

“Okay!” she yelps. “Just don’t leave me!”

“Good night, Alex.” And I hang up.



CHAPTER TWO

March 21, 2019. Thursday.

The urgent drive to win Dylan's heart flees me into *Luster* at around 9AM with breakfast in hand. She flinches away from the computer and pouts, displaying her somber and puffy-red eyes. I rest the takeout meal and the cup of coffee on the counter as I put her rugged face under a microscope. "What the hell happened to you?" I interrogate in a demanding air.

"You," she mutters.

"What?" I snap.

"Just stay away from me, Ace," she sobs. "I don't want to get to know you anymore."

"Excuse me? Does this have something to do with your *screaming insecurities* again?"

"Look, I still don't know you, all right? But it's easy to fall in love with you. It's dangerous. It's a total suicide for me. I can't do this."

"Stop brewing," I yelp. "I got you pancakes and coffee. What did you do last night, anyway? Why do you look like you've been attacked by goblins?"

"I cried," she mumbles.

"Over what?"

"Cause I don't wanna feel something for you. I don't wanna go crazy. I don't wanna murder myself."

"Will you stop acting like some paranoid goat already? Is this why you didn't buzz me in?"

"I'm sorry."

"You made me cry, too."

"You're a lunatic."

"What should I do to make you believe that I'm for real, Dylan? Tell me. 'Cause I hate to see you brewing around, despising and questioning my guts while I *walnut* against your fears. What should I do?"

"Just stay away."

"You know there is no way in hell that I'd do that," I point out. "I have three things tanking up on my mind right now—get to know you, get closer to you, and get you to dance with me. Then you decide. Whether I've convinced you enough to share the dance floor with me—or I'd still scare you away. For now—don't worry about losing me anytime of the day 'cause it would never happen, anyway. Maybe not until I would have to fly back home. But it's the least of our worries, really. 'Cause I wouldn't be this miserable pop-in walnut if you were just some boring, ordinary, bland potato. Clinched?"

"Claimed," she agrees. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

"Yeah," I reply. "I've had oatmeal and some apple slices."

"Cool," she says. "I have to do my groceries after work, though. My human impulses drilled on like a construction machine last night, so I did a lot of deep cleaning in my suite, and threw out all the rotten stuff from my fridge, too. And this was while I was thrilling out yowls over you. I thought it would work, but—"

"Dylan," I say, holding her hand, "don't ever hurt yourself like that again. You promise?"

"I don't know, Ace," she sighs.

"Just say it!"

"Okay okay! God!"

"Just say *the words*."

"I promise."

"Clinched," I yelp.

"Claimed," she seconds.

"I'll help you with grocery shopping later."

"Don't you have something rewarding to do?"

"Keep discriminating against my walnut, and I'd terrorize you more. So shut up."

"This miracle is just blaring out of my panic siren, all right?"

"You waltzed in to work with an empty stomach, didn't you?" I brush off her guff.

"Yeah," she replies.

"Now go on and revitalize your day. Eat."

"Thank you for breakfast."

"Anytime."



"WHY ARE YOU TAKING a cart for?" Dylan protests. We have just whirled into a huge grocery store. "Put it back. I don't need an entire store hoarding around my place. Just a basket is fine."

I snatch a basket from the stack. "Okay. C'mon."

"What are you doing?" she whines.

"I'm holding an empty basket," I reply. "Now let's fill it up."

"It's *my* groceries, Ace."

"It's *ours* now."

"Since when?"

"Since now."

"Since when did you make *that* alarming decision?"

"Since I thought of making you pasta. Do you like something spicy?"

"Wait wait wait wait wait—wait minute here!" she attacks on. "You're telling me—?"

"I'm going home with you," I invite myself. "And I'll make us pasta for dinner."

She winces. "Ace—"

I wrap my arm around her shoulders. “Aw, come on, babe. Don’t rationalize your insecurities anymore. I’m sick of it. Let’s go.”

“I live in a squealing neighborhood,” she explains, as we approach the isles. “And it’s not a cozy basement suite. I only have one tiny table and one tiny chair. I’m just in bed most of the time.”

“Picnic style—okay?” I suggest.

“I guess,” she shrugs. “But Ace—it’s still embarrassing. I mean—”

“Three—two—one—” I warn her.

“What was the countdown for?”

“For you to shut up already.”

“I’m just scared to—fall in love—with you—”

“Don’t be. I’m not. I’m not scared to fall in love with you.”

“Goodness,” she yelps. “I gotta give you my parents’ contact info just in case I’d kill myself in the middle of this illusion.”

“It is NOT an illusion,” I affirm. “It’s me attacking you with my walnut crack even before the *All of Lush* confirmation. So I think I’d kill myself first if you wouldn’t give *this* a chance. If you wouldn’t give—*us*—a chance. Do you feel better now?”

“Not really,” she murmurs. “It’s just that—”

“Dylan,” I gasp, interrupting her, “is there any way for you to shut up and face the music? Be a little brave? Because I have no intention of playing around and messing with your heart. It would be a waste of time. For both of us. I’m here—with you—because my heart desires to be here. And for the first time in my life—I’m fearless. Like—walnut and baby carrot—kind of fearless. Would you be kind enough to believe that?”

She considers it. “Yeah. I guess that sounds convincing enough.”

I plant a smack on her head. “Hmm. Your hair smells great. What brand of shampoo do you use?”

“Just something random,” she pouts. “My memory doesn’t normally stick around for those things.”

“You’re a cutie,” I giggle. “So do you like something spicy?”

"What are you making, anyway?"

"Spicy prawn linguine pasta."

"I've never heard of that before."

"You'll love it! You're okay with seafoods, though?"

"It's cool." She smiles at me—the only beguiling smile that mesmerizes my spiralled breaths.

I am already falling in love.



DYLAN'S NEIGHBORHOOD is contrary to her bazooka description. It may look sketchy along the main avenue, but trailing down to a row of middle-class houses piles me up without cringing needles pinning into my arteries. Not only do I feel comfortable, the high-spunk thought of living here harasses me in an instant. Uh-oh. I am such a presumptuous destiny bugger.

Dylan, dance with me now! Please! My lower abdomen already aches inside All of Lush lyrics and melody! Just do something—wild—god-dammit!

We take a turn to the left and march through the separate entrance of a cushy house, then she leads me into her basement suite and turns the light on. I pause to check out a minimalist's pad: a snug bed with a laptop resting on it, a short-legged side table, a small drawer—then—one tiny chair and one tiny table erecting with hyped humility on the dining area floor. It's cream white and clean. With a garden scent lurking in the air.

"I've told you—" she shies away, "—it's embarrassing—"

I grin. "Oh, baby. I love it." I march into the kitchen and place the heavy grocery bags on the counter, as she watches me from the doorway—frozen in complete disbelief. "What's wrong?" I yelp.

She closes the door behind her and joins me, then dunks the rest of the items next to my heaps. "The last time I invited someone over was almost three years ago, and it was while I was still in Alberta. We only

dated for a few months, then she dumped me for a dude. She was bi. And that was the last time I was with someone. Now this is scaring me, like one of those contestants in a steak-eating tournament who happens to be vegan.”

“I’m here to disinfect bad luck,” I reply. “Deal with it, and just let it grind.”

A text message sounds off on her cell phone. “Ooh.” She checks it with a cold dash.

I start unloading the bags. “What’s up?”

“It’s my high-school best friend’s ex-girlfriend’s best friend,” she informs me. “She’s gonna be in town pretty soon. From Detroit.” A guilty dub sprinkles in her eyes. “They’re—setting us up.”

“Pardon me?” I shrill.

“We’ve been talking for a while,” she confesses. “Though I’ve already told her—I’m not interested—but she figured we should see each other first before I’d go for the total ditch. It’s kind of like—a psychogenic venture, so—we’ll see—.”

I collect my cool. “Do you have a picture of her?” She browses through her phone and shows me a photo of a pretty girl who seems to be a part of our demographic age group. Now she is—she is—going to be my *mortal enemy*! Oh god. Now I understand the ferocious fear—of losing somebody you love—with all the crowning romance granted by the universe—anytime and any day! “What’s her name?”

“Sarah,” she replies.

“Sarah what?” I investigate.

“Her last name sounds a bit complicated to pronounce. Can’t remember.”

“So what’s not to like about her then? Her last name?”

“She talks about pigeons a lot,” she answers. “She devours pork. She hates Jazz. She always interrupts me when I’m bragging about my favorite songs and how I’d stand up for myself at work. And she has a string of desires for butch lesbians.”

"Well then—how come she's into you all of a sudden?"

"Because a psychic advised her that she was destined to be with someone—like me—Someone like me—that *she must settle for*—kind of—thing. Then she told my high-school best friend about her clairvoyant trip, and they got me into the voodoo spin, so—"

"I don't want you to see her," I flare up.

"But – Ace—" she stammers, "—the girl seems serious about meeting me—"

"When is she coming?" I grunt.

"Friday next week."

"How long is she in town for?"

"Twelve days."

"TWELVE DAYS??? IS SHE STAYING HERE WITH YOU??? RIGHT HERE??? AT YOUR PLACE???"

"Yeah." She is about to burst into tears.

"I'm cancelling my flight then," I simmer down.

"I'm sorry," she gives in. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about this."

"Clinch it up, Dylan," I rouse on. "I'm hanging on to my *All of Lush* dance, and I am not handing you over to a girl, with a Gordian last name, who believes her psychic's shuck and jive, then import herself into the country!"

"But Ace—" she begs, "—I just wanna be nice and accommodating, that's all."

"You tell her you've already met someone," I insist. "You've found your *All of Lush destiny*, and you can't junk it out of the way no matter what her psychic says!"

"I can't tell her that," she objects.

"Why not?" I convulse.

"BECAUSE SOMEONE LIKE YOU CAN NEVER BE MINE!!! SOMEONE LIKE YOU CAN ONLY BREATHE IN MY ILLUSION!!! SOMEONE LIKE YOU—!!!"

"Shut up!" I interrupt her, trembling. "I'm here to make pasta for YOU! For US! My heart took me here! NOT MY SKIN!" And I whimper like a pregnant cow, giving birth for the first time.

"Ace, I'm still scared," she weeps along.

"I'm scared, too," I reply. "That I'd lose you anytime—any day—"

"You have no right to steal off my fears," she says.

"Like, you're the only one here who was born with a heart!" I blurt out. "You've gotta get rid of Sarah. Right now. I mean it."

"Ace, we're still getting to know each other, for god's sake. And I'm not being a smug here or anything, I'm just saying—I respect Sarah's decision to meet me. The same way as I labor my way out of my screaming insecurities so I would finally have enough courage to face—*our* music."

"Okay. But I want a formal introduction."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Me. Your *All of Lush*."

"Okay."

"And—the walnut—is entitled to crack around wherever you go."

"Ace!" she yelps.

I submerge back to my grocery task. "I'm all set, Dylan. I—am—all—set!"



TRANCING ON A PICNIC blanket as we chow down spicy prawn linguine pasta uncovers more truths in me: a simple and lovely life, only the right person tickles a heart in full bliss, and destiny chooses the perfect time to fall in love.

"I'm sorry if I've made you sprawl on the floor," Dylan blanches. "You can have the table and the chair, though. Really. I can just—"

"Dylan," I interrupt her, "I asked for us to do this. You've got nothing to apologize for. I love it. And I'll do it over and over again. With you."

She smiles. “The pasta is luscious. Thank you.”

“Anytime,” I reply.

“Don’t cancel your flight, Ace. We’ll buzz each other, anyways.”

“I don’t trust your buzz anymore. I’m staying ‘cause I’m a lunatic walnut. And I’ll make sure we’ll make it to the dance floor. Clinched. Done.”

“What has brought you into town?” she asks.

“Work expansion,” I reply, looking away—uncomfortable much—Alex—the discreet engagement—letting my hair down—Argh! “Grand opening. I just had to cut a ribbon and kiss them all goodbye.”

“You can’t stick around Toronto longer, Ace. You’ve got life waiting for you in Vancouver, and your boss would freak out if—”

“She’ll be fine. I’ll take care of it.”

She sifts through my testy response. “Your sweet darlings at work,” she recalls. “I bet they’ve all been in love with you, huh?”

“I don’t know,” I shrug. “They just melt me away with their affectionate gestures, that’s all.”

“They’re all in love with you. They’re just terrified to drop it.”

“Maybe that’s just how they engage with me.”

“Any human in the entire universe can fall in love with you in a snap, Ace. You own all the beautiful and kind adjectives bouncing out of a dictionary, for god’s sake. You’re too—GORGEOUS IN EVERYTHING—which makes our lives too—PAINFUL—to bear! I don’t wanna end up in a suicidal pit, all right? I love my parents that much! Pardon me for bringing *it* up again, but it’s been deteriorating my gooey jello principles since you’ve thundered into my world for the first time.”

“Dylan, you’re scaring all the wild animals with your famous hippo pouts, your gooey jello principles are *just* slithering around, looking for a brand new home to gratify their truth, AND your parents would not appreciate it if you’d keep on kicking me to the curb, accusing me of not

being genuine enough all because of the way I look. Now that's some serious discrimination punch you've been jabbing around me."

"Name one sensible mind who would believe that someone like you could like me," she assaults on. "Anyone. From your *walnut world*. Name one, Ace. Then I'd probably feel better."

A piece of prawn struggles its way down into my throat. "My—" I pause and sip my red wine. "—Um—my parents—"

"I knew it," she mumbles, swiveling away.

"Dylan," I beg, "can we please not talk about *my world* anymore?"

"It's part of the whole package."

"The whole package is RIGHT HERE, having spicy prawn linguine pasta with you, fighting her way around to get you to the dance floor, and no Sarah from Detroit could jump in and tug you away all because her psychic told her to."

"I bet, your boss would also die for you," she guesses. "Who wouldn't? It's so easy to fall in love with you, for crying out loud. Has she been in love with you, too?"

Oh, god. I would rather bask in a pool of cornflakes than axing a dark truth in front of my *All of Lush true love wish*. "She's been—in love with me. Yes."

"I knew it." She sets her bowl down and sips her peppermint tea. "She's stunning, fashionable, super rich, untouchable, and the elite society worships her. Am I right?"

"She's one of those," I gasp. "Yes." I panic—"Dylan, STOP! JUST STOP! OKAY? I DON'T WANNA TALK ABOUT HER RIGHT NOW! PLEASE RESPECT THAT!"

"You're angry 'cause I've just caught your truth!" she grills on. "And how could you possibly not fall in love with a perfect woman who, not only owns all the glamorous corners blitzing across the country, but can also *own*—romance practically everywhere? Holy mother of god! You fell in love with her too, didn't you?"

"You're judging me," I fire back. "I've got conceited and shallow morals just because I look like THIS! Fine, here's the truth. Yes, she pursued me, like the queen of all bugs, we ended up making silly breakfast meals and running around parks to catch butterflies, I took a flu shot and got really sick instead that she dropped all her engagements just to be by my side until I got better, and that is how she got me! That is how she got my—*fears*."

"Then what happened?" Her curiosity fuses up.

"I gave in," I reply. "It happened fast. The first stage of our relationship was fine. I wasn't happy, never ever happy, but it was more of a—safe curb—somehow. She proposed—and *I had to say yes*—out of complete terror. Then she became a vicious monster—and I had been meaning to play hooky from her—but I just couldn't find the courage to—until—last night."

"You broke off the engagement last night?" she hisses.

"Yeah, and she wouldn't accept it!" I stir up. "But I don't wanna be her goddamn puppet anymore, I can't hurt my heart much longer, I want *happiness* to own me, and my *true love wish* is crying for justice!"

"And she wouldn't accept it, which means, you're still engaged, and she could turn up anytime to harass you or do something vicious to make your life a complete living hell. Never mind what she would do to me if she ever found out—"

"I've already told her about you."

"Pardon me???"

"Dylan, you don't understand. It's not just about you and *All of Lush*, okay? I've gotta let my hair down now, get real, and be truly happy. It's about time to respect myself."

"You're really good at making me feel so bad."

"Can I sleep over?"

"NO!" she yelps. "I'm calling a cab to take you back to your hotel, and I'll come with you just to make sure you get there safe."

A menacing thought streams in. "Fine."

"Why are you smiling like that?" she hashesh.

"Like what?" I play dumb.

"Like, you're about to smash 9-foot cake all over me."

"I'm just relieved that we've had *the* talk, that's all. Sarah from Detroit. My boss. It's so real, and it makes me smile."



THE CAB PULLS UP IN front of the hotel, and Dylan drafts out some bills from her wallet in an instant. "Don't you dare do that again," I clue in. "Here you go, sir." Cash payment is the way to whip out my walnut streak.

"Hang on," the taxi driver says. "I think I'm short on some bills here for change. You got cards, by any chance?"

"That's okay," I reply. "Don't worry about it. It's your lucky night."

"Thank you!" he cheers. "Thank you so much! Have a good night, ladies!"

"You too, sir," I respond, then turn to Dylan, who ducks away with a pout. "C'mon."

"I'm going back home," she mumbles.

"Have a drink with me for a bit," I insist. "C'mon."

"Ace—" Her lips throb.

"What are you so scared about?" I say. "Just a drink. Nothing's gonna happen. *We're not like that*. C'mon."

"This is the 9-foot cake, isn't it?" she suspects.

"Oh, Dylan," I giggle. "You're the only one who wakes up my bones and spins them around until they crack open." I hold her hand. "C'mon. Let's go."

We slide out of the cab. "Oh my goodness, Ace." She takes a glimpse of the grand entrance. "I've never been to a 5-star hotel before."

"Well, this isn't life, babe," I reply. "It's just some absurd lifestyle that people like me must wake up from." I drag her inside, wrapping my

hand around her waist. Her clean and refreshing scent lunges into my lower abdomen. Goddammit!

“Do you like this kind of lifestyle, though?” she asks. Such pure innocence! Argh!

“Sometimes,” I answer. “But I don’t know—I just don’t find any—authenticity sparkling out of it 99% of the time, though. It’s like some dummy game that you’ve got to figure out which one deserves a genuine smile or a momentous minute of your life.” We take the elevator and exchange looks. “Nothing’s gonna happen, Dylan,” I laugh. “Don’t be a nervous wreck.”

“You’ve just been making me do things that I haven’t done before,” she rats on.

“That would be my pledge, too.”

“Ace, let’s not do anything funny, okay? I’m telling you, I love my parents so much.”

“It’s just a drink. It wouldn’t turn us into sexual mongers. Our heads are still attached to our necks. And *we’re not like that*. Do you trust me?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

We step out of the elevator and tour down the hallway. “Have you ever heard of a drabble?” I ask.

“I’d do it sometimes,” she replies. “But I always end up in a frustrated crunch, with my name slammed on it as *dimwit*.”

I click my hotel room door open with the card key, and we enter. She pauses and schemes her eyes around the deluxe suite—dumb-founded. I shut the door and plop my purse on the side table, then stand in front of her. “We’re gonna play drabbles,” I say.

She stares at me, immobilized. “Ace, I don’t like this feeling.”

I dismiss her apprehension. “What would you like to drink?” I dart towards the fridge. “Is coffee liqueur okay? Cooler? Beer? There’s also wine, if you want. Or—iced tea? Pop?”

“I feel like—I’m about to puke,” she totters.

"Dylan, will you stop it, please? My god. Just take a seat and relax."

"I'm in a 5-star hotel room with the most beautiful woman I have ever seen—and met in my godawful life! How am I supposed to relax my muscles here? This is my major catastrophe, Ace! So I am sorry for smashing myself into the escape route, like right now!"

"We're gonna have a drink and play drabbles. That's what we're gonna do. Stop acting like, we're about to roll in bed together and ruin each other's lives. That is not why I dragged you in here. We may have those—urges and impulses cramming around our lower abdomens for each other—" *When can I hold you and make you mine?* "—but *we are not like that* at all, Dylan. And you know it."

"We are—romantic," she stammers. "We have *All of Lush* playing all the way from our innocence. We're getting to know each other. We're learning each other's dance steps. I know. I'm sorry."

Dear *true love wish*: I should have found her a long time ago. Why did you have to make me suffer first? Oh, and yet—this is even more challenging—in the name of—losing each other—anytime and any day. "Iced tea?" I offer, smiling.

She throws herself into the sofa chair. "Yes, please." I grab a can and pop it open, then hand it to her. "Thanks," she says. "So what's this drabble thing, anyway?"

"The theme is—a beautiful moment that we wish to happen in the future—being with each other," I explain, pouring a glass of red wine. "I'm keeping yours. You're keeping mine. And we'd only read it by the time either one of us—under some wicked circumstances— would have to say goodbye—for good."

"Goodness, Ace," she shimmies. "You're making me feel so bad again."

"This is not to make each other feel bad, Dylan," I justify. "This would motivate us to get to the dance floor. Clinched?"

"Claimed," she yelps.



A DRABBLE. A STORY in one hundred words. Well, there is nothing fictional about what I'm scribbling across this 5-star hotel stationery—as the universe contrives with my heart. For I will make sure—in honor of our *All of Lush* dance—nothing will get in the way between me and her. Nothing. Not Sarah with a Gordian last name. Not Toronto. Not Vancouver. NOT EVEN THE VICIOUS MONSTER!!!

Dylan is delved into the writing duty as if she has to defend a dissertation in a room full of academic committee. It amuses my reveries to catch glimpses of her pouting away and brooding over a wish. Though there are occasions when she draws a whimsical smile on her face while poking her forehead with the pen. In this moment alone, happiness owns me. I can only hope that she feels the same way, too. *My true love wish. Her castle in the air dance with a princess.* Our dreams and wishes have already come true. *Only my world and her world are in the way. Along with fears—of losing each other—anytime and any day.*

I fold my drabble and seal it up in a small envelope, then jot down 'For my one and only LUSH, Dylan'! I turn to her, and she's also done at once. We look at each other and rise from our seats, then meet halfway across the room and stand face to face. We exchange envelopes and read the addressed inked words.

GASPS!!!

She wrote: *For my one and only LUSH, Ace!*

She is dead-shocked that she limps back into the sofa chair. As for me—?

Dear *true love wish*: I cannot contain myself anymore, but I am in tears of joy, and I want to kiss her—RIGHT NOW! But I know—oh, god—I know that it would terrify her to death! How dare you, Dylan! How dare you!

"Okay, now—" she pants, "—this is scary! Like people are already preparing for my funeral!"

I finish my red wine in one big gulp. "I have an idea!"

"I don't wanna go for your ideas anymore, Ace," she dissolves into tears. "Okay! Okay! There it is! Love signs have been whooping us around! But we can't change our lives for each other—just like that—all because of the song, the childhood dreams and wishes, the drabbles, and everything else that might scare the hell out of us later on, then we would end up hating the universe and the metaphysical blooms, with a load of regrets for plummeting ourselves into a romantic jungle that would not even guarantee us a happy future together!"

I scud towards her and kneel down. "Listen to me, Dylan."

"NO!" she snaps.

"Listen to me, goddammit!" I yell at her, and she calms down. "Would you—be kind enough—to accept me for who I am? A walnut? A baby carrot? The one who lets her hair down 'cause it's the only thing she's got that never lies?"

She wipes away her tears with the back of her hand and stares down at me. "Ace," she mutters, as her lips teeter, "it's easy to fall in love with you, okay? And I'm afraid I'm already falling in love, and it hurts me. Because I'm terrified that I'd lose you anytime and any day. It makes me sick to my stomach, and this greatest fear rushes around my blood streams. Besides, there is no way that I could ever get someone like you to love me for real. No way. I would have to visit all the churches around the world first before such miracle could ever happen."

I hold her hand and give in to my heartaches. "Dylan," I weep, looking up at her, "I introduced myself as a walnut because I just wanted you to look at me. Before that, you attacked my heart with pouts and a lot of eye-rolling. I already knew I had to be with you. Even before *All of Lush* danced in. Despite the defensive shield that you put on when I dropped off my stupid clothes, I could feel your true heart and pure joy for life. Even your innocent dreams and wishes. That's why I did what I was meant to do. That's why I never left you alone. That's why we're here now. And I believe—it's not really about how long we've known each other. It's about how you've cracked my walnut in an instant, and

how you've switched on your diva alarms upon catching a piece out of all my truths—So—would you be kind enough to accept me—for who I am?”

“I don't know, Ace,” she sighs. “There's Toronto. There's Vancouver. Your reputation. Your glamorous life. Your career. Your engagement. Your boss—”

I thud away and nab the bottle of red wine, then take a sip. “I'm only asking you one question, and you're enumerating all my crap instead.”

“Because it's too much for my SCREAMING INSECURITIES, all right??? IT'S TOO MUCH!!!”

“Then it's not my goddamn problem anymore, Dylan, 'cause I'm right here, and I'm willing to give this a chance!”

“How exactly are you gonna give this a chance? How? Moving here? Turning your back on everything that excites your world? That makes you a complete freaking lunatic if you would do that!”

“You really think of me as a shallow, lunatic chick, huh? That's just what I am. A shallow, lunatic chick. Nothing else. All because of the world that you see through my clothes, how I walk, and this 5-star hotel room. Never mind me letting my hair down. Never mind me being a walnut and baby carrot. That's just how you see me, Dylan. A shallow, lunatic chick. You slap all your screaming insecurities and your fears in my face all the time. Maybe I should slap mine in yours as well. I'm insecure because I can never be happy—People fall in love with me because of my looks and my sensitivity—and I don't have something meaningful in my life except for my parents. My fears? Wondering about what it would feel like to be loved by somebody who makes my heart tingle. Wondering about the dance. Wondering about being with you—So I'm sorry if that makes me a shallow, lunatic chick! I can never be enough. I will never be enough for you.”

“I'm sorry,” she mumbles, contemplating. “I'll try really hard here.”

“So are you gonna listen to my idea or what?” I hound her.

She gets up and steps closer. “Okay. What is it?”

"I'll fly back home on Tuesday," I say, "to take care of everything. Get Alex out of the way, talk to my parents, make the sweet darlings understand, and sort other things out. Once it's all clear, I'm back here by the end of the month, then you and I can give *us* a chance—The chance to claim our childhood dreams and wishes. And while I'm away, you must work through your screaming insecurities and fears. Oh, and—get rid of the Detroit girl—ASAP! Clinched?"

"What if you wouldn't make it by the end of the month?" she worries.

"Then—" I sigh, "—something—vicious must have come up and—"

"And then I would have to read your drabble," she sobs.

I caress her face. "Dylan, please, don't say that. I'll make sure to get to you, okay? Is that clinched yet?"

"Claimed," she mumbles.

I lock her in my arms, and she welcomes it with a pulsating squeeze. I smile at happiness and kiss her on the cheek, then she responds with her invigorating lips glowing on my right visage.

Dear *true love wish*: Bring me back to her by the end of the month! Or even – SOONER! NO MATTER WHAT!

Please please please please please!



CHAPTER THREE

March 22, 2019. Friday.

“So how’s the dreamy rush going?” Alex is poised at the foot of the bed, puffing a slim cigarette—her pricey sophisticated tobacco brand. This grandiose, beautiful, powerful, cunning, and elite woman in her mid-40s—openly gay—(—yet she has to put up with my relationship signature because of her passionate love for me—)—broke into my hotel room while I was dancing with Dylan in a fairy-tale dream.

I check the time. It’s past 9 o’clock in the morning. Dylan has just come in to work. Bringing her breakfast consumes me more than booting myself into a panic spotlight over Alex Avery’s surprise appearance. “What time did you break in?” I sit up and rub my eyes—just to make sure I’m not stuck in a simulated nightmare.

“Just a little while ago,” she replies. “Aren’t you even gonna give me a kiss?”

“I just woke up, Alex,” I groan. She draws closer and sits on the bed, then runs her forefinger across my face and leans in—to seek for my kiss—Disgust plucks me out, onto the floor—right away! And the panic spotlight flames up! “I’ve told you, it’s done!” I blast. “The engagement is off! I can’t be with you anymore! I cannot stay with a monster, Alex! You can fire me all you want! I don’t care! Just stay away from me! You make me sick!”

She simpers and takes a graceful puff. Oh, god. I see—something—VICIOUS—is about to happen! Please please please please please! Make her go away! And keep my *true love wish* safe! “Your

dad has been such a highly regarded therapist that he's got most of my prominent friends as his devoted clients for years," she chuckles.

"Alex," I gasp, pleading, "please leave my dad out of this."

"And your mom!" She ascends from the bed and twirls to me. "It must be impressively sweet that she always lands lucrative accounts, and has become a major-league advertising executive—all of a sudden—with my little big-shot influence, of course."

"LEAVE MY PARENTS OUT OF THIS!!!" I scream.

"I'm not finished yet, my love," she laughs.

"Just kill me, Alex!" I cry out. "Slit my throat! Get me assassinated! Just don't you touch my parents!"

"We'll get to that. Just—allow me to finish my speech first. It was only—you know—a little dabble—It's gonna get more exciting now. Are you ready?"

"Kill me now. That's just what I want you to do."

"You got pancakes and coffee from a high-end brunch restaurant, then delivered it to her yourself," she shells out. "Very romantic, huh, my love?"

"You got me followed???" I dread.

"Grocery shopping was sweet. Now we know where she lives. Lovely neighborhood, indeed. Uhm. Name, Dylan Dawson. 27 years old. Born and raised in Sherwood Park, Alberta. Only graduated high school. Smart. Records are clean. Bless her. Moved here about two years ago. Father, David Dawson, works for a distinguished construction company. Mother, Beverly Dawson, is an early childhood educator. Both still reside on Oak Street, same province—I hired the top private investigator in town—He just missed out on the part when you brought her up here—into this fucking 5-star hotel room that I paid for!"

"Is this all a threat? You want to ruin our lives? Mine. Hers. My parents. Her parents. Is that what this is all about?"

“Not so fast, my love,” she chortles. “I’ll give you an option. Marry me. Or—your parents and her parents—would end up—jobless, penniless, and completely—damaged for the rest of their senior lives.”

Dylan, you will always be my one and only LUSH! Please forgive me! “Okay,” I weep.

“I was confident you’d say yes!” She sticks her chin up and grins. “All right, then. We shall grace the formal grand opening party tonight, and we’re flying back home tomorrow morning. Our wedding is set on the last Sunday of this month, in my parents’ mansion garden—”

“By the end of this month?” I yelp.

“Yes, my love. That soon. Sorry. I just want to make sure you’re mine forever. Would that be too much to ask? Oh, goddess. I’ll work on the monster shocks right after we’ve exchanged our vows, okay? And everything will be—just—perfect. How’s that?”

“I’d like to spend time with Dylan today. All day. For a last goodbye. Without your private investigator tramping around.”

“HELL, NO!!!” Her outrage terrorizes the entire room.

“Please, Alex!” I bawl out. “Please! I’m begging you! I’ll make love to you after! Just please—let me be with her for one last time! Just to say goodbye!”

“AFTER ALL THE SHITTY SPITS THAT YOU’VE SLAMMED ALL OVER ME?? ABSOLUTELY NOT!!!” She shakes it off and releases a deep sigh. “Get dressed. We’ll have breakfast—By the way, my love—I can trace everything. That includes your phone. So don’t you dare sneak away with it, or you’d be sorry for the rest of your life.”

“How can you be this cruel?” I would rather die now!

“Because what’s mine is mine.”



DEAR *true love wish*: Whisper into Dylan's ear that I have been held captive by the vicious monster whose fatal obsession and twisted love gospel could potentially waft me into a mental asylum.

The drabble is hidden in a slim wallet—stuffed in my purse. Discreet yet proud. Like, a myth. Only its integrity illuminates hope. The unwavering hope of catching her on the dance floor. My one and only LUSH. My happiness. My true love.

Oh, Dylan. I will get to you. I promise. Don't cry, okay? Please, don't cry. I will come back for you. And we will have the dance. Our All of Lush dance. Our true love dance. Just hang in there and don't judge my sudden disappearance. I'm not like that. We're not like that at all. Just trust walnut and baby carrot. We will be with each other—SOON! Maybe even before the end of the month—THAT SOON!

No vicious monster can keep us apart! And no yellow belly sits on *this* lass! Not when I can still breathe and crack on with grits! For defeat only has powers once I let it infect me! Who is this vicious monster kidding? I have to fight for what is mine, too! Happiness and true love will guide me through it! The good guys always win! NO MATTER WHAT! And we will win!

The game is on, Alex! This walnut is rolling her sleeves up—to outwit your blue blood! Get your high-and-mighty shacks ready! Now!
—first—

Oh god. What must I do? Plan. Something—vicious—ultimately vicious—that this blue blood would find herself crawling for mercy! Ooh. The thought of her losing it all is fueling up my VICIOUS VEINS!!! ALREADY!!!

Okay. So what's my vicious vein? Think. Uh, well, once upon a time—

Oh my goodness. Why on earth did my parents raise me without any repulsive desire to be—vicious—anyway? Thanks, Mom and Dad! Really!

So here's the plan. Hmm. C'mon. Get in there. Just—get in there, for crying out loud! Help me accomplish something majestic and monumental here! Dylan is worried sick! Her eyes are probably red and puffed up by now! Please! What should I do? What is this walnut's greatest grit that can conquer all? THINK!!! Goddammit. My streaks are not working yet. Dumdumdumdumdumdum! Argh!

Alex and I are having brunch in the hotel restaurant. My appetite struggles as contempt numbs off all my senses. She has been—admiring my face—my goddamn face that turns her into a vicious monster.

I got it! I have to play along! You —*jack—ass—whatever!*

There! THERE! I've just created a vicious vein inside of me! Progress! Whew!

"Wanna go shopping after brunch?" she asks.

"Alex," I sigh, "we're not flying back home with a bundle of glitz that would only end up in your walk-in closet display."

"It's not for my closet display. It's for you."

"I don't want anything. Thank you. I'm fine."

"By the time we get home," she says, "we've gotta talk to your parents about us. About the wedding."

"Could you please—just allow me to come out to them myself?" I reply. Yes, that should count as my vicious vein. Hiding in the closet. From the two people who I love and who love me more than anything in the world.

"As soon as we land in Vancouver, Ace," she insists. "I mean it."

"Fine," I groan. "May I please be excused? Just a little touch-up. Back in three."

"Sure," she shrugs.

I grab my purse and hasten my way into the washroom.



A CLEANING LADY IS wiping the mirror clean while humming away a lullaby tune. It makes me smile. "Hello," she greets me.

"Hi," I reply. "I love your tune."

"It's for my daughter," she says. "I used to sing it to her when she was a baby."

"It's beautiful!" It warms my heart.

"She's a grown woman now. With a husband and two kids."

"You must be very proud."

"I am. I am, indeed." A text message barges into her cell phone. She slips it out of her pocket and checks the content. "It's her, all right. She always bugs me at work. It's embarrassing sometimes."

And a sharp idea stunts in. "I'm Ace Hansel." I extend my hand.

She seems taken aback by my gesture. "I would love to shake your hand, but I can't. I'm wearing gloves. I'm working. But anyways, my name is Ruth."

"It's nice to meet you, Ruth!" *A fairy godmother!*

"Nice to meet you, too, Miss Ace Hansel." She smiles.

"Ruth," I say, stepping closer to her, "I have a huge favor to ask. Huge. I'll pay you for it."

"I hope it has nothing to do with weed or anything."

"No no. Not at all. I'm just in a desperate situation here, and I need help. Any help that I can get. From anybody."

"Oh my. You look like a damsel in distress."

"I am a damsel in distress. Big time."

"Oh, I'll do anything! What kind of help do you need?"

"There's someone very special out there waiting for me. I was wondering if I could use your phone and send her a message."

"Oh!" she exclaims. "No problem at all!" She hands me her phone. "Here. Feel free."

"Thank you," I reply. Dylan's number has already been implanted in my memory right after Alex's phone spy announcement. I type in: *Di-va, it's me, walnut and baby carrot. The vicious monster is here. I've been blackmailed, and it's a vicious one. Very vicious that I cannot even tell you. I can't go anywhere. I can't use my phone either. She can track it all down.*

*I'm coming up with a plan to win this. So I can be with you by the end of the month. Or hopefully a lot sooner. Don't cry, okay? And—I will always find a way to capture you—To capture my one and only LUSH—To hold you and make you mine—Clinched—*My oblivious tears roll down, and Ruth's sympathetic eyes twinge into mine. I hand the device back to her and pep up a hopeful smile. "Thank you, Ruth," I utter. "You have just saved my day."



"WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG?" Alex blasts as soon as I scoot back from the washroom.

"I felt nauseated." I take my seat. "I can't finish my food anymore."

"Let's go back into the room then. I'll give you a massage. You look strained."

"I'm sorry. Just not in the mood for it right now. But thank you."

She probes into my eyes. "You are already in love with this girl, aren't you?"

"It doesn't matter," I yelp. "My feelings don't matter."

"What does she have, Ace? What does she have that I don't?"

"Oh, I don't know. Everything?"

"Like what? Name everything."

"We can't talk about this anymore, Alex. It's not gonna go anywhere, anyways. It's just a waste of time."

"I wanna know," she insists. "I wanna know why you've fallen in love in one blink with a *dry-clean girl*."

"She is NOT a dry-clean girl!" I grunt. "She is a girl, and her name is Dylan!"

"She is and will always be a dry-clean girl, Ace!"

"She is and will always be A GIRL! THE GIRL! And that would be my answer to your burning question. It all just comes down to THAT!"

"I can get her fired, you know?" she threatens.

"Alex, please," I beg. "You've already got me. What more do you want?"

"Everything in your heart."

"Fine. I'll work on it."

"Great," she yelps, then sips her coffee. "Let's make a surprise visit at the store."

"I just wanna stay in bed all day," I groan.

"You can't be out of my sight anymore, my love. Especially here in Toronto. From now on, I'm taking you with me wherever I go."

"I can't be your chaperone all the time, Alex. I wanna work. I wanna—"

"You're not a chaperone," she interrupts me. "You're going to be my wife. You own everything that I own. What's the matter with you?"

"Well, I don't want it. I'm going to be your wife—okay. But I don't want the rest of it. The rest of *your world*. And I love working with the sweet darlings. At least, give me that freedom to enjoy life that way."

"Working *with*—the sweet darlings? You do not work *with* them, Ace. They work *for* you."

"I work *WITH* them. We work *FOR* you."

"You have to know your place in the society now," she commands, "and get rid of that preposterous mentality once and for all, because they could never walk your walk, and you never walked on their generic floors even before I met you."

"I walk in their shoes all the time," I reply. "I will always do. We're humans after all. We laugh. We cry. We get angry. We get hurt. We look for happiness. We're desperate for true love. You know, stuff that humans can only feel."

Guilt transpires in her face. "Let's go to the store now."

"Okay, boss!" I pester her.

"What did you just call me?" she protests.

"Oh, zip it, Alex," I reply. "You're still my boss, for crying out loud. Don't make me hop out of that—regardless of how you own me."

"Are you gonna give me fucking attitude, Ace?" Furor protrudes in her eyes.

"I'm gonna give you all of me and all the love," I nerve up in a subtle tone, "that I can smother you with just to satisfy all your desires. I can't be human anymore. With you. Happy now?"

"You know," she cackles, "it only takes a few phone calls to get all *the job done*? So if you don't want me to do that, you have to show—all of you—all the love that you can smother me with—just to satisfy—all my desires."

"What do you want me to do now, Alex?" I sit back.

"Well, since you don't want to tag along with me to the store, perhaps—we could—"

"Wouldn't you wanna wait for our—honeymoon—instead?"

"I want us to make love—NOW!"

"Alex, I can't. Let's just do it on our wedding night, and we'll make it—romantic. How's that?"

"Okay," she sighs. "I'll consider it. After all, you're going to be my wife. When it comes to romance, I'll let you run the show—once in a while."

"Don't consider it, Alex," I strike back. "Respect it!"

"Don't you give me fucking attitude anymore, Ace!" she warns me, pointing a devilish forefinger in my face. "Or I swear to god. I swear to god—Don't make me fucking do something that you'd regret for the rest of your life. You understand me?"

"I'm not afraid to die, Alex," I spunk on. "So I'm here as your puppet. Take it or leave it. You dare to make those phone calls now, I'm gone, and you know it first hand. You don't want that to happen, do you? So here I am. Feast on it. I don't care. Because that's all you can ever have. Nothing else. Not even a split-second tick of what's pumping inside my chest."

"I've heard enough of your mouth shit." She gives me an evil look. "You're free to go."

"I beg your pardon?" I pluck forward, almost wrenching out of my seat.

"You've been insulting my heart and my love this whole time. So get the fuck out of my face and be with the dry-clean girl. GO!"

"Alex, what are you gonna do?"

"It scares the shit out of you, doesn't it?" she lets out a *Machiavel-
lian* laugh. "You'll see, my love. You'll see. NOW FUCK OFF!!!"

Dylan, I'm coming! We can get through this together! We can win this!

I run back into the room and mishmash around for my belongings, then hit a cab and ZOOM my way to *Luster!!!*



DYLAN DROPS HER JAW upon my provoking entrance. Her eyes—oh, her red puffy eyes—behold me—astonished yet overjoyed! "Ace! I thought I'd never see you again!"

I flap my luggage away and collapse into her arms. "We gotta go."

She tiptoes back and looks at me. "What do you mean?"

"Alex is up to something really—REALLY VICIOUS—and it involves our parents! That was the blackmail!" I open fire.

"What?" she yelps.

"Call your boss," I vest up, "and tell him you need to take off now, then we'll fly to Alberta to save your folks' jobs!"

"I knew she was gonna do something demonic and flick us into a torture chamber! Why the hell did you even sleep with this vicious monster for?"

"Claim your attacks later. Just call your boss now, so we can get the hell out of here."

"Rahul is on his way to drop off stuff for today's pickups," she says. "Including your laundry. I'm not sure if they got that pukey stain thingy off, though—God, I can't believe we've already got ourselves into this can of worms on your pickup day."

"Me neither," I mutter. "Oh, and after Alberta, we're flying to BC. To explain this donnybrook to my parents."

"And I can't believe you're already dragging me around the country! This is crazy, Ace! And I'm just a girl, who looks like, she's fully geared up to clean your house, for god's sake!"

"Dylan, stop screaming your insecurities at me anymore, because you already know why I'm here and how I got you into this mess!"

"I got the text," she mumbles. "Do I really deserve you this much, Miss Ace Hansel?"

I smile. "Dylan, I'm here. Excited to hold you—for our dance."

"How am I gonna explain all this to my parents?"

"I'll explain it to them myself."

"How? Like, how am I supposed to introduce you?"

"I'll introduce myself."

"As what?"

"As your *one and only LUSH!*"

"They wouldn't believe that at all," she groans.

"Dylan," I gasp, "can we please just worry about it later on? What time is Rahul coming, anyway?"

A middle-aged man with a vibrant smile enters, towing along a rack full of laundry. "Ho ho! Who do we have here?" he cheers.

"My friend," Dylan answers, lowering her head, "Ace Hansel."

"Ace Hansel!" he buoys up. "Wait. Now where did I hear that name from? You're in one of those movies that I must have watched recently! Right? Am I right? Or maybe—uh-huh! Jackpot! Boom! I got it! *That* detective TV show! Right? I bet it's that HOT detective TV show, isn't it? You're playing—"

"Rahul," Dylan interrupts him, blushing, "she's not—like that."

"I'm just a walnut and baby carrot," I giggle, extending my hand. "I'm *just* Ace Hansel. It's nice to meet you."

He shakes my hand, flustered and—star-stricken. Oh my goodness. My hair raises out of embarrassment. "Rahul," he introduces himself.

“And—it’s—it’s a—pleasure to meet you – Miss Ace Hansel—” And he turns to Dylan, seeking for confirmation. “Are you sure—? This is a bluff. Right? You guys are just—bluffing me around—Right? Please, tell me it’s just a bluff.”

“I’m just Dylan’s *one and only LUSH*, Rahul,” I assure him. “And I’m here to kidnap her away due to family emergencies that we must take care of as we speak. So would you please fill in for her?”

“For how long?” he replies.

“*Mantra*—this would have to be my first major catastrophe,” Dylan grunts, “so if I’m not back here next week or the week after that, then consider attending my funeral.”

“Dylan! “I reprimand her.

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs.

“What kind of a major catastrophe?” Rahul inquires. “By degree. In what degree?”

“Something about *All of Lush* dance,” I answer. “So now our parents are under attack.”

Stumped! “This is gotta be the most confusing major catastrophe I have ever heard of in my entire life,” he says.

“Please?” I plead. “Can I take her with me now?”

“Well—” he teases, fluttering his eyes.

“We’ll take you to dinner as soon as we get back,” I convince him.

“Okay,” he agrees.

“Thank you!” And Dylan runs into the back room.

“So—” Rahul gestures, “—you’re not really—”

“I’ve told you,” I giggle, “I’m just a walnut, Rahul. No sweat.”

“‘Cause I haven’t met a celebrity before,” he says. “I’ve seen some. But I haven’t actually met them—*like this*—you know—like for real—And once I’d tell my pregnant wife about this—mind-blowing encounter, her water would break right away—‘cause she’d be so pissed that she didn’t get the chance to meet you.”

“I’ll be a godmother,” I sew up.

"Really?" he yelps. "You're not—bluffing—right? This godmother—surprise is not a bluff—right?"

"Dylan and I will be godmothers." I pat him on the shoulder. "I promise."

"Sweeeet!" he claps. "I've gotta call my wife now, and drop her this—amazing news! I just hope her water wouldn't break, though."

And a familiar woman barges in, tugging a luggage along. OH MY GOD!!! It's—It's—It's Sarah with a Gordian last name—the Detroit girl, witching in with her psychic's twisted black magic high! No way in hell SHE is happening right now!

Rahul turns to her. "Hello, miss. And how may I help you?"

"Um," she says, "I'm looking for—"

"Sarah?" Dylan snaps from the back room doorway, dangling her backpack.

"Dylan!" She flies towards her and—*DON'T YOU DARE KISS HER OR I WOULD DEFINITELY SACK OUT MY VICIOUS VEIN INTO YOUR—YOUR—Oh, god!!!*—attempts to twiddle a smack on Dylan's lips.

"No, please, no!" Dylan hops away. "I'm sorry—I thought you were gonna turn up Friday next week, not this Friday."

"It's this Friday," Sarah lollops. "You got mixed up. Aren't you even glad to see me? Surprise surprise?"

"Sarah," Dylan droops, "I really don't know how to make up for this mishap, but I'm really sorry for disappointing your trip—like—you have a right to ambush me with a load of brickbats after this first and—quick meeting—'cause I—I have to go—"

"Excuse me?" Sarah yelps, baffled.

"The bottom line is," Dylan says, "I've already told you—I could never like you that way. And I'm—with a walnut."

"EXCUSE ME???" Sarah is horrified!

"The walnut is right over there." Dylan points to my direction.

"Hi." I wave at Sarah, who bulges her venomous eyes right on!

“SCREW YOU!!!” she screams in Dylan’s face, then storms out. Dylan slinks to join me and Rahul. “I’m such a horrible person.”

“No, you’re not,” Rahul justifies. “Her energy was dark and ugly. I wouldn’t want you around her at all.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I second.

“Right? Am I right?” He sticks his chin up. “Huh!”



I’M LOUNGING IN DYLAN’S bed, with my brazen hands on her laptop, browsing through for Edmonton flights—as her marches and whizzes cruise around the basement suite, packing up. I gloat over her clumsy bustles in between, and it sweeps me off my feet, with a lovey-dovey thought of catching her for a dance now.

She zips up her hand-carry suitcase and joins me. “Do you have a breakdown of this vicious Alex mission?”

“She’s gonna bribe the top people with a load of cash,” I reply, “or their business integrity is at stake. She’s got high-profile and notorious connections all over North America.”

“Ace!” she exclaims.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter.

“I cannot believe you slept with this whacko, for god’s sake!”

“I only slept with her four times in one year that we were together. First, it was after we gorged on breakfast in bed. Second, on the night of her birthday. Third, on Valentine’s day. The last one, I had to pacify her chutzpah when she caught a regular customer almost rubbing her breasts against mine. I kept myself busy at work, and I wanted to run away the minute she morphed into a total freak after I said *yes* to her marriage proposal. I did not realize she’d turn out to be a vicious monster after all. *This vicious monster.*”

“Then how did you figure out the breakdown?” she asks.

“Most of my parents’ prominent clients are her friends,” I reply. “I would overhear them talk about these nasty things at parties.”

"Now I understand why some huge business corporations would go down the drain. They ruin each other. All these sick and retarded people without regard for humanity. My god."

"We just gotta outwit her."

"We need a strong mantra for that," she groans.

"It'll kick in," I brace up. "I know it will."

"Even the spirit guides are terrified of her. We're already wrecked up."

"I'm gonna talk to your parents' bosses myself, then pray for miracles."

"And it's the weekend," she yelps. "It's not gonna work!"

"The only earliest flight that we can get," I say, staring at the screen, "is around midnight tonight. At 12.35."

"No way! We'd be like— drunken ninjas by the time we arrive in Edmonton!"

"Booked."

"I hate you."

"Pout on."

"Scoot over. I'm taking a nap." She lays down beside me and closes her eyes.

"Dylan?" I marvel at her innocent and glowing face.

"Huh?" she moans.

"You're beautiful," I whisper into her ear.

"Ace, we have to take a nap," she utters, drifting off to sleep. "I think I got exhausted from yowling my eyes out this morning, that's why I'm sleepy beat now—Aren't you even fatigued up after all that?"

I set the laptop on the bedside table, then wheel around with a dare to snuggle her. Oh, god. My heart! My melting supple absolute—HEART! I have never felt—gratified—animated—and unflawed—this way before! My heart has found a beautiful home—at last!

She cuddles me back and opens her eyes—with a puzzling grasp. Uh-oh. “So your parents have known all along? About you and Alex?”

Dylan, that’s just a euphemism for—are you out? “I’ve been discreet.”

“Seriously?” she giggles.

“I’ll make the announcement once we hit Vancouver,” I vow. “And I’ll introduce you as my *one and only LUSH*.”

“How did you even go around the discreet territory?” she asks. *Thank god, she’s calm about it.*

“Like a cartoon character’s rollicking adventure,” I reply.

“Which one?” she plays along.

“Baby carrot Ace Hansel,” I muse. “Bobbing around looking for a potato.”

“How many has she got since?”

“Just one. Just now.”

“No, I meant—the other potatoes.”

“Stacey was a cassava.”

“A what?” she laughs.

“A woody shrub,” I say. “And Alex—well—we already know who she is.”

“So you’ve only been with two?”

“Did you really think I was the type who would chunk out all the root vegetables that she would ever come across?”

“Ace, you’re drop dead gorgeous. With a sparkling good heart. With the kindest face and the kindest everything.”

“And I’ve been lying to my parents. And I slept with a vicious monster. And I got you into this hodgepodge.”

“Well,” she sighs, “that’s what a baby carrot is all about, anyway.”

“I think I’m a baby lesbian,” I reckon.

“Me too!” she yelps. “I had only been with one girl. *That girl* that I told you about—who dumped me for a dude. It was quite strange, though. ‘Cause I knew I was—fascinated. But I could never understand

its truth at all. After we broke up, I would just—daydream—and dream away—about an enchanting woman with a beautiful heart. Though crushes would butt in once in a while—but I would rather daydream—and dream away—about *her*—The princess from my childhood castle in the air dances—” She pouts and leers at me. “And it was only about a walnut.”

“Dylan,” I laugh, “keep pouting! I’m gonna kiss you!”

“We can only kiss once we’ve already mushed the vicious monster,” she lays out the rule. “And—without a single threat shambling into the drabbles.”

“You are such a diva potato!” I snap.

“Ace, I just wanna make sure I’m not in a suicidal pit here, all right?”

“And you think we’re not in the same boat?”

“No,” she says. “‘Cause anybody could rock you out of it anytime and any day.”

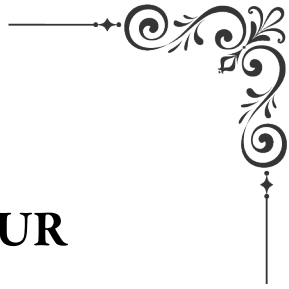
“Anybody could also rock you out of it anytime and any day, Dylan,” I yip back.

“That’s not gonna happen. ‘Cause only girls like Sarah would attempt to do that. And my heart is only dressed and squeezed for our dance—for the rest of my life. No matter how much it scares the hell out of my bamboos.”

“And yet you can’t even give me a kiss, and my lower abdomen is now gearing up for a major Martial Arts exhibition, and your staunch diva potato whirlwind is way too much for baby carrot and walnut to bob over!”

“My goodness, Ace Hansel!” she giggles. “You really are an aggressive puck!”

“That’s just a pint of it, babe,” I grunt. “Just – a—pint!”



CHAPTER FOUR

Edmonton. Sherwood Park. March 23, 2019. Saturday.

“Why are people looking at us?” I ask Dylan as we prance out of the airport terminal, ferrying our luggage along.

“They’re not looking at us, Ace,” she replies. “They’re looking at you. Like, how Rahul was desperate to figure out which famous celebrity you were. And then—they see me—figuring out when I’m supposed to do your laundry or clean your house.”

“I feel insulted each time you do this,” I brew up.

“Well, it’s true,” she yelps. “I still don’t know why—”

“Dylan, stop it! Or I’m compelled to break the rule and kiss you in front of these people right now!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Let’s have breakfast,” I say.

“I still feel dizzy,” she groans, feeling her head.

“You need something warm. C’mon.” I drag her into a burger bar that serves breakfast, and she browses through the menu without a particle of appetite that she pokes her cheek—to and fro—with her fist. “Veggie omelette and coffee?” I ask.

“Okay,” she moans—Once our order is served—“Ace, my parents wouldn’t believe—*us*—at all,” she sweats. “I mean, I’m out, but they wouldn’t believe that you’ve—you know—?”

“That I’ve fallen in love with a diva potato?”

“That a miracle has rocked into their daughter’s life.”

"Dylan, good parents have sound instincts. They would know right off the bat if I were for real or just a sham. Besides, what we have is not a miracle. It's meant to be. And this magic *will always be ours*. Always. And there's nothing that you can do about it anymore. All you gotta do is accept it with a full heart 'cause it's our truth. *Our beautiful truth. Our only beautiful truth. We are each other's one and only Lush*. What could be more beautiful than that? So please—stop bobbling my nerves around already. Clinched?"

"Claimed. It's just that—my full heart is drowning into all the world's seas and oceans here. It scares the hell out of me. Like—I can't even breathe anymore."

"This walnut will always win, babe," I snap. "I guarantee you that. Stop brewing now, and get your appetite to work. Eat."

Two timid pretty women take their seats next to our table, and an instant curiosity whooshes over to me, along with an anxious smile. Dylan is strung out of their presence, and pops in a piece of omelette. "You've just frightened my appetite out of your wits," she says.

"Good." I set my plate and cup of coffee in front of me as my peripheral vision catches a sight of the two spectators devouring my walnut, with their absorbed eyes. "Do you still feel dizzy?"

"A bit," Dylan replies and sips her coffee.

I take a bite of vegetable omelette. "Those two girls are looking at us."

"They're not looking at us, Ace," she yelps. "They're looking at you, wondering why you're branched up so closely with your housekeeper."

"Dylan, don't make me break the rule right now."

"It's just another *which celebrity guessing game*. Which would haunt you down all over Sherwood Park, and then they would demand for a book of explanations and anecdotes from me."

"I just find it—bizarre that I get this—much dotty attention around here when I can just waltz around Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa without this awkward clown horrifying my stom-

ach—regardless of how many pairs of eyes maggot me off along the way.”

“You don’t waltz around here, Ace. You run.”

Her adorable charm arrests my senses. “Can I kiss your nose?”

“Nope.” She swirls her head away.

“C’m on, babe. Just nose.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Just a little smack.”

“Please, Ace. Don’t. Or I’d break the rule myself. So bug off about it.”

“You can’t even give me your nose for a split-second?”

“Our thing is sacred in my books, okay? I don’t plan on ruining it anytime soon no matter how much my screaming insecurities tempt me to escape.”

“You know that I’d still find a way to capture you, right?” I hit back. “So clinch it up, Dylan. ‘Cause I won’t let that happen at all. Ever.”

“What if *your world* would be way too much for me to take on, though?” she grumbles. “Then I’d be terrorized, and I’d end up with ugly puffy eyes everyday.”

“Dylan, *my world* is this potato right here. Would you please be kind enough to believe that?” I grant her with a luring grin, then she forks in some omelette and delivers it into my mouth. I savor every ingredient like never before, with a confronting desire to press my lips against her—Okay, just nose—FOR NOW!! Argh!! “My *one and only LUSH*,” I say, holding her hand, “may I take the pleasure of—kissing your nose?” She smiles. It’s a YES! Woohoo! And I endear the opportunity to remedy my cramps with a nose-kiss!

“All I got was the omelette!” she laughs.

“How dare you!” I guffaw, then sip my coffee. The snoopy eyes from the other table melt into the twilight zone after witnessing the delectable display mooned off by *baby carrot and potato*. “You know

what?" I say. "I totally forgot about our audience. Now that's a good sign. Don't you think?"

"You're coming out of it, huh?" Dylan replies.

"Amen to that," I confirm. "Why is it taking so long for their order to arrive, anyway?"

"Maybe they haven't ordered yet," she assumes, "'cause you've hypnotized them dead on."



QUITE A LONG RIDE FROM Edmonton International Airport to Sherwood Park. It's already past 9 o'clock when we approach the front door of a townhouse along Oak Street. Dylan rings the doorbell and hefts a nervous sigh. "Stop rattling," I say.

"They're *different* people, Ace," she replies.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The door opens, and—!

A delightful woman in her early 60s, with a bright blue apron on, stands in awe—more like—SHOCKED—really – oh, god! She looks at Dylan, then investigates me with her startled pupils, back to Dylan again—this time, perplexed yet welcoming—and suspires over my presence—

"Who is it?" a kind man's voice barges in, and he appears next to the delightful woman—who still seems traumatized! The man must be in his mid-60s, stout, fully bearded, country-like—just as delightful as his ladylove. His jaw drops, paralyzed. He glances at Dylan, then his boggled optic electrifies towards me. He gulps to keep his composure together, then addresses Dylan with—"Did you commit a crime? Who did you kidnap?"

"Mom, Dad," Dylan mumbles in a bumbling state.

"Hi," I interrupt her, smiling at the two of the most delightful people I have ever laid eyes on, "I'm Ace Hansel." I extend my hand, and they glim down at my suspended open palm for a moment, then ex-

change glances and elbow each other. I throw each one of them a brisk squeeze instead, and I can feel the ripples fizzing out of their systems. A mortified silence hums in, and I succor to Dylan for a *move it* signal. Nothing. So—“I’m a walnut,” I mutter, introducing myself—formally!

“What did she say?” Mrs. Dawson asks her delightful husband.

“She says she’s a walnut,” Mr. Dawson replies, unsettled.

Dylan’s delightful folks have come to their senses—somehow—though I know—my walnut pride is about to be fried on an open pit as we all sit down in the kitchen for coffee. No awkwardness. Just a sprinkle of bashful curtsies and snoops.

“I’ll take our luggage upstairs,” Dylan says.

“We’ll do it together, babe,” I reply, and the delightful folks mouth ‘*babe*’ to each other—either amused or floored. “Let’s just chill for a second. C’mon now.”

“So—” Mr. Dawson kicks off, smiling at me, “Miss Ace Hansel—”

“Please,” I say, “just Ace. Just call me Ace, sir.”

“Ace,” he stutters, “w-what’s—this—*Hollywoodish*—thing—going on here?”

“Mr. Dawson,” I sigh, “there is nothing—*Hollywoodish*—about our sudden visit at all. It’s more like—Well—”

“Oh my god,” Dylan cringes.

“All right.” I jam all my courage sticks together and set them on fire. “Dylan and I have found each other’s *All of Lush* —in each other. But I pursued her first before the *true love wish made its formal affirmation in a flash*. So then, a vicious monster, my ex, blackmailed me—involving—both of you—and my parents—That’s why we flew away as fast as we could—to stop the distraction from happening.”

“What did she say?” Mrs. Dawson asks her delightful husband, dazed.

“She says,” Mr. Dawson analyzes my statement, “they’ve fallen in love with each other. Now her ex is about to murder us—and her parents.”

"Dad!" Dylan bolts at him.

"Murder us?" Mrs. Dawson distresses.

"My ex, Alex Avery," I explain, "is the daughter of one of the wealthiest couples in the country. She's an almighty elite powerhouse. She can take down anybody who gets in her way. Her vicious plan is to strip you off of your jobs—strip my parents off their top clients. And we're here to talk to your bosses about it—and hopefully—we could drag them over to our side."

"We've already got fired!" Mr. Dawson confesses.

"What?" Dylan and I exclaim in chorus, almost jumping off of our seats.

"Yesterday," Mrs. Dawson mutters.

"Oh, god!" I'm about to vomit out of contempt.

"It was just quite puzzling," Mr. Dawson says, "as to how we both got fired on the same day."

"I am so sorry!" Dylan bursts.

"Oh, Dylan," I grip her hand for comfort.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about it if I were you!" Mr. Dawson persuades us.

"Pardon me, sir?" I yelp, muddled.

"Dad—?" Dylan seconds, surprised.

"I was gonna fire myself a long time ago, anyways," Mr. Dawson explains. "They put me behind the desk to do computer work 'cause they said I was getting weak. I wasn't productive enough anymore. But the administrative job strained me up, turning me into a cranky cowboy instead. So then, I've talked to my friend, and we're gonna do some carpentry work here and there. Wherever. So long as I get my bones into action, I'll be fine. Rather than wasting away my strength behind a fancy desk."

"Me too," Mrs. Dawson follows. "They said the young teachers were more vibrant to accomplish the job, and the paperworks would give me migraines—forcing me to go home early everyday. So it's fine. I'm just

gonna go back to my seamstress work, which I've been doing on the side for a while now. It makes me happy, anyway."

"Oh god," I pop off, whiffing out cutting tears, "this is just—torturing my heart in million tiny pieces now! How could I ever make it up to both of you? Please—let me know—And I'll do anything and everything to—"

"Oh, darling," Mrs. Dawson interrupts me, with her nurturing voice, "it will all be fine. Don't worry about us. Honest. We're happier—this way."

"I'm so embarrassed that this has happened," I weep on. "I'm so sorry for all this! It's so disgraceful!" Dylan reaches out for my hand and gives it a consoling rub. I respond with a coy smile, then present the delightful folks with an indebted look. "If there is anything that I can do—"

"We will be fine," Mr. Dawson echoes his delightful wife's testament. "And it wasn't your fault at all. So don't worry, and stop crying now."

Oh, their beautiful hearts! How could the universe be too kind? I AM THE LUCKIEST HUMAN ALIVE!

"By the way, he's singing at the mall today," Mrs. Dawson announces, killing off the doleful air.

"Oh, god!" Dylan worms away. "Dad!"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world!" I exclaim, then turn to my *one and only LUSH*. "Babe, we're going!"

"The last time he performed," Dylan briefs me, "he scared the hell out of the young crowd. Kids booed and heckled. It hurt me."

"Which song was it, sir?" I ask Mr. Dawson.

"Something from the 50s," he answers.

"Would you like to do one in a contemporary style—perhaps?" I suggest. "Can you do *All of Lush*, *Ocean Lawrie's* version? Rock it up a bit more, and—?"

"On my guitar?" he whoops. "Yeah! I can do that!"

"Ace!" Dylan prompts me. "Don't push it! Please!"

"I'm not pushing it!" I say in defense. "I just know that he can do it, and he's going up there to delight them all! Trust me!"

"So—" Mr. Dawson interrogates, "—are you and my daughter—really—serious about—?"

"Dad," Dylan interjects, "we're not getting married, all right?"

"Yet!" I yelp. "We're not getting married yet! But we will! Someday!"

"Oh, goodness gracious!" Mrs. Dawson cheers.

"You've no idea," I proclaim, "how grateful and happy I am right now. Having found her. My *one and only* LUSH. My *diva potato*. And I really do hope I got your hearts, too."

Mr. Dawson keeps an eagle eye on Dylan for a good—minute—long—then—"How are you gonna explain all this to the entire province?"



"YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE convinced him," Dylan argues, as we walk into her old bedroom.

"They wouldn't boo and heckle this time," I promise her, "or I'd kick some butts!"

"Really," she giggles. "You can't even mush a mosquito, Ace. Now you want to kick some butts in Sherwood Park?"

"I mushed Alex," I reply. "Standing up for my hair like that was a historical event of my walnut pride."

"Back to that. What's the plan? How is this outwit mission running in your head so far? Got an idea yet?"

"It should pop in once we get to Vancouver, and we're flying on Monday."

She sets our suitcases in the corner, then lays down in bed. "I'm exhausted."

"We're not taking a nap," I say. "The show is at 2 o'clock. C'mon. Let's go for a walk."

"I'm not parading you around now?" she complains. "I'm already losing my mind here, for god's sake."

I sit on the bed, facing her. "Baby, you're losing your mind over erratic things that will never win. It's pointless. What are you so worried about, anyway?"

"What do you think, Ace? I don't think we would ever have a private *All of Lush* life together at all considering your celebrity-like splendor. We'd always be attacked by strangers' wolfing eyes, then maybe another vicious monster would wangle in and lure you away, and I'd—"

"I'm sick of you judging my heart all the freaking time, Dylan! Like, no matter how hard I try, no matter what I do, you would always buckle up in your doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities, and smack me around, like I'm just some simulated walnut in your daydreams and dreams that you can dismiss anytime you want because it hurts! Well, you're not daydreaming and dreaming anymore! Neither am I! I'm not *that* 12-year-old girl anymore either, *who wished for you*! We're right in front of each other now, we're together, we're still in a mess, we hope for the *happily ever after*, and our drabbles must stay in our wooden box until one of us loses her breath in the other's arms—WHAT PART OF THIS BEAUTIFUL TRUTH YOU STILL CAN'T ACCEPT???"

She gazes at me as her tears hasten down—I caress her hair and hold her hand—"I'm just really scared," she sobs.

I lie down beside her, and we snuggle. "Me too," I reply. "I'm scared that you'd run away from me—anytime—and any day."

"Wooden box?" she giggles, snagging it off from my frenzied speech.

"We should get one," I say. "Something sparkly."

"Why does it have to be sparkly?"

"So it wouldn't fade for the next seven decades or so."

"I'd never live that long at all."

"If it has something to do with your doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities, I'm not listening anymore. C'mon. Let's go get one now."



THE MALL HAS JUST OPENED, and is located right across Oak Street. Some establishments are still closed, though the food court starts to get a little busy now, tending to lineups of dearest old folks. A sleepy, hearty, and maybe even celestial community—and I'm loving it!

I grip Dylan's hand as we check out the keepsake isle of a commercial bookstore while a suave young male associate has been stalking us around—with his stealth and subtle leapfrogs. I ignore him, though I have a funny feeling about his character. The same male specie character that quails my walnut back into the shell. I keep my defiance to spare Dylan's angst and grab a sparkling brown wooden box from the display. "Our seven decades," I moan. "What do you think?"

"It's perfect," Dylan replies. "Love it!"

We approach the cash register, and the suave male associate jumps right in, with a soothing smile delivered to my presence. "Good morning!" he greets.

I place the item on the counter and tug out my wallet, as Dylan ducks closer to me—disturbed. Her intuition is just as sharp-edged as mine. Oh, my *one and only LUSH*, indeed!

I catch his nametag. It reads: Jason. "Good morning," I say. "Just this box, please."

"Name's Jason," he introduces himself. "What's yours?"

"Walnut," I reply.

"Walnut!" he cackles. "No, what's your name? Really? I won't bite."

"We're kind of in a hurry," I say, slipping out a card. "Could you punch it through now, please?"

"I'm 25," he pushes, "single, and my family owns this franchise. So what's your name?"

"It's walnut, I'm gay, and this beautiful girl—is my WIFE!" I grunt, wrapping my hands around Dylan's waist.

He goes numb. "No—No. That's just something that you'd say to put me off."

"Good catch," I giggle, amused. "But really—I'm gay and this is my *All of Lush true love wish* right here!" I kiss Dylan's neck, and the brash testosterone loses his balance—ALARMED and in disbelief! "Now—are you running a business here or what?" He is forced to scan the item through, then I tap my card on the machine—And as he attempts to grab a plastic bag—"No bag. That's okay. Thanks." I seize the wooden box and catch Dylan's hand. "C'mon, babe." Instantaneously, *my wife* and I boot our way out.

"What a prick!" Dylan groans.

"I've come out to a complete stranger," I narrate, "then introduced my wife. Welcome—to Sherwood Park. I love how my walnut cracks around like it owns the absolute definition of spunk."

"You shouldn't have done that," she protests. "You shouldn't have introduced me as *your wife*."

"Well, I meant it," I reply. "Though it was a white lie, but I meant every word of it, and it felt crunchy and real to me. Stop brewing now."

"How am I supposed to handle all this wild attention surrounding your walnut, Ace? This is driving me insane already!"

"Aw, you'll laugh over it sooner in time. 'Cause it's sickening and insignificant."

"It's sickening, yeah," she exclaims. "Insignificant? That's like, you telling me I'm forbidden to mush a thirsty mosquito sucking in my blood."

"It's insignificant 'cause it wouldn't affect our appetite at all," I insist. "We go home together and eat at our table. That's what's important."



WE SURGE BACK INTO the bedroom right away to perform the drabble ritual. We stand face to face, spellbind into each other's eyes, and—with a delicate move—place the sacred envelopes inside the sparkling brown wooden box.

"Clinched," I utter in whisper.

"Claimed," she replies, enamoring me with an esoteric smile.

I ram it into my suitcase. "We'll take it *home*."

"*Home*?" she counters. "Where's our home, Ace? We don't have a home—yet. And it's too early for us to have one, anyway."

"It didn't take too long for us to catch *All of Lush in each other*, did it?"

"But that was a miracle."

"Dylan," I snap, "I don't have to question the universe anymore, okay? It's clinched and claimed. We're stuck with each other now whether you like it or not because it's meant to be. Now all we gotta do is find a *home* for us and our *sacred seven decades ahead*."

"Can we please just talk about this u-haul event by the time we've mushed the vicious monster?" she panics.

"Okay," I giggle.

"This is not funny, Ace," she whines. "I'm still having a hard time grasping your walnut splendor here, for god's sake, and you're already talking about us hauling our lives away into a load of apocalyptic pile."

"Would you breathe out all your doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities already?" I urge her. "I wanna be with you, Dylan. I'm sure of it. I had never been sure of anything in my entire life—until I met you. I know it sounds cheesy and scary, but—here I am—being so brave and so proud—to dance with you."

"Your parents wouldn't approve of me," she mutters, "that's for sure."

"My parents are not like *that*," I assure her. "They don't hype along with Alex Avery's kind. Though the main line has always been a part of their respective careers, but that's about it. I've just been scared to come

out, that's all. Just out of plain ignorance. But having you has given me the courage to. And I promise you—they're kind and warm. They'd only roast me without mercy once I'd get myself into—scummy situations—Like— *sacrificing my morals to please the vicious monster*—kind of scummy situation."

"You better call them, Ace," she insists. "Send them a message or something. They have to know. You've got to warn them about—Alex. Go on. Use my phone." She rests the device in my hand. "There. Don't be scared. I'm sure they'd understand. Tell them everything. Tell them the truth."

"Okay!" I kiss her on the cheek. "Thanks!" And I type away with thoughtful, honest, and detailed messages, then hit send. "I hope they wouldn't freak out, though."

"I hope the vicious monster hasn't gone that far yet!" And she pouts.

"Dylan," I laugh, "I'm gonna catch that pout with a huge smooch one day soon! You'll see!"

"Girls!" Mrs. Dawson enthuses from the stairs. "Lunch is served! Come on down!"

"Mom!" Dylan howls back. "It's not even noon yet!"

"Doesn't matter," I say, cuffing her wrist with my grip. "C'mon."



AND ALL FOUR OF US swash down in the kitchen to rejoice in delectable vegetarian meals. Like one happy family. Like a festivity of life—sizzled with love!

"I practiced in the park," Mr. Dawson says. "In front of a group of ducks swimming in the pond. I'm tellin' ya, I swear on my momma's soul, god bless, hallelujah, them ducks? They all gathered together and listened on."

Mrs. Dawson and I cheer—while Dylan skulks and rolls her eyes away. I slide my hand under the table and pinch her in the thigh. She

squeaks and drops her fork. At once, Mr. and Mrs. Dawson twist their heads to us, mystified.

"What's the matter, darling?" Mrs. Dawson asks Dylan.

"Ace pinched me 'cause I rolled my eyes," she mumbles.

Oh, god! My *one and only LUSH!* She can read my moves! Now my lower abdomen aches even more! "Your dad's gonna rock it all out," I say. "Don't jinx it. Stop with the eye-rolling."

"I just don't want those mean punks making fun of him, all right?" she grumbles.

"They wouldn't make fun of him," I reassure her. "I guarantee you that."

"You can't even mush a mosquito, for crying out loud," she blows off.

"Give me one, and I'd torture it in my palm," I jest.

"Walnut," she sneers.

"Diva," I bark back.

"Baby carrot," she snarls on.

"Potato," I gibe.

"I was a carrot, too," Mr. Dawson says, "in our fights."

"And I was the potato," Mrs. Dawson seconds.

Dylan and I exchange looks, then titter—and a sweet dispute blares out between the delightful Dawson folks—

"We should fight over something some time soon," he informs his delightful wife. "We haven't done that in a very long while."

"What was our last fight all about?" she replies.

"I think it was something about – *Abby Phillips*," he recalls.

"What about her?" she supplicates.

"That she also did a recording of *All of Lush*," he answers.

"SHE DID NOT!" she objects.

"DID TOO!" he points out. "I just got no proof of it. But I know she did. Momma told me."

"No, she didn't!" she insists. "*Carmen Cozzolino* did!"

"Her and *Abby Phillips*!" he vouches.

"You mean, in a duet?" she blurts out.

"No!" he yelps. "Respectively!"

"What year was that?" she challenges him.

"Mmm—I don't know," he ponders.

"1965," Dylan and I render in chorus.

And the delightful Dawson folks gape at us, transfixed. "Huh?" Mr. Dawson reacts.

"Both versions were released in the same year," I say.

"In 1965," Dylan rings it out again and spreads her palm before me.

"Clinched!" I meet it with a high-five.

"Claimed!" she snaps.

"That's just settled it then," Mr. Dawson says.

"How long ago was that?" Mrs. Dawson asks. "I mean, the fight?"

"It was on Dylan's 9th birthday," he replies. "On my old folks' farm. When we caught her dancing alone to the song, and dreamily smiling away. And it was *Zea Schiavione* and *Kai Cannon*'s version. It's been stuck in my head since."

"Oh, that's right!" Mrs. Dawson affirms.

And that does it! The effulgent desire to dance with her for the rest of my life radiates in with a major greenlight—enslaving me into an impulsive myriad of colorful and vivid thoughts—*I want to marry you now! I can't wait to clinch and claim the sacred seven decades! And I am desperate to be your wife!*

I smile at Dylan and whisper into her ear: "I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us."

"What did she say?" Mrs. Dawson snoops in.

"It's their *thing*," Mr. Dawson reprimands his delightful wife. "We should have a *thing*, too."

"We already have a *thing*," Mrs. Dawson replies. "There's so many of them that I can't even name one right now."

Dylan traps me in her happy and fulfilling teary eyes. "Me too."



THE MALL SHOW!

Whoah. The humble stage is set up in the food court, and it is full packed! The camera operator is good to go! Surround sound systems—checked! Community media—ready! The anticipation mounts as a middle-aged man appears on stage and performs a mic test in different tones and voice volumes. He must be the host. He addresses the crowd with punch lines about being a carnivore. He gets suppressed laughs. He gets the cue—*shut up and get it rolling already!*

Dylan and I stand close by the stage, sipping our smoothies, clinging to each other's arms—while inquisitive and emanated eyes ingest us. When I survey some audience members, smitten smiles assail at me. I smile back with a self-conscious wave at some female seniors and teenage girls. My polite response titillates them. Dylan starts to find humor in it now, cooling it around with soft giggles.

I caress her ear, and she shimmers. "Please, Ace," she pleads, whispering, "you're cramping me up. Stop it."

"Okay," I giggle. "So I call you babe—or baby. What's your term of endearment for me?"

"I haven't thought of a better one yet," she replies.

"What was the first one that you had in mind?" I ask.

"*Lushie*."

"I like *lushie*."

"No. I'm not going for it. It sounds like—a cat's name."

"It sounds cute."

"It doesn't suit you."

"What would suit me then?"

"When was the last time you looked at yourself in the mirror, anyway?"

"Dylan, looks do not fall in any category at all."

"Since when has the world said that?"

"Since the beginning of time. It's how you see me that matters here."

"It's a million beautiful things," she says. "So it's hard to decide. I'm still deliberating."

"I love you," I whisper in her ear.

"Me too," she whispers back.

Aaannndddd——the show lights on——at last!

First performer: a teenage girl belts out the *latest country hit*. Applause! Whistles! More cheers!

Second performer: a young man swags on stage with a *classic rock* strain. Standing O! A town pride! Yay!

Third performer: a young boy with an extraordinary singing voice charms the crowd with a *power ballad song*. A Sherwood Park gold! Wow!

Fourth performer: a young woman takes over the stage, seizing the audience up on their feet with a *mega pop dance* tune! Professional! She should invade a Vegas spotlight! Hands down!

Fifth performer: a young girl delights all corners with a *global knockout country melody*! A future star! Adorable! Awwwwww!

Then—

Mr. Dawson climbs on stage with his acoustic guitar, and—oh no—grisly groans—mocking giggles—unwelcoming murmurs—

Dylan sheds tears and looks at me. "I've told you so."

THIS IS NOT HAPPENING IN FRONT OF MY WALNUT PRIDE!!!

I shove my cup of smoothie to Dylan and flight up to the stage! Aaannndddd—

HUSH!!! GUSH!!! GOSH!!! GASPS!!! FREEZE!!!

Though surprised, Mr. Dawson grins at me. He gets *it*! I drag him aside and whisper into his ear. He nods, pumped up, proud! Then we both stand before the microphone. "Hi, I'm Ace Hansel!" I introduce myself, and radiant smiles hot-boogie at us, along with giddy anticipation.

"I'm David Dawson," he seconds. "And here's our little treat for you today!"

Mr. Dawson and I perform a duet of *All of Lush*, Zea Schiavione and Kai Cannon's version. AND!!!

The crowd falls in love—clicking away with their phone cameras, taking videos, compressing their way towards the stage—Even the punk kids fight for perfect shots and better spots—The camera operator and the community media spark up on a frenzy—The entire mall humps into a hysterical state! Oh, dear god.

Meanwhile, Dylan – *oh, my baby*—is wiping away her spirited tears—smiling—ecstatic—though perturbed by the bouncy and intense audience— She zests on in the moment—like it is the most valued memory stick.

Mr. Dawson ends it with a rocking strum of a power chord, and rousing SCREAMS—jammed with passionate CHEERS—throw off the roof! I evade the host as fast as I can and jump off the stage to get to Dylan, as all heads turn to my direction and—

The community media and the doting young audience rush towards me! OH MY GOD! I'm about to be SMASHED!

Dylan races on and captures me by the arm, then we horse our way for a zipping escape! Stumbles! Wheezes! Until open air slams into our faces! Though some boys and girls are still trailing along behind us—we're safe now!

We cross the street and skitter inside the house, then slam the door closed! Startling Mrs. Dawson, bouncing away from her sewing machine! "What happened?" she yelps.

"Ace performed with dad on stage," Dylan replies, catching her breath. "Now the entire Sherwood Park is dying out of complete madness! Over her mesmerizing jazzy singing voice that can instantly launch a million breaths to the heavens—and over her walnut!"

"Really?" Mrs. Dawson cheers, then suddenly realizes the ghastly consequences—"Oh dear! Oh dear! Where's dad?"

"He's still back there," Dylan gasps. "Hopefully, not entertaining those local reporters! Or we're out of here!"

"We gotta lie down," I say and drag Dylan upstairs, into the bedroom. "Oh my god!" I plop down in bed and feel my head.

"We have to leave Sherwood Park now, Ace," she panics. "I have a gut feeling it's gonna go really RACY!!! This is not just another day anymore!!!"

"Baby, I'm exhausted," I sigh. "I think I'm ready for a long nap now. C'mon. Come here. Let's take a nap together." She lays down beside me, and we snuggle. I kiss her forehead and pet her hair. "It'll be fine. They'll get over it."

"I didn't know you could sing like that," she mutters.

"Ah. Singing *was* just something that I'd do in my secret world just to give me something to smile about."

"Was?"

"Nothing made me genuinely smile, Dylan. Just my parents. The sweet darlings' affectionate gestures. And sometimes, some random strangers telling me about their beloved. Then I met you, and—"

"Don't you find it odd at all?" she interjects. "How it's all happening so fast?"

"I blame it on destiny."

"The metaphysical universe."

"*All of Lush true love wish.*"

"And—your grits!"

"My what?" I laugh.

"If you didn't grit up like that," she reasons, "then none of this would have happened at all. No walnut in my life, your hair would still be tied up, and—"

"And we'd still be looking for each other," I interrupt her. "Then some time later—I'd find myself back in Toronto, I'd spill coffee on my top, and I'd attack you at *Luster*. See how tricky destiny is?"

"That was coffee?" she smirks. "It looked like puke to me."

“Did it look like I got super drunk the night before, with some guy slobbering all over me?”

“Yeah.”

“While my walnut had been mangled into million pieces because of you.”

“How was I supposed to know a miracle flashed itself in front of me?”

“It was not a miracle,” I insist. “It was meant to be.”

“Still a miracle,” she pouts.

“Dylan!” I laugh. “One more! I swear to god, I’m kissing that pout away!”

“Shut up, walnut!” she giggles.



CHAPTER FIVE

March 24, 2019. Sunday.

Ladies and gentlemen, the world, especially all life, love, and spiritual gurus—Edmonton TV and Sherwood Park media are glorifying my walnut mall stunt—and canonizing my walnut flesh—as if I am a *Hollywood* or *New York jazz superstar*—rolled into one nutshell!

—On Sunday morning news headlines—Two woozy male TV anchors/commentators—

“Are you ready for this?” one announces, grinning, wide-eyed—his extreme enthusiasm electrifies through the TV screen—“Sherwood Park went oh-gaga yesterday—And no, it had nothing to do with hockey, neither the *Titans*, nor *Dolly Parton*’s surprise visit—It was all about one classy, jazzy, and sassy name – Ace Hansel! Roll the clip—and here she is!”—

And there I am. There’s my walnut. My very first public singing performance—a fun *All of Lush* duet with the delightful man—the father of my *one and only LUSH*—all the good human hearts—with only love and happiness to share with the rest of mankind—This purity and pride—It was one of the most heart-rending moments of my life—that I will never regret—Regardless of how much the public may consume off my privacy, my secrets, and everything else that blends along with my pulverized vanity. I would do it again in the name of my loving pulse—and grits!

Mr. Dawson appears on an ambushed interview after our singing smackdown. “She’s my daughter’s good friend,” he says. “She’s a very

nice girl.”—The reporters rumble at him with more provoking questions—“She’s just visiting. They’re just visiting. That’s all I gotta say. Thank you.” And he breaks away from the harassment.

And fanatical random witnesses pan through the screen, expressing their distraught devotion:

“Oh, man! That was pretty surreal! I got no words for it! My mind was just—all over the place! I could not even think!” one teenage boy fusses.

“She’s gotta be somebody! She’s gotta be!” one man insists.

“Gorgeous, like drop-dead-gorgeous with a drop-dead-gorgeous voice!” one lady flaps.

“Ace Hansel! Doesn’t the name sound famous already?” one teenage girl wonders. “I think I must have already heard of it somewhere! But yeah, I’m glad I went and saw her in full flesh! It was very exciting!”

“Oh yes! My wife has also fallen in love with her, all right!” one young man reveals.

“She waved and smiled at me! She looks like an angel!” one fair female senior shares her propensity.

“Oh, I broke my ankle! My friends and I ran after her!” one young woman confesses—

Dylan grabs the remote control and taps the TV off! Mr. Dawson, Mrs. Dawson, and I are all frozen on the couch, motioning with our troubled heads, exchanging looks. “Never mind Sherwood Park paper headlines!” Dylan clamors. “THIS—is already spreading way too fast, infecting the rest of the country, all over freaking North America, not to mention Social Media, and the rest of the WORLD!!!”

“It wasn’t Ace’s fault,” Mr. Dawson mutters. “It was my fault. I shouldn’t have insisted on joining the mall show again, anyway. It was only supposed to be for kids.”

“Yes, honey,” Mrs. Dawson says, holding his hand. “But it was your dream. To be on stage and to—serenade the public.”

It breaks my heart. “Well, I do not regret any of it at all,” I say, then turn to Dylan. “As a matter of fact, I would do it again! Now they know that this delightful man right here can sing and pull off a great show himself! That’s all that matters to me! I don’t care about my walnut being trampled to death like that! They’ll get over it in time, anyways! So please—stop freaking out like we’re about to be assassinated—We’ll be okay!” I step closer to her and lift her face. “We’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

“It’s just scaring the hell out of me,” she mumbles, sobbing. “Now they’re all gonna wonder about who you are, then—”

“Hey hey,” I interrupt her, “stop. Dylan, just—stop. I wouldn’t put you through more mess anymore. This is just—”

A knock busts in!

“Are we expecting anybody?” Mrs. Dawson asks her conscience-stricken husband.

“I think they must have gotten our address from the mall show organizer,” he replies. “And they must have figured that – Ace is staying here with us—so—”

“So?” Dylan flies off the handle. “So we’re on a house arrest ‘cause those psyched out paper and TV people are out there! Is that what’s going on here now?” She stomps to the window and flips away the curtain, then takes a peek and spins back to us—GROWLING!!! “This is my suicidal pit—RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW!!”

Mr. Dawson rises. “I’ll go talk to them.”

“Really, dad!” Dylan slams him. “Even if you’d have to come up with a white lie, they’d still keep on harassing you, even mom, the house—”

“It’s not only about the show!” he spouts out. “This kid from a bookstore has been razzing about you two! All over! Everywhere! With a clear surveillance video to prove it!”

“That Jason prick guy?” Dylan bellows. “I knew he was gonna do something evil! He was coming on to Ace! I even wanted to punch his groin for being so pushy and whatnot!”

“Look, darling,” he sighs, “we live in a very demented world, all right? Your mom and I got fired, Ace rescued my dignity, and both of you still have a lot of insane things that you must surmount together. What I’m trying to say is they’re not harassing us out of hate. They’re harassing us because—somehow—we’ve fascinated them. We’ve invigorated their lives a little bit. We’ve probably even taught them a little lesson there. That anyone deserves to be up there. Deserves a chance to make a dream come true—Deserves to stand up for her heart’s happiness—No, they’re not angry about what they’ve seen on the surveillance video. They just want to know the truth. ‘Cause perhaps—it resonates with a piece of themselves or their friends or their loved ones. It was a display, yes. But it was also courage and pride—” —he looks at me—“It was Ace’s courage and pride.” —back to Dylan—“Because she loves you this much. And there’s no other better explanation than that.”

I have found a third home. A home with Dylan. A home with mom and dad. A home with the delightful Dawsons a.k.a. *my future in-laws*.

“Dad,” Dylan snivels, “we were only there to pick up a box for our sacred seven decades.”

“A what, darling?” Mrs. Dawson yelps.

I press Dylan’s hand. “Babe, can I please talk to you upstairs?”

“Okay,” she agrees.

“May we be excused?” I ask for Mr. and Mrs. Dawson’s permission. They gently nod, and I drag Dylan up into the bedroom. I shut the door and convulse into a loud cry, confounding her. “I—I—I’m really deeply wildly in love—with you! And your parents! Your hearts! Your wonderful hearts! Your beautiful and simple life! Everything about you! Everything that connects to you! Everything that mirrors who you are! I am really deeply wildly in love with you and all of that!” I weep some more—out of rapturous euphoria and breathing fears. “Your fears may not equate with mine at all, Dylan. They keep on magnifying up every second. I don’t want you to be overwhelmed by stupid hysteria surrounding my flesh. I’m worried that by the time we get to Vancouver,

you stumble on a chop of my reality, and then you'd run away from me. I'm just a walnut. I worked for Alex. So I used to top manage her business because I loved it. To me, it was a significant run. It shaped a part of who I am today. When I could have had a better career than that. But I chose not to. I dismissed my master's degree for something that my heart enjoyed doing, and it took a lot of courage for me to do that and defend my decision to my parents—The bottom line is—I am no better than anyone. Than you. Than anybody out there who likes me, who stares at me, who seeks for my attention. If there's one amazing lesson that my walnut life has taught me, it would be claiming happiness regardless of the sacrifices that I would have to make—I'm with you and I want to be with you for the rest of my life because I've claimed my happiness, and I pray that it wouldn't run away. I pray that—whatever happens from here on—I don't want you to have a change of heart. I don't want to wake up one morning—and you've gone your way. I don't want to lose my *one and only LUSH—Because it's mine, and it will always be mine!* No matter how many times you doubt it! And you—you will always be mine. Always—And just like what I've said, we don't have to question the universe anymore. *Because you and I hold the truth.* And we're trapped in our sacred seven decades together—So would you be kind enough to promise me that I wouldn't lose you anytime—and any day?"

Her tears roll down on her pristine face. She nuzzles my chin and reveres my lips. *Oh baby—kiss me—please kiss me now!*—She honors my eyes with a confident smile. "Walnut—I'd love to kiss you now—But we still have a vicious monster to take down—So we'll claim it until then—"

"Clinched," I reply. "Wait a minute. Is that your term of endearment for me? *Walnut?*"

"I like the sound of it. And everything about it. And its *happiness* crack."

“Yeah, but—could you please come up with something—anatomical—instead?”

“Out of all your million beautiful things? How could I slam them altogether into one nutshell?”

“Please! Just—come up with something—adorable—Anything that sounds—humanly adorable!”

“Okay okay! God, *walnut!*”

I peep through the window—and—Argh! “They’re really out there.” A group of local media and some delirious community residents are still mooning over the house, fawning my arrogant walnut away!

“I’m not looking anymore,” Dylan protests.

“They’ll get tired of it, anyways!” I slump down in bed. “Any word from Vancouver yet?”

“Nope,” she says. “No reply yet.”

“I’m getting really worried now!”

“Just now? I’ve been worried since day one!”

“Dylan, baby, I’ve just delivered a heart-wrenching speech!”

“I’m sorry.”

I pull her into me for a snuggle. “Come here!” She buries her face in my neck, and I press my lips against her temple. “We’ve gotta book for our flight now.”

“We should leave tonight,” she replies. “I don’t want those people tormenting you more. It sucks me into my fears, like my suicidal pit is already welcoming me in.”

“Baby,” I sigh, “*I’ve just delivered a heart-wrenching speech.*”

“I’m sorry, Ace. My paranoia just can’t help it, all right?”

“Your paranoia is driving me to dig my own grave myself!”

“I’ll try harder to kick it out of the way. Just—give me some time.”

“Fine. Now we need to use your folks’ computer. See if we can fly tonight.”

“Use my phone,” she says.

"All right, then," I yelp, and she rests her leg over me, with her arm limping around my stomach. It vamps up my lower abdomen that I wind my head away, fracturing into a romantic reverie of our—*first time*. "Babe—"

"Don't move yet," she moans, closing her eyes. "I like this. It makes me feel like— you really are mine—forever."

"I am yours all through our sacred seven decades," I reply. "What are you talking about? Are you pulling the fear trigger again?"

"I don't know," she mumbles. "I just have a feeling that—something—very atrocious is about to happen between us."

"Please don't say that," I beg, pulling her closer. "Please—don't you ever —EVER—say that!"

"Okay," she groans. "Just don't move yet."

I kiss her head. "I really like the smell of your hair. I'll find out what brand of shampoo you use—since you've said it's—*just something random*."

"You still remember that?" she laughs.

"It was one of your cute moments. How could I forget?—So what was my cute moment? Do I have one?"

"*What's my deal? I'm a walnut! I'm a walnut! You see me otherwise, I know—but inside—I'm a walnut!*"

"Oh my god!" I crow out, clapping! "That was hilarious!"

"So then I said—" she continues, "*—where is this walnut introduction going, Miss Ace Hansel?—You could have just said—I'm dragging you around the country to stop a vicious monster! And then—you ended up rescuing my dad's dream—along the way—And you became a super-star!*"

"I'm afraid I would have to disagree," I say. "You—all of you—have made my *All of Lush true love wish*—come true—"

She kisses me on the nose. "I love you very much, walnut."

"You really are settling for walnut, huh?"

"I'm still thinking of a humanly adorable one. Cool it."

Her cell phone rings! She rolls away and picks it up from the bedside table. My mom's number is flashing on the screen. "It's my mom!" She hands it to me, and I answer it. "Mom! Hi!" I shriek on the mouthpiece—then put her on speaker—

"Hey, honey," she says on the other line, sounding worried. "Are you okay? Is everything okay?"

"It's fine," I reply. "Well, not really. But —it will be okay—hopefully—"

"We couldn't get back to you right away," she explains. "Your dad and I have been in panic—and deliberating over—this—reprehensible case—We'd like you to know that—the only thing that has made us go off the deep end—is—how you sold your soul to Alex—"

"I'm really sorry, mom," I weep—as Dylan locks me in a tight hug—"I'm awfully ashamed of it! I'm so sorry!"

"Most of your dad's clients have dropped him," she continues. "And some of my lucrative accounts have also backed off. At once."

"Mom," I wail on, "please—I didn't mean for all this to happen—I'm so sorry that you and dad got into this mess—my mess!"

"We're not worried about that at all," she replies. "We're worried about you and Dylan—and her mom and dad—" Dylan and I gape at each other in a reserved wield. "Honey," mom carries on, "as long as everybody is safe and sound, that's all that matters. We only regret the fact that you've finally found the courage to share your truth and happiness with us at an inauspicious time—and through virtual messages—However, no matter what, we're glad that—your heart is proud and smiling now."

"Thanks, mom," I sob.

"Please—give our hugs to Dylan's parents," she says. "We'll see you—and your *LUSH* pretty soon. Love you. Ciao." And she hangs up.

Dylan gazes at me in ironic woes. I wipe off her tears with my fingers. "What's the matter?" I ask.

"You did not delete those sent messages," she responds. "But I refused to read them out of respect—Did you really tell them everything?"

"Every truth that I could ever snag out of me," I confess, "yeah. Except for the—you know—engagement bash—or—"

"I'm already falling in love with your parents. This is even becoming more dangerous."

"I've told you, they're kind and warm!"

"What's gonna happen to the vicious monster mission now?"

"We're still taking her down!"

"And how exactly are we gonna do that? She's vicious and powerful, for crying out loud!"

"Vancouver will give us the major light bulbs!"



THE HOUSE ARREST LASTS for the rest of the day. It is only until evening that the front lot is cleared off. Though some media trolls—and maybe—even a few stalkers—may still patrol around the area—the public delirium is dying down now. In the open air, at least. But who knows how my walnut virus has poisoned the world wide web and the rest of the major media outlets across the country. Do I have to justify what's in the surveillance video? Nope. It was for what it was. It is. It will always be about—how baby carrot has reached the finish line of her potato search. Do I have to take pride in my mall stunt? Nope. I am taking pride in sharing the moment with the delightful man who created my *All of Lush true love*. So I have nothing to say to the curious, the fanatics, and the internet glues. I wholeheartedly thank their admiration—in good or bad definitive sprout. I am on a mission to take the vicious monster down the drain. For justice. For courage and pride. For true love.

Our flight is around 11 o'clock at night. The delightful folks drive us to the airport. As I hug them both a momentary goodbye, Mr. Dawson whispers to me, "Thank you for making my dream come true."

"Thank you for making my *All of Lush true love wish* come true," I whisper back.

"What did she say?" Mrs. Dawson inquires.

"She's thanking us for making her *All of Lush true love wish* come true," Mr. Dawson replies.

"Oh, darling!" Mrs. Dawson cups my face with her hands. "You're a family now! Come back soon?"

"Uh, mom," Dylan butts in. "The walnut is squashed here in Alberta. So no."

"We'll ship you both over to—" I turn to Dylan—"Baby—Toronto—?"

"Yep!" Dylan snaps.

"Toronto it is!" I address the delightful folks. "That's what she said."

"We should do that, too," Mr. Dawson informs his delightful wife. "They ask each other. Over certain things."

"You've just asked me this morning over a baking soda case," Mrs. Dawson replies. "Whether it's good for hair or not."

"We haven't come to a conclusion yet," he argues. "It didn't even take a second for Dylan to answer Ace's question. So is it good for hair or not?"

"Well—" Mrs. Dawson stammers, contemplating.

"It is!" Dylan and I yelp at once.

"That's just settled it then," Mr. Dawson says.

Dylan spreads her palm before me. "Claimed."

I meet it with a high-five. "Clinched."

We hug them both again, then roll our way into the terminal. "You think Alex has been back in Vancouver by now?" Dylan asks.

"Maybe," I sigh.

"So have you got anything in mind yet?" she bombards on.

"Vancouver can answer to that," I reply.

"Can you turn yourself into a walnut superhero? Or a baby carrot air missile? We are up against a vicious monster who can even destroy Venus and Mars. How on earth are we gonna outwit that?"

"Dylan, please, have a little faith in me."

"I just don't want anything to happen to you."

"Nothing is gonna happen to me. What do you think she would do? Poison me?"

"Or trap you in a wicked setup," she surmises.

"Let's talk about how we're gonna outwit the vicious monster," I insist, "instead of the vicious possibilities that could happen to me."

"If something happens to you," she grunts, "I swear to god, I'd go for the mushing mission with a very dangerous weapon."

"Dylan," I giggle, "you've almost convinced a bug around here!"

"I'll show you some courage soon," she yaps, pouting.

"Some courage with a pout?" I laugh. "That would work!"



THE *arrogant walnut* in me is bestowed by feverish rubbernecks and avid news mongers—from checking in—to security—all the way to terminal waiting areas—as the *outrageous mania*—caused by my impromptu singing exhibition—along with the flashing pride of introducing my *sacred seven decades beauty* glistening through the bookstore surveillance video—streams on TV news feature reports emblazoned around the airport—overlaying political chaos and worldwide concerns—Nothing rude at all. In fact, Dylan gets venerating heads and fair amount of attention as well—All eyes and all smiles hail us—It's cute in a way. And *my wife seems appeased about it now*, though—I know—her doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities would smash in at any given time.

We occupy a spot away from any human contact. As we take our seats, with our suitcases and hand-carries plumped beside us, I notice her pale face. “Babe, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she mutters.

Her eyes are dilating. I feel her body temperature with the back of my hand. She’s burning up. “You’ve got a flu!” I yelp. “Do you feel dizzy and nauseated?”

“A little bit,” she replies.

“Oh my god!” I scramble for the aspirin bottle from my purse. “I gotta go grab some water.” I kiss her on the cheek—and RUN!!!

I spot a coffee shop along the way and screech to a full stop. An aghast young woman tends to me. “Hi,” I pant, “may I please get a bottle of water?”

“Ace Hansel,” she uproars. “Oh—my—god!”

“Thank you,” I reply—in the spirit of awkward society—“I just need a bottle of water, please?”

“Absolutely!” She hops away and snatches a water bottle from the fridge, then hands it to me—still star-stricken—“Oh—my—god—You’re—just—amazing—and drop dead stunningly—GORGEOUS!!”

And I forgot my wallet! “Oh, shoot.” I place the water bottle on the counter. “I’m sorry. I’ll be back. I forgot my wallet.”

“No! It’s okay! You can have it! All yours!” she offers in a blasting tone.

“No, that’s not right,” I insist. “I’ll be back. I promise.”

“No! Just take it! And just swing by later!” she thrills on.

“Oh, okay,” I say, smiling. “Thank you. I’ll be back in a sec.”

“Is it true that you’ve got a wife?” she mouses in.

“Yeah,” I answer, with gleaming confidence. “She’s caught a flu all of a sudden, and this water is for her.”

“Wow,” she snaps, pleased! “Well, I hope she feels better soon.”

“Thank you!” I scurry back to Dylan—who seems to fall asleep in her seat now—I sit beside her, then give her the pill and the water bottle. She pops it in and swooshes it down. I feel her head, and it inflames my skin. I want to scream my heart out—but it might only worsen her condition. So stalwart walnut must leap up!

“I think it’s because we haven’t had good rest and good sleep,” she murmurs, “and then there’s the Alberta weather—”

“Oh, baby—” I moan, soothing her hair, “—I’m so sorry for putting you all through this mess!”

“It’s okay,” she shrugs, and I quash her with kisses all over her cheeks! “Ace!” She scruples away and looks at me. “I’m already cramped up. You’re making it worse.”

“Sorry,” I giggle. “Oh, I gotta head back to the coffee shop lady.” I nab my wallet out of my purse. “I forgot my wallet. I haven’t paid for it yet. She just let me take it.”

“Even if she didn’t recognize you,” she says, “she’d still let you take it, anyway.”

“That’s not nice,” I reply and kiss her on the nose, then wish back to the coffee shop. “Hi!” I greet the coffee shop lady, who has been anticipating for my reappearance right outside of the stand. She rewards me with a beseeching smile. Uh-oh. This is trouble! I kick the thought out of my head and slip out a bill from my wallet. “Here’s for the water.”

“May I please have a selfie with you?” she prays.

“I—I—” I hesitate—“I—I’m not—”

“PLEASE!!!” She almost kneels down before me.

“Okay,” I give in—*I would rather dunk myself in a dam of ketchup—*

“YAY!!!” she cheers and reveals her smartphone. As she poses close to my face, I force a *logical smile*—Oh. Yeah. Logical smile. Whatever that means—And she snaps a shot—“Oh my god!” she lauds over the photo. “You’re such a—total goddess!!”

I want to gag! “It’s just grits, as my wife would say!”

“Ace Hansel?!!” A group of female travellers—hollers and dashes over! WITH GUNG-HO SHRILLS!!! WHOOPS!!! OH NO!!! NO NO NO NO NO!!! Others catch on—and jump towards the commotion! MORE SOULS SWARM IN!!! Oh, dear god!!! What has the world become??? I AM BEING MOBBED—

—in a *Hollywoodish* kind of way!!!

I stay collected and smile, though my chest explodes with a murder of crows! I let them take videos and pictures while some manage to sneak away with selfies! Until I can’t breathe anymore and—“It was nice meeting you all, but I really have to go now! My wife’s got a flu—so—”

“We love you! I love you! Love you, Ace Hansel!” they jam on, as I break away and strut back to Dylan!

I throw my exhausted walnut into the seat and pant. Dylan looks at me, snickering. “It is not funny!” I yelp.

“I’ve heard the hysteria from here,” she smirks. “It’s like—*The Beatles* mania.”

“That would be way too much for my walnut to take on,” I say. “I’m not going for that route. We—are not going for *The Beatles* mania route.”

“Just pray that the rest of the country is still clueless about your walnut epidemic,” she stresses.

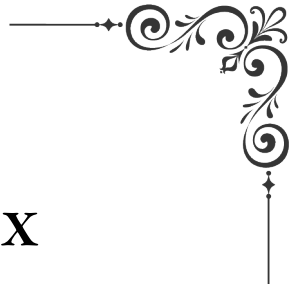
“How are you feeling, though?” I feel her head.

“It’s okay,” she replies. “I’ll feel better once we get to Vancouver.” A text message spurts into her cell phone. She checks the screen and hands the device to me. “It’s your mom.”

I read the message, and—“Oh my god!” I squeak. “Dad’s just been rushed to the hospital. Very bad hypertension kick. And here you are with a flu! Argh!” I poke my head with my fist.

“Ace!” She catches me by the wrist to calm me down. “It’ll all be fine.” And she strokes my face—with her impassioned fingers—then rests a longing smooch on the side of my lips. I am compelled to dodge

up for our *first* —but I don't want her to get mad for breaking the rule! Even more—ARGH!!! “We'll be fine,” she pledges.



CHAPTER SIX

Vancouver. March 25, 2019. Monday.

The plane ride aggravated Dylan's flu. She threw up, and was in stinging chills, coupled with shortness of breath.

It is past 2 o'clock in the morning when we swoop out of the airport and take a cab to the hospital—where dad has been admitted to—I have notified mom of the predicament, and she meets us by the entrance upon our arrival.

"Oh, sweetheart!" Mom checks on Dylan, then looks at me. "This is a severe flu!"

"Oh, mom!" I hug her, almost in tears. "I'm about to explode! I can't even think anymore!"

She hands me her car keys. "Here. Drop all your stuff into my trunk. It's just parked at the east end of the lot. I'm taking Dylan inside."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hansel," Dylan mumbles, smiling.

"Oh, no worries, sweetheart," mom replies, caressing Dylan's face. "You'll be fine now."

And I stand there, surrounded by our belongings, feeling the floating tears of enormous love. My loving mother, caring for my *one and only LUSH* — with all her accepting and genuine heart.

I AM THE MOST BLESSED HUMAN ALIVE!!!

Dylan is treated in a private room nearby dad's. Both of them are asleep now. Due to restrictions on visiting hours, mom and I drive away to a 24-hour diner.

We sit in a booth, and a waitress flounces over to take our order. Her dumbstruck reaction as she lays her bowled eyes on me—well—pleases my mother—with an unassuming brush. Growing up, I would get engrossing attention and stares everywhere. When I became a fully grown woman, my walnut would get disgusted and displeased by strangers' subconscious and emotional extolment— especially by those who personally knew me and casual or business encounters. Until I learned how to shatter it up and get it over with!

Though this time around, it has amped on! As my walnut is now attached to *All of Lush* —and my *one and only LUSH*! Hopefully, this waitress is still smoothing along in the sane world, uncontaminated and—

“Ace Hansel,” she yelps, taken aback. Uh-oh. And there goes the validation of my walnut epidemic, corrupting the rest of the country.

Mom simpers. “You’ve watched it, too, huh?”

“Excuse me?” I whoop at my mother. “Mom!”

“Oh my god!” the waitress wobbles. “I can’t believe I’m literally meeting you right now! Like, for real! And you’re just—wow! WOW!!!”

“Honey,” mom addresses me, “it’s all over. Your dad got overwhelmed by it, that’s why his blood pressure went berserk.”

“Oh no!” Remorse belts across my throat.

“May we order now, please?” mom says to the waitress.

“Of course!” And she gets her notepad ready, as her dreamy eyes gun through me.

“Just a strawberry pie and a cup of black coffee for me, please,” mom instructs her, then nods at me. “Honey, what are you having?”

“Coffee,” I mutter, stifling a smile at the waitress. “Thank you.”

“Right on!” she cheers and trots away.

“He was too ecstatic about it!” mom says. “It was a whole lot of mix, really. Your *All of Lush* superb performance, which completely surprised us ‘cause the last time we heard you sing was when you appeared

on a talent show in Elementary school. And then—there's Alex's revenge. Ugh!" Her face goes dim. "I am not even going to lampoon you as to why you *dated* her. What's done is done."

"I'm sorry, mom," I quiver. "You've no idea how ashamed I am of it all. It's disgraceful."

She holds my hand, perusing me with her forbearing eyes, "Honey—"

"Mom—" I mumble, interrupting her, "I'm sorry if I—*came out* that way—I was just—"

"Bragging about a charming girl whose good heart seized your mother's instincts into a comforting fix," she interjects, caressing my face, "was the best thing that you had ever done out of all—your mess."

I smile. "Isn't she perfect?"

"An easy breeze," she agrees. "Her purity and all. Which reflects her parents' sterling character, too."

"Oh, mom!" I gush. "Her delightful folks! Oh, god! How they melt my heart away! Their understanding, support, and love! Everything! I can't even express to you how embarrassed, grateful, and conscience-ridden I am! I want to make it up to them somehow, but they've dismissed my offer flat-out! I feel really bad—and—"

"Your dad and I have had a talk about it, too," she sighs. "It's heart-breaking. We'll figure something out, honey. Something special for them. Don't worry."

"We should," I reply. "I really do hope they'd accept it, though. Or I'd be smashed for the rest of my life. Oh, god. I cannot believe Alex would do such vicious things to innocent people. How could she just—"

"Don't mention her name anymore," she snaps. "It's making my blood curdle! Ugh!"

The waitress returns with our order and grins at me. "Are you ever gonna record a song or something? Oh my god! That would be like—the greatest thing ever! I'm just sooo freakin' in love

with—YOU! Like, everything about you! You blow my mind—like—like all the way—and—and—”

“Uh, no,” I interrupt her. “It’s not my thing, really.”

“Her *wife* wouldn’t be pleased about it,” mom drops a follow-up.

“Oh.” Her disappointing sigh flies into my face. “Well, I’m still a fan, and will always be a fan! Can we take a selfie?”

“I’m sorry,” I politely decline. “I would love to, but not right now. My wife and my dad are both in the hospital, so—I’m just not—”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that,” she says. “Maybe next time when you happen to come by?”

“Sure,” I reply, smiling.

“Okay!” She roosters away, swaying her curvaceous behind—as an enticing token.

“Now you’ve got another problem,” mom warns me.

“What is it?” I sip my coffee.

“The entire straight female population is turning into lesbians,” she says. “Just like your sweet darlings.”



MOM HAS DROPPED ME off at my apartment—my affluent abode that might draw a lot of pouts in Dylan’s face—with her screaming insecurities as the lawful excuse. I unzip my suitcase and take the wooden box out, then leave a loud smack on it and hide it away under the bed. I set our purses on the office table and take a seat to clear my mind. How will I take down the vicious monster? Nothing moves. As my mind seagulls its anxious run to my *one and only LUSH* and dad.

My phone drifts through my thought. It wouldn’t hurt to turn it on and check all my incoming messages and calls. I yank it out of my purse and obey my momentum. And—!

IN FULL BLAST!! 108 MESSAGES!! 48 VOICEMAILS!!

I browse through my inbox first—mostly from my sweet darlings—TROUBLED—CRUSHED—BETRAYED – HEARTBRO-

KEN!!! IN A HELTER-SKELTER SPIN!!! ME, HAVING A WIFE!!! AND HOW IN THE NAME OF GOD I ENDED UP IN SHERWOOD PARK ALL OF A SUDDEN!!!

Stop! Okay. So—

—roll out the facts—Here's what they have known: Tuesday, I'm back in town. Wednesday, I'm back to work. Thursday, meeting with all the store managers. Friday, just another regular TGIF with a bistro sojourn after work—Huh. The way their upsetting hearts sound—Alex is still sulking away from announcing my buh-bye walnut—because she knows that they would all resign at once—ghosting her business out!

I smile at my victory!

However, I would not allow my sweet darlings to ditch the jobs that they love over my walnut pride. That would be way too much walnut worship now.

I so hate Ace Hansel!! ARGH!!

And then—some surprising messages from my relationship stat: the one and only—Stacey Peckinham—the striking photographer!

Desperation crinkles out of her words—To answer all her madcap questions: *Yes, I'm out—and married to my All of Lush true love. No, I won't have coffee with you. Yes, I am super deeply in love. No, don't you dare turn up on my doorstep. Yes, I was happy you and I broke up. And no, I will never go to your photo exhibit at all.*

Why do I feel like she's going to be another vicious monster? Yes, I know she can be cruel—but not—a vicious monster kind of cruel! What is she up to? Why is she being an erratic sapphic boom now? We never even stayed friends after we went separate ways.

Ah. My relationship signature with her: discreet. Now she wants REDEMPTION!!

Well, sorry, cassava. Baby carrot is already set to spend the sacred seven decades with her potato—the one and only potato—it has captured at the finish line.

CLINCHED AND CLAIMED!!!

I take a shower and settle for a long nap. However, no matter how drained I am, I can't bring myself to sleep at all. I keep on tossing around—like an acupuncture patient schlepping all the needles out because they either rebel with itches or tickles. I check the time—it's past 7 o'clock in the morning. Dylan and dad must be up by now given the medical treatment timeline.

I spring out of bed, get dressed, and—I freeze in front of the mirror—Game up! Keeping my hair down—in honor of my principle! No brush. Just gotta keep its wavy style—though in a very messy hip! Makeup? That would be supercilious Ace Hansel now. Abolished! There. Whoah. Just a damp of lipstick should put my confidence on the beam. Argh!—And I frown at myself! No no!

I change my outfit—to red jeans and a white slim fit top—and the fashion self-critic in me still can't snuff off the actual reflection—The arrogant walnut with its mod swag—and futile nutshell—that would never make a difference in human chronicle—at all!

I end up with a pair of fake prescription glasses that I wear to bust out elite regulars—both males and females—who would still come on to my walnut—regardless! I am cursed! Argh! Seriously! The universe is a lot more meaningful than gloating over *Helen of Troy* or *Adonis*, you know?

I grab my purse and my car keys, then head down into the parking lot and pull out of the driveway. Good and healthy breakfast for Dylan and dad along the way—And—

Really! Along the way—not even a minute drive—a familiar figure creeps around by the street, facing the building. What the—?

She recognizes my car and runs towards my direction—fouled up—forcing me to pull over in an instant to spare us both from any impending accident or injury. She is dressed in a jogging suit—her long black hair is pulled up—sweaty—still striking! The last time we ran into each other was at a common friend's bridal shower party—While I

was knuckling under Alex's romantic spurs – believing that she was—a *little human*—!

She stands in front of the car, flaming at me—with punch-drunk tears spouting out of her wondrous eyes. I knock my head against the steering wheel and release the deepest breath out of my karmic walnut. Argh!

Okay, so I played *Judas* in the discreet sapphic relationship course. I broke her heart—many times over—and yet she would still fight for it—Until my love dropped out of sight—That I dropped out of her sight—completely! Leaving her with these thorny words that may have still been sucking into her heart to this day—‘*You’re not my true love wish. I can’t pretend being in love with you anymore*’—And I murdered my own words when Alex obsessively demonstrated her *human side* to win me over—and adorn me with a snake of *fears*! What a hypocrite!



I SLIDE OUT OF THE car, and she darts towards me. “Just jogging by,” she breathes. “I was hoping you were up there. Since Ace Hansel Vancouver sightings are wandering around everywhere now.”

“Stacey,” I sigh.

“This is so unfair, Ace! And you know it! You know how hard I tried to make everything work for our relationship! You know how much I loved you! You know how many sleepless nights you made me fucking cry the whole time! I was miserable when you left me to rot that I had to leave the country to forget every painful thing that you had done to me! Then all of a sudden, one morning, I woke up to this fucking news? How dare you do this to me? Who is she, huh? Are you gonna make her cry, too, turn her life upside down, and make her stab herself to death? Do you find satisfaction in breaking our hearts? Huh? Fuck you, Ace Hansel! Fuck you!”

“I’ll take the big f-word, and I deserve those harsh words. I’m sorry. But my heart has nothing to explain to you—or to anybody for that

matter—at all. I’ve got my *true love wish* now—that you and everybody else would have probably made fun of behind my back the minute after I revealed it to you—But guess what? It’s true. And it came true. And I’m proud of it. I’m proud of having her in my life. I’m proud to tell the world how much she makes my heart sing like that. Since I met her, courage took over me—owned me – in the most unimaginable ways. She makes me do hell-bent and amazing things that I have never done before—that I could have never done myself—She makes me see all the beautiful things even more beautiful—For the first time, I feel all truths gushing out of falling in love—of being in love—of love – And I didn’t look for her—She didn’t look for me either—We only did one crazy thing together—We wished for each other—in one song—in one beautiful song—And that is how our story went—That is how my life changed—So yeah—I’m so sorry for breaking your heart, Stacey—I was naive and—”

“Stop it,” she interrupts me. “The one excruciating thing about you, Ace Hansel—is how transparent you are. That your heart aches so much when you lie, then you run away ‘cause you can’t stand lying anymore. And such trait of yours made me cry—a lot! I suppose you only stuck around with me ‘cause you just wanted to console my pathetic life, though you never really loved me the same way. Did you? Am I right?”

“Yeah.” I look away. How could I be so snooty back then? Oh, god. My past is an embarrassing circuit! I should have been hung to death!

“Well, I can see and feel how much you’d die for this girl,” she says. “And I hate to say it—but I adore your love story—”

“Thanks,” I blush. “She’s perfect!”

“Your heart is fully sunk,” she giggles.

“You have no idea!” I reply.

“And you still haven’t changed. You still have that—power of—all the beautiful things in the world—dumped into one—drug.”

“One drug! Come on now! That’s not nice!”

"Well, you are a drug," she asserts. "Like, you make people fall in love with you at first glance, and even soften up their crabs. Look what you've just done to me. Shutting off my stormy glands in a snap, and now I feel like a total idiot."

"Stacey," I gasp, "I didn't mean—"

"That huge side of you caused me so much agony 'cause you'd make it so impossible for me to do something crazy or get even or hurt you back—every time you refused to make love or do something—And especially when you dumped me 'cause you couldn't pretend any longer. God, Ace. You're probably an alien from Venus."

"I'm really sorry for everything."

"I threw it all out now," she says. "After 18 months of stewing around!"

"I'm sorry," I apologize again. "Look, uh, Dylan and dad have both been confined in a hospital—"

"Is that her name?" she asks. "Dylan?"

"Yeah," I reply.

"Why are they in the hospital? What happened?"

"Dylan's caught a flu, and dad's hypertension has punched in, so—"

"Ace," she pleads, "can we be friends?"

"Y-yeah," I shrug. "I guess."

"Great. Can I meet her, though?"

"Um, would you mind if I'd talk to Dylan about it first? I mean, I just don't want her to be—more—overwhelmed here—you know? She's been having a hard time—dealing with—things—*My things*—so—"

"Can I call you?"

"My phone is hacked. I'll let you know as soon as I get a new one."

"You promise?"

"Stacey, please don't expect anything from me anymore. You've already heard my story."

"I'm not expecting anything from you, Ace," she says. "Not anymore. I just want us to be friends. I've already heard your heart. It's enough."

"Okay." Though suspicions peck in. But I tortured her heart. Should I compensate it for—a little friendship? Perhaps, I must give her the benefit of the doubt here. There's a tinkle of sincerity in her voice, anyway. "Okay. I trust your word then—I gotta go—"

"All right," she sighs. "I'll just—um—would you please—just give me a ride—home?"

Oh, god. I do not want to be rude to the woman who almost gave up on life because of me. "Uh—sure. Hop in." I sense another vicious monster coming to life! Get your walnut shield ready, Miss Ace Hansel!



DRIVING STACEY PECKINHAM home—a.k.a. the relationship stat that shouldn't have existed—out of my bleeding conscience—spews me into a dreadful thought that this may be redefined as—cheating—Although it's just my hyperbolic sentiment—but my plaguing anatomy is too much to bear now as I cannot stand being near another woman, who, I know, would rack Dylan's heart.

Bummer. The morning traffic is not cooperating with my prayer now. Argh! Move it! I need to escape from another vicious monster here! Please!

"So when did you guys get married?" she asks.

Stacey, please, shut up!

Okay, I have to lie—to make her go away. But no. Wait. Analyze. She knows Alex—who also knows that she's my ex—who doesn't know that the latter has just recently become my ex—who is the original monster—who can brainwash just about anybody—anybody like Stacey! Oh, how my logic can still form a complex roundabout! Dear

god. "Uh—the bookstore guy pestered me so badly, so—I introduced Dylan as my wife."

"So you're not married yet!" she laughs.

"Soon," I clear my throat. "We'll get married soon."

"How soon are we talking about here?"

"We're still sorting out some stuff. Living arrangements and all."

"Where did you guys meet?" she interrogates.

"Toronto," I reply. I HAVE TO SHUT HER UP NOW!!! "How's your photo exhibit coming along?"

"It's fine. It's this coming Wednesday. You and Dylan should come check it out."

"I don't know. I'd have to ask Dylan first."

"Can't you make your own decision and just tag her along?" she assaults on.

"Stacey," I lash back, "it doesn't work that way, okay? That is not how we compromise. I have to make sure she's positively one hundred percent okay with whatever it is that pops into my life. I'm also the same way with her. If we both think it would hurt the other, then that would be an easy no. Her opinion is the most valued to me. My opinion is her top priority, too. We talk it out and look for the most rational conclusion. That's how we run."

"I can't believe you've suddenly blossomed into one professional lesbian relationship goddess! Three years of being with you, and you wouldn't even give a shit about our relationship, my opinions—You'd just let me do and say anything—and you'd just go get yourself busy with work. It's ridiculous."

"Stacey, would you please rewind my love story in your head?"

"I GET IT!!" she raises her voice—on the warpath!

"There is no reason for you to act this way at all," I exclaim. "I'm sorry I hurt you so badly, and I deserve all the contempt. But I don't want to be your consoling perk anymore—just to make up for it." We

drive on. Whew! Come on come on come on! One more kilometer, and I can breathe.

"If you hadn't met her, would you still consider us getting back together?"

"No!"

"I was good to you, Ace!"

"But I wasn't really in love."

"Then why the hell did you even stay with me for?"

"Because I thought you could teach me how to fall in love with you more to keep me around."

"What made you fall in love with me to begin with?"

"Your photo subjects. The happiest and kindest faces."

"You fell in love with me because of that?"

"That's hard to pull. They make you fall in love with life—and trust the beauty found in the universe."

"That's it? Nothing about ME at all?"

"That's a huge part of you that you should be proud of."

"I'm not even gonna ask how you fell in love with Dylan," she murmurs.

"Oh, Stacey," I gasp, smiling. "All the gravitational energies harassed everything inside of me the second I saw her for the first time."

"I don't wanna listen to that!" She looks out the window.

"That was—unkind of me," I gulp. "I'm sorry."

"So are you guys staying in Vancouver for good or what?"

"Toronto. She lives in Toronto, so—"

"You're moving your whole life to Toronto? You're out of your mind!"

"I wanna get away from everything, too!"

"You wanna get away from me!"

"Stacey, please, leave yourself out of it."

"Then the least that you could do for me is show up at my photo exhibit," she insists. "With her!"

"I have to talk to Dylan about it first," I reply, and we pull over in front of her apartment building. Thank god! But—oops!

"No, Ace," she protests, "you have to grace my photo exhibit whether she likes it or not. After all the pain that you caused me all through this time, and you can't even grant me a simple favor?"

"You're basically asking me to dive back into your consoling perk here," I assess.

"I'm basically asking you for a truce!"

"Which could compromise Dylan's feelings."

"It wouldn't compromise her feelings if she feels secure and confident about how much you love her!" she reasons.

Bites! All Dylan's doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities rampage around my heart, erupting anguish—engulfing me down. "You don't know her," I mutter.

"No, I don't, Ace! But since you and Dylan know so much about love, then what scares the hell out of you two, huh? Why do you forbid yourself from going?"

"Because I don't want her to see more people tottering around *my world*, and I certainly don't want her to experience a thing or two in it! It overwhelms her! It scares her away! I love her with all my heart, and I don't want her to feel bad about anything! Please respect that!"

She gapes at me—in awe—with a bit of compassion—"Okay. It's fine." And she attempts to kiss me—

I push her back right away! NOOO!!! "Respect me, too, Stacey," I say. "Respect my heart."

"It was only a goodbye kiss," she yowls.

I turn on the engines. "I'm sorry. Can't. Bye."

She sits still, piercing into the blues. "I'm still in love with you, Ace."

"I'm not your true love wish, Stacey," I say. "Your true love is waiting for you out there—somewhere. Just trust your wish."

She jumps out of the car and SLAMS the door!



IT IS ALMOST BRUNCH time when I pull into a busy breakfast restaurant lot. I sit in the car for a moment—to reflect—That’s right. Echo it all out—the turgid walnut epidemic—Eeps! The ransacked acumen. The shallow judgment. Bring up the morals! Oops! Where are they? No. Nothing’s going to happen. So stop being such a vain manic, Ace Hansel. Look at yourself in the rear-view mirror. Go on. Take a look. You’re human. An actual person. With an actual face. With an actual physical body—that—that—ARGH!!!

“I hate you!” I grumble at my reflection. “I just need to pick up breakfast for Dylan and dad.”

It will be fine. Shut up, presumptuous walnut! Let me go!

I grab my purse and lope towards the restaurant. And—oh, god—IT IS PACKED!! What now??

Okay. Stop gnawing at yourself too much, Ace Hansel! You’re fine. Remember, you’re baby carrot. You just need to wear your hair down ‘cause it’s the only thing you’ve got that never lies. That’s it. There’s nothing special about you at all. Nothing! So—breathe—you’d get through this—with delectable breakfast in hand. Hmm.

I step inside, and heads turn to me in a breeze! The heads that have been lining up at the counter—picking their patient nerves—Now the heads motion over my walnut—dribbling in quiet speculations—soliciting information through whispers—I ignore their intense exchanges and pondering yet defeated eyes. I take over the end spot and wait.

The nebbly woman lining up before me—turns her head—in graceful SLOW MO! And her face is now staying afloat two inches away from mine—

One of my natural habits is to smile at strangers who bestow me with their kind eyes—no matter how their ardor strokes through me—I just see the kind eyes—And this nebbly woman owns such a pair—

I draw a subconscious smile—And—

“ACE HANSEL!!!!” she raves, alerting the busy room!

FREEZE!!! SILENCE!!! UTENSILS CLANK ON THE FLOOR!!! ALL HEADS ARE SUSPENDED TOWARDS THE NEBBY WOMAN'S VOICE!!!

"IT'S ACE HANSEL, Y'ALL!!" a hipster from the line up shouts. JUMPING MOVEMENTS CRUSH THEIR WAY TO MY DIRECTION!!! The nebbly woman SCREAMS!!! Oh, dear god. Who am I? Who am I? Really! Answer me that!

AND THE ABSURD HUBBA-HUBBA OVER MY WALNUT SLAMS INTO AIR!!! CHANTING MY NAME—MY HUMAN NAME!!! I am about to be trampled to death!!

And the walnut cracks its way back into the lot—before the crowd smashes its arrogant shell!!!

I jump into the car and turn on the engines! A throng chases after me! DRIVE!!! Oh, please. I hope I won't run over some souls' feet! Please, get away! Spare your lives!

Some are taking videos and snapping away photos with their smart-phones—as my walnut struggles to escape! Oh no! I don't want to hurt anybody! Just get out of the way—please! PLEASE!!!

NO LUCK!! My car is mobbed!! Now THINK!! Something shrewd—yet humanly palpable! THINK, GODDAMMIT!!!

I smile and wave at them—and their FANATICAL SCREAMS SOAR AWAY—to the heavens!! They get busy with their devices now—as they slowly make their way for me—Though they're still CATERWAULING and throwing FLYING KISSES—At least, I have a chance to disappear on the hubbub!

I drive out of the lot, into the street, disparaging the walnut epidemic in my head! Oh, how am I going to bring brunch to my *one and only LUSH* and dad now? My life has become a complete turmoil, and it would repulse Dylan a lot more!

No phone! No breakfast! No liberating walnut cracks! Where is this 5-minute fame going? I hope it would only last that long. Now the

sweet darlings are going to find out that I have been back. More acts of betrayal. More questions. More helter-skelter spins—

And once the truth apprehends them—THE VICIOUS MONSTER IS GOING DOWN THE DRAIN!!! OH NO!!! They must hate me now! I must do something—UGLY and SUPERHUMAN—to CLEAN UP THE MESS!!

HOW?? I haven't even unearthed my vicious vein yet!!!

Alex! What is she up to next? Perhaps, plotting a wicked set-up—just like what Dylan has hypothesized. But—it would only destroy her business in the most scandalous stabs! So no. Let's leave it off. I am safe. We are safe. Except for the walnut mania that might cripple my sacred seven decades!

Dear *true love wish*: Please vaporize Dylan's doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities. Keep our sacred seven decades safe and sound in the wooden box. That her heart and mind must stay strong—for us! That regardless of what she sees in the external reality of my world must be regarded as meaningless. And that the only thing that matters is—our truth, our bound love, and *All of Lush dreams and wishes*.

I pull into the hospital lot and hum into the building. Yes, I get the stares, but they stay calm. After all, it is a medical facility. High-strung smiles and hellos are harmless. I am a welcomed walnut in here. I am very HUMAN! It makes me smile.



AS I HEAD DOWN TO DAD'S room, I run into mom in the hallway. "I just went to check on Dylan," she says. "She has strictly told me—well—"

"She has strictly told you what?" Agitation horses in.

"You can't see her—yet—" she replies.

"Why can't I see her now?" I yelp back.

"She doesn't want to see you—right now—Okay?"

"Why? Is she mad at me?"

"She's not mad at you, honey. She JUST doesn't want you to see her right now."

"I don't understand what's going on. I gotta go see dad first, then I'll barge into her room."

"Honey, please—Don't barge. She's recovering. She'll be discharged this evening. But you can't—upset her—just yet."

"Mom, you're frightening my brainwaves and my nerves at once here. What is going on?"

"Not telling you," she snobs away.

"Excuse me?" I snap back. "Since when have you started keeping secrets from me?"

"Just don't barge into her room. She made me swear to it."

"She made you swear to it? What is this connivance about, anyway? Sounds like, I'm about to be annihilated."

"Don't upset her," she insists.

"Well, I'm just about to do that now!" I march down to Dylan's room—instead!

"Honey!" mom calls after me.

"Love yah!" I wave and disappear into Dylan's room. Oh, my *one and only LUSH* is startled to see me, then her pout makes its cute appearance. She is sitting up in bed, with a bottle of dextrose attached to her delicate skin—I close the door behind me and sprint closer—"Baby—"

"Don't!" she rages. "Don't come near me! Just stay where you are!"

"Hey hey—What are you erupting about now?"

"Please, Ace—It's not a good time, okay? It's embarrassing."

The stubborn walnut waltzes to her side. And—catches a sight of a tiny red pimple crowning on her right cheek. I ignore it and kiss her on the nose. "You don't want me to see you 'cause you've got a pimple?"

"Yeah," she mumbles. "It's so humiliating. I'm tempted to prick it off, but—"

"Don't. We'll treat it later." I sit on the bed, facing her. "I haven't talked to your doctor yet, but it looks like you're coping with it good now, though. You've got some color."

"Better now," she mutters. "I don't have private health insurance, Ace. I've only got Ontario Health Insurance Plan. This whole thing right here is not covered in BC. It's a private hospital, and I'm in a private room. It must be pretty hefty expensive. How much is the bill now?"

"Dylan, don't worry about it, all right? I'll take care of it."

"No, you can't just tell me that? I have to know how much it is. I can probably afford it."

"We'll find out this evening. Once you're discharged. But really—you've got nothing to worry about—"

"I'm paying for it. And I'd be mad at you if you'd sneak out of my way. You can't overstep me all the time here."

"What if the same thing happened to me? What would you do?"

"I'd settle the bill with or without you knowing about it."

"Exactly my point," I reply. "And that's what I'm going to do in this situation!"

"It's different, Ace," she yelps. "I still have a lot to prove to you, okay? A LOT! You've already proven way too much to me, and you have no idea how hard I run after it every second just to keep up with your pace."

"Which pace are you talking about? We're on the same strides. What kind of race are we fighting for here, anyway?"

"My screaming insecurities, all right? I don't want you spoiling me, like I'm an inadequate nutcase. I don't want you taking care of EVERYTHING just because you're in clover and I'm wrapped in a banana leaf. I don't want you to do marvelous things for me all the time because it makes me feel like—a total loser. Every minute, I think of all the greatest possibilities that I can do for you and offer you, and it hurts me so much knowing that I may not even give you something that your sweet

darlings may have already given you. It makes me feel so little—and so undeserving.”

I brawl back my weeps. “Baby—you have just wasted your time distressing over—tangible things and bank accounts—which could never talk back and express their love in any *All of Lush* forms—” —I kiss her— on the cheek— “—like that—” —on the side of her lips— “—and that—” —on her nose— “—and that—Then—this—” —I whisper into her ear, “I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us.” I fondle her hair and hold her hand. “Have your screaming insecurities shut off yet?”

“I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve you,” she mumbles. “Like—I gotta dissect my head just to figure out this miracle happening in my life right now.”

“Dylan,” I say, “it’s not a miracle. It’s our *All of Lush* magic. Or in my case, the pout and the eye-rolling attacks that harassed me first.”

Her soft fingers examine my face—then slumber on my lips. And my lower abdomen cries out for mercy! As its cognizant agony is desperate for its sublime absolution – NOW!!! “I want to kiss you now,” she utters. “But we still have a vicious monster to take down.”

“You know what, you are not going to believe this, but—the vicious monster already knows that she might be going down the drain any minute. And it’s even more troubling and scandalous. Like—a world-wide news headline—troubling and scandalous.”

“What?”

“Once the sweet darlings find out that I don’t work there anymore, then they might resign all at once—”

“Ghosting her business out.”

Oh, how our minds synchronize! “Exactly!” I exclaim. “Since they can’t stand her—And no matter how many times I’d convince them back then that SHE—was—you know—HUMAN—they would only respond with a sneering ‘huh’—and—they’ve only been sticking

around there—because of me. At least, that’s how my conscious glitters illuminate over this case.”

“That’s like—world war one in luxury clothing brand industry,” she analyzes.

“I am not gonna work for Alex anymore, but I don’t like this idea of my sweet darlings walking out on their jobs that they have loved for years on behalf of my walnut! That’s too much Ace Hansel mania already! I can’t be this arrogant!”

“You’re not arrogant, Ace. Your sweet darlings just love you so much because—you’re YOU! You’re Ace Hansel. You’re drop-dead gorgeous in everything. Like, respect and kindness and all the most wonderful things in the world.”

“You know what I mean! It still makes me arrogant!”

“Okay. Do they know you’re back yet?”

“I think they do now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I walked into a breakfast restaurant to grab stuff for you and dad—and I—I got mobbed.”

“Now there’s our other problem. We might as well just move to the Northern Territories if this keeps on happening.”

“Or New York! Just for a little while. Until it dies out.”

“Do you really think your walnut hasn’t crashed its way down there yet? Your Ace Hansel mania very much defines New York, for crying out loud. They would find out about you first before Toronto goes wicked nuts! So forget it. *All of Lush*? The heavenly mesmerizing jazzy singing voice? The whole physical splendor? NO!”

“Aw, c’mon, babe. You’re exaggerating it up. They wouldn’t care. Trust me.”

“Are you telling me you’re dumping us both in New York after Vancouver?”

“Maybe.” I tease her with a smack on the side of her lips.

"I'm cramped up big time," she objects, pouting. "Stop it and get away."

I laugh. "I've gotta bite off that pout pretty soon, babe!"

"I'd attack you first," she threatens.

"Really!" I giggle. "Have you convinced one bug yet?"

"Ace," she says, "I'm still a little bit sick. I don't want you to catch anything."

"I missed you, and all the gazillion cramps have been killing me, too. But the vicious monster—" DING DING!! The big bell RINGS!!! UH-HUH!!! Here we COME!!! I fetch her with a mischievous look—"We don't have a vicious monster to take down anymore. We are going to rescue the sweet darlings' jobs. Which means—WE—can—you know—" I wink and raise my brow—with a baiting smile—"Once you feel better. We've gotta pick a very romantic spot first. How does that sound?"

"Ace," she replies, "I want it to be special and spontaneous. Something that gives us a feeling of a lasting moment. Let's not plan it. Let's just make it happen by itself. Would that be okay?"

"This is such the diva side of you."

"Walnut."

"Potato," I sneer.

"Baby carrot," she pouts.

"Clinched," I giggle.

"Claimed!" She wraps her arms around me and rests her lips on my neck.

Dear *true love wish*: I am very grateful for this beautiful magic!



DAD'S IMMENSE RECOVERY sends him to a hysterical laugh, detailing his overpowering curveballs over my instant stardom, and the cocky burst he clobbers out mixed with the vicious monster's counterblow. Mom and I can't help but roar our heads off as well while mea-

suring up our worries that his heart would crunch in as a result. “I’m sure I’ve been besieged with emails and calls from our media friends by now,” he blasts. “Ah, it’s hilarious! I can’t watch news anymore! It terrifies me to see my daughter being jostled around by those delirious throngs!”

“Dad,” I say, holding his hand, “I’m really sorry about—”

“Alex?” he yelps, with bettled eyes. “What’s got into your mind when you decided to be with that witch, anyway?”

“Mr. Mason Hansel!” mom reprimands him. “It’s done. She has fully admitted her gaffe. We’re moving on.”

“You better move on good,” he growls at me. “In fact, you better move on GREAT! And I know Dylan is an incredible girl! I have a great feeling about her already as your mother has also fallen in love with her! You better be serious about this, and not do something batty anymore, or—”

“Mr. Mason Hansel!” mom reprimands him—again! “She’s serious. It’s obvious. She’s undeniably in love. Even more profound than—*All of Lush*. She has moved on.”

“Now I’m relieved!” he sighs and plunks back in bed. “And we want to arrange a get-together with Dylan’s parents as soon as possible. The sooner, the better. And—oohhh! That WITCH!!! ALEX!!!”

“Mr. Mason Hansel!” mom reprimands him—one more time! “Your hypertension. Take it easy.”

“Sorry,” he sighs, then throws an imploring look at me. “Can’t you and Dylan spend a few nights at the beach house once I’m discharged?”

“Dad,” I stammer, “—you have—a 15-million-dollar luxury beach house—and Dylan—wouldn’t feel comfortable for sure—Perhaps, once she already gets the hang of—*my world*—then it would be fine. Just not right now.”

“Oh,” he replies, pondering on it. And as he seeps into his understanding—“Has anybody settled Dylan’s bill yet?”

I signal mom with a nod. “We’re just about to do that now.”

"That's right," she perks up.

"On me," he instructs.

Mom and I strut outside, arm in arm. Once we shut the door behind us—"Dylan would hate me for it!" I groan.

"That dad is paying for the hospital bill?" she replies.

"Yeah. We've had a bit of a fuss over it a while ago, and she insists on paying instead."

"Then drop a white lie. You're already stubborn enough. *Now we've got another one?*"

"Oh, mom, I don't know what to do sometimes."

"She'll get used to it. C'mon."

My stomach gnarls like a thunderstorm after the payment has been processed. "I feel like—my colon is about to dive out of my belly button," I panic. Argh!

"Would you relax?" mom calms me down. "I'd talk her out of it once a dramatic convulsion bursts out."

"I just want to shrink everything just so I could fit in to her world," I sob.

She caresses my chin. "Oh, honey. It'll be fine. She'll open her heart to it soon. I promise."

"She's just as stubborn as my walnut. She's a diva potato. My baby carrot is afraid to bob over a lot of times."

"Well—maybe because—Dylan wants to be—*the man*—in this."

"She can't do that," I yelp. "Because we're both wearing the pants—and dresses at the same time!"

"That's exhausting," she giggles. "I hope you two can still breathe."



DYLAN AND DAD JIVE on at first glance, dishing jolly anecdotes at each other. Mom and I quietly observe their side-splitting exchanges from the corner of the hospital room as if witnessing a father-and-daughter reunion. Oh, my heart! My flying high heart! *My world*

would have been perfect—if only I wasn't gilded this much—then Dylan would not have crossed paths with her doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities—at all!

Dad will be discharged tomorrow morning. So we muffle my loving folks with hugs and kisses, then exit the room and prance down the hallway.

"Ace," Dylan confronts me, "be honest. You've paid for my hospital bill, haven't you?"

"Dad insisted," I confess. "He paid for it."

She fixes her blustering teary eyes on me. "I'm paying it back!" And she treads out of the building.

I rush after her. "Dylan! Will you please—"

"Do you have any idea how embarrassed I am right now?" she cries out. "Your parents are some of the loveliest and greatest people I have ever met, and I'M TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THEM!!! This is not how my principles work, Ace! NOT MY PRINCIPLE!!!"

"Let's get in the car," I reply, latching on to her arm. "I don't wanna listen to this crap right now." I lead her into the parking lot, and we slip inside the vehicle. As I turn on the engines, she slugs out a loud wail. "Babe—" I damp a kiss on her temple—"—you're not taking advantage of them. You're not taking advantage of me. You're not taking advantage of anything and anybody. Absolutely not. I promise. That's just how hearts are supposed to work. If they didn't fall in love with you instantly, if they didn't feel your good and pure heart with their strong and sharp instincts, they wouldn't do it. Trust me, they'd even roast me alive once a single doubt would sear in their minds—So—would you please—be kind enough to accept it? To accept their hearts?"

"They have the most beautiful hearts," she sobs. "I will never be able to top that at all."

I drift back and wipe away her tears with my fingers. "A heart competition is only for the ignorant. Because there should only be *heart*. No

competition. And the heart—the good heart always wins. What trails behind is a wonderful memory. Nothing else.”

“Drive!” she plays her first fiddle.

“I’m sorry?” I choke off.

“Just drive us home!” she sounds like a razor sharp.

“Okay,” I submit. We pull out of the lot, into the street.

“How far away is your place?” she asks in a casual tone.

“We’ll get there in approximately 15 minutes,” I reply—still beclouded!

“Is my pimple getting worse, you think?”

“I can’t see it now. And I’m driving. I’ll check on it later. Just don’t touch it.”

“I hate it that it has attacked me in front of your walnut,” she grumbles.

“Come on!” I laugh. “It’s just a little sebum. It’ll go away.”

“I gotta start working on a book now.”

“Can’t wait to read it. What are you gonna write about?”

“I don’t know yet,” she shrugs. “Something.”

“Dylan,” I giggle, “you’ve gotta narrow it down. Is it fiction?”

“Can’t decide yet.”

“Well, what makes your heart jump?”

“You,” she answers right away—as if we’re ordering a pizza delivery. “I’m just letting you know that I’m determined to work on a book. For the first time. And I don’t want to jinx it.”

“Does that mean we can’t talk about it until it’s done?” I lose it!

“That means you have to stay away from me when I’m writing.”

“Can’t I bug you for a nose kiss, at least?”

“Nope. No Ace Hansel enticement hovering around my writing zone—ever!”

“What if my cramps get worse?”

“You’ll have to wait until my head is fused out. Or—”

"I refuse to take care of them alone, thank you very much. So there. Now you know."

"Then I don't want you near me," she insists.

"You're such a diva," I murmur.

"I might even cease to exist. Just waving you the red flag here."

"Oh my god. You're scaring the hell out of me now."

"I'm serious!"

"Okay!"

"I've never been serious about my writing until now, Ace. So I'm sorry if I'm being super diva about it."

"I'm just excited to read it. And I'll understand. But I just don't want you pushing me aside constantly, that's all."

"I'll make sure to take care of the cramps first—before I type away," she promises. "How's that?"

"Clinched!" I yelp, grinning.

"Claimed!"



WE STEP INSIDE THE apartment—*my world* kind of apartment—as my knees vibrate. I lock the door behind us, then drop the car keys and my purse on the office table. Dylan finds a reflective interlude spot by the giant wall painting of *Zea Schiavione and Kai Cannon* sharing a dance. She immerses herself into it for a moment, then investigates the opulent bachelor's suite—with her crouching eyes. It aches everything inside of me—that I am almost ashamed of—the human planet!

I dash towards her and hold her hand. "C'mon." I lead her to the kitchen counter. "It's our home for a while. If that's alright with you."

She gulps and pulls away. "Can I—take a shower—first?"

"Dylan, you don't have to ask me every time you need to do something. Just feel free to sashay around. It's your home, too."

"I never expected for your place to look this – MUCH! It's—too—heavy for me to take on—now—"

"Stop damaging yourself already. And stop punishing my walnut world. Look, it's all just stupid things laying around in a shelter. Under a roof. That's all it is. Beyond that is utterly meaningless. So don't brew up like you're calculating yourself with whatever the hell it is that you see around—because you're my—priceless one!"

"Here you are with the poignant speech again. You're wounding up my vultures every time you do that. Just like the heart competition whip in the car a while ago. Though I'm still struggling to figure out how to measure my worth— having you—and now—falling in love with your parents' beautiful hearts—it oppressed me down into my cramps that I badly wanted to kiss you—But I didn't want our—actual first kiss to ignite right there, so—"

"Oh!" I giggle. "Now I get it! I thought you were up to something that would crush my walnut!" I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her into me. "Oh baby—you have no idea how impatient I have been!"

"I have to—" she says, then clears her throat, "—you know—freshen up first."

"You're beautiful," I whisper, caressing her face.

"Look—" She pulls away and steps back a little. "—just let me shut off one of my screaming insecurities first, then—I'll go for the *attack*—Alright?"

I smile and kiss her on the cheek. "Okay. You go and splash around."

"Where's the washroom?" she asks.

"In *our* bedroom."

"*Our* bedroom? Walnut, I'm sorry but—this is not going to be—*our* home—"

"I don't want you settling for walnut as your term of endearment for me."

"It's walnut for a while until I've come up with a humanly adorable one."

"And it's *our* home for a while until we're out of Vancouver," I snap.

"I'm going to win next time!" She paces into the bedroom, then shuts the door behind her.

"Oh god," I gasp, feeling my lower abdomen! "I just can't wait to make love to you now! Goddammit!" And the door swings open, startling me. Her provocative stare—hidden in sensible and innocent swell—elevates the smarting pain more. "What?" I yelp.

"I've heard it," she groans and fades into the washroom.

I shake my head, amused. My *one and only LUSH*—the cutest and the most beckoning woman I have ever laid eyes on—will come to her senses soon—over my walnut world.

I pour a glass of red wine and sit out in the balcony. As I observe the street, a familiar car pokes into my terrorized Ace Hansel self-doom. It is parked outside of the building—with a disturbing prying intent. Or perhaps, waiting for me to emerge—just like this morning. "Damn it, Stacey!" How am I supposed to revel in my first kiss now when my relationship stat is blocking the way?

I rest my glass on the kitchen counter and speed out of the building, then rev up towards her car and peek through the driver's seat window. She pulls it down and glares at me. Her eyes are puffed up from lamenting—and battling in wretched straits—desperate to capture me back into her consoling perk gear. "Why are you still doing this?" I scorn her. "You very well know that nothing would ever come out of this anyhow. It's senseless and a complete waste of your time."

"I'm gonna keep on terrorizing you like this until you promise me that you'd grace my photo exhibit—WITH OR WITHOUT DYLAN!!" she screams.

"Dylan just got out of the hospital," I reply. "And I thought all the while you were a receptive woman. Now I'm really—REALLY HAPPY that I broke up with you, and I'm dropping this without a grain

of guilt in my heart anymore! And THAT—would be our TRUCE! Goodbye, Stacey!” I split away.

“YOU WILL BE SORRY FOR THIS!!” she shoots back.

I pause and twist around. “BRING IT!!”

“I CERTAINLY WILL!!” Her ill-boding oath skies out of her broken heart fireworks.

I zoom my way back into the apartment building, up into the suite—then SHUT THE DOOR and lean back against it—panting and praying! “Dear god.”

I run for my glass of wine and gulp it down. Now I am more tempted to hop into the shower and *attack* Dylan for a sultry sway. But *we’re not like that*. We’re not like that at all. We value the feeling of a lasting moment shared in romance and intimacy. Regardless of how much my lower abdomen kneels down for luck.

I take off my shoes and slip inside the room, then fling into bed and gaze at the ceiling—as I listen to my *one and only LUSH’s* movements slinging inside the washroom.

“Walnut!” she calls out.

Why does it sound—humanly adorable now? I giggle over the surprising thought. “Yeah!” I answer. “Do you need anything?”

“I forgot to grab my pajamas!” she replies.

“Okay!” I jump off of the bed and snatch a red satin nightshirt from the closet, then knock at the washroom door. Her head surfaces—along with wet hair—wet neck - wet—Goddammit! My walnut is going insane! All the steamy strokes pin into me—electrocuting my every vein! “Here.” I hand the garment to her. “Put it on for now.”

“I’ve never worn these things before,” she protests. “I’d rather—”

“Baby, please—” I plead. “Just for tonight. C’mon. Please?”

“Walnut,” she says, “don’t set it ablaze—just yet—*We’re not like that.*”

“I know,” I yelp. “We’ll rummage through your suitcase later. I just want—to see you—in *this*—please?”

She examines the context of my alluring round robin, then throws a heedful sigh. “Okay.” She takes the garment, and I smile. “You’re up to something really nasty here. I can see it in your smile. Like a chintzy sunshine. No no no.” And she closes the door.

“Yes!”

“I’ve heard that!”



OOH. IN RED SATIN NIGHTSHIRT. How my *one and only LUSH* cajoles the jangled cramps entrapping hexing reveries and biting dreams dancing in baby carrot and potato love story. My lusting eyes rouse the lower abdomen windstorm—tossing my possessed walnut back in bed.

She crawls down beside me and rests her head on my shoulder. “I’m hungry,” she mumbles, then lands her arm across my ill at ease stomach that has been bubbling along with thwarting passion.

“Pizza delivery?” I suggest.

“Sure,” she replies.

“Okay.” As I am about to grab the landline phone from the bedside table—

“Don’t move yet,” she moans.

“Lasting moment,” I whisper.

“Walnut, I’m gonna thrive harder. A lot harder. So I could prove myself to you. Like—giving you a beautiful and comfortable home—or something.”

“We already have a home. Your basement suite. I find it enchanting and perfect for us. Do you like wall paintings and decors, though?”

She looks up at me. “Are you sure about that?”

“Of course!” I unwind my lips on her temple. “Would you want a bigger place instead?”

"I love that place. It has made me dream about a walnut many times. Practically every other night. Then I'd wake up to reality with a cracked heart."

"How's the heart in your reality now?"

"Well—"—she glooms—"—not fully—bright and happy—to be honest. 'Cause—you know—"

"Babe," I reply, "all your doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities do not have a place in the walnut world at all. The walnut will always bomb off your monkey cart. Just see me. As another heart. Your *one and only LUSH*. Who will always ask for *the* dance with you. Would you be kind enough to believe that?"

"Let's order pizza now," she yelps, rolling away.

"Okay." Abashed! I pick up the landline phone and lean in closer. "Anything vegetarian?"

"Yeah," she sighs, contemplating.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Just make the call now, please."

"Baby—what's wrong?"

She grunts into tears. "I don't know why I deserve you this much!"

"Oh my god—baby—" The probing ache moves me to weep along. "Stop it! I can't stand seeing you like this! Hey hey—STOP! Dylan—" I maneuver myself on top of her, and she sobs out—As we fluster into each other's eyes—"Am I smashing you?"

"You've just crushed my bladder," she giggles.

I faint down before her face. "Well—you've been crushing my lower abdomen since the first day—I'm getting even—"

"Walnut, I can't breathe!" she whines.

"Oh. Sorry." I flip over to her side, and she swaddles on top of me—instead! "Clever!" I laugh.

"Be honest. Vancouver or Toronto?"

"Wherever you are!"

"Coffee or tea?"

“Whatever you like!”

“Pizza or pasta?”

“Whichever you choose!”

“Sweet or spicy?”

“Whatever your taste bud craves!”

“Morning or night?”

“Whenever you feel!”

“Fast or smooth?”

“However you run!”

“You’re a lunatic walnut,” she snaps.

“Excuse me?” I gulp.

“You can’t just base your—EVERYTHING—on my EVERYTHING all the freaking time!”

“Dylan—I want to make it work for both of us.”

She pegs away and lays down next to me. “I know,” she moans. “Me too. But I feel like—you’d rather murder your entire world because of me, and I don’t want you to sacrifice *you* —over us.”

“I understand your principles,” I say, looking at her melancholic face. “But you’ve gotta take it easy. Because the only thing that matters is we’ve found each other and we’re meant to share the sacred seven decades together. It’s that simple. Nothing amazes me more about life than—being with you. It will always be the finish line. Our finish line. All you gotta do is accept—*our beautiful truth*.”

“I’ll work on it,” she utters. “I mean, I’ve gotta thrive harder and prove myself to you—first.”

“The finish line is clinched, Dylan,” I proclaim. “What about you? Is it claimed yet?”

She draws her lips to mine—The sweet-tempered tongue licks in as the coveted reply—My jittered spine gushes up—imprisoning her in my arms—while locked in the vehement desire—of nestling inside her skin—The hot-zealous breaths release at once—Gentle moans—The promised language of love—My *one and only LUSH*—My sacred seven

decades—The secret drabbles—The *true love wish* – Clinched and claimed—by our FIRST KISS!

The heavenly first kiss—one of our lasting moments!

“Vegetarian pizza?” she yelps.

“Okay!” I giggle and steal away a lip smack, then she plays her supple fingers around my neck—down to my chest—to my burrowed stomach—I close my eyes and let out an ardent moan—C’mon c’mon c’mon! Keep going!

“Tease,” she chuckles into my ear.

“How dare you!” ARGH!! “When exactly are we gonna take care of the cramps? I’m dying here!”

“Once all my doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities vanish into thin air!” she declares.

“Well, you better hurry up already!” I exclaim.

“Oh my god, Miss Ace Hansel,” she laughs. “You are such an aggressive puck!”



CHAPTER SEVEN

March 26, 2019. Tuesday.

The landline phone dragoons through with its exasperating ring-tone at 6:24 AM! Dylan and I bump out of sleep at once! “Is this your typical morning?” she groans. “People are already shaking their legs to hear your voice way too early?”

I check the caller ID. It is Joan—one of the sweet darlings—I vault out of the bed and answer the call—“Joan!”

“You have no idea how deliriously mad we all are right now, Ace Hansel,” she blasts through the other line. “We’re outside of your building. We need to talk.”

I sprint out of the bedroom, towards the balcony, and—OH MY GOD!!! All nine store managers are hunched up together, stretching their heads up to my suite! “I am so dead!” I panic and address my caller on the mouthpiece—“You may come up!” I run to the door entrance buzzer system and press the unlock button. “It’s open!” I hang up and haul off on Dylan—“Baby, some of the sweet darlings are here!”

“Whaaat?” She sacks out, stupefied! “I don’t want them to see me! Just go talk to them yourself! I’m staying right here!”

“No no no no no!” I protest. “I’ll introduce you! I’m not hiding you away! C’mon out!”

“Ace, I’m sure they’re glamorous and all that!” she exclaims. “I don’t want to see their disappointing faces once I show myself!”

I pacify her with a kiss. “You’re beautiful. They’re gonna love your glow. Please?”

"I'm in your nightshirt, for crying out loud!" she frets.

"It's not a see-through. You're sexy. C'mon." I pull her out of the bed, and she concedes. We calm our way into the kitchen. "I've gotta make some coffee," I say.

"I'll do it," she insists.

A KNOCK startles us! I respond to it right away! And—whoops! Without a word—only sulky looks—greet me! They all flock inside, breathing out embittered blows! I shut the door and face the huffy horde—Joan, Lisa, and Nicole lead the pack! These elegant young women—all nine of them—can own a part of this world—and yet here they are—standing before me—betrayed and outraged—over my walnut proclamation sensationalized by human inner child—fueled by the arrogant Ace Hansel mania!

They notice Dylan prowling in the kitchen—Browbeaten eye scrutiny for a moment—Then their heads bash to me—somewhat diffident now—And they muse over my *one and only LUSH* again—Back to my walnut—Back to my beautiful sacred seven decades—AND!

"Is that her?" Joan asks—with her glazing eyes on me.

"Yes," I pride up, smiling. "Her name is Dylan. Dylan Dawson."

"Ace Hansel," Lisa yelps, "you're gay? And you've picked—"—she grins—"—the most charming girl!"

And they all mob Dylan with sweet and enthusiastic welcome—congratulations—and introductions!!! Oh, my *one and only LUSH*'s overwhelming reaction almost clubs me into cheerful sobs!

SCORED!!!

It is about time to get serious now. I sit them all down in the living room over coffee. Dylan is perched beside me, quietly listening—

"I've got an announcement to make," I strike in.

"You mean," Nicole yups, "we're up for more surprises here?"

"We're just swinging by to meet Dylan," Joan says, "and bombard you with a million-dollar question—How come your name is not men-

tioned in the memo? And why is Alex calling the shots now? We're having a lunch meeting with her today. What the hell is going on?"

"My announcement is sliced out of that," I reply. "I—uh—Well—" "Ace Hansel!" Lisa rivets.

"I don't work there anymore," I confess. And—stunned! Nobody moves a spasm—The disheartening silence provokes the *human* air. "Alex and I have had a—vicious—misunderstanding—so I—"

"Alex has been madly in love with you!" Nicole rants out. "We've known it all along!"

"Did she fire you because of Dylan?" Joan assesses.

"Pretty much," I mutter.

"I've told you she's not HUMAN!" Lisa raises. "This is unacceptable! Excuse my ass, but I am NOT gonna be working for that bitch at all! I'm done! That's it for me!" She points a finger to my flurried face. "I already know what you're gonna do given your beautiful conscience and all, but I'm so sorry, Ace Hansel—YOU CAN'T MAKE ME GO BACK THERE ANYMORE!!!" And she wrangles her way out of the suite.

"ME TOO!!" Nicole weaves after Lisa!

"Girls ! Girls! Please!" I panic.

"What's the point now, Ace?" Joan says. "What's the point?" And she commands the other sweet darlings—"Girls, let's go!"

I jump on to my feet. "Joan—girls—will you please—just listen to me for a minute here—Please please please!"

"Oh, I'm still gonna attend the meeting, Ace!" Joan feeds the fire. "And I'll let the bitch have it! You'll see! Every single one in the employee list—is storming out TODAY—and there is nothing—NOTHING THAT YOU CAN EVER DO ABOUT IT!! NOTHING, ACE HANSEL!! UNLESS THE BITCH COMES TO HER SENSES AND MORPHS INTO HUMAN!!"

"JOAN!!! GIRLS!!!" I plead.

And they all gust out of my sight. I attempt to scurry after them, but Dylan weans me down right away. “Oh, god!” I shudder. “I hate Ace Hansel! I don’t know what to do now!”

“Walnut,” Dylan says, “this is the time when—you must—humble up and speak to the vicious monster yourself.”

“About what?” I counter.

“Get your job back,” she proposes.

“I’m sorry? You did not just blurt that out in my face!”

“You have to do this for your sweet darlings!”

“Dylan, if I were to beg for my job back, Alex would shove a vicious condition into my walnut along with it! To have me back! And after the shameless thing she’s done, we’d end up kneeling down for mercy? Our moms and dads would kill us for sure! Besides, we’re not staying in Vancouver for our sacred seven decades, anyway! So I’m sorry—but I would have to dismiss your suggestion here!”

“I’m sorry, too. But my heart goes out for your sweet darlings. Our moms and dads would understand it in time—I know that—I’m just saying—talk to Alex about the job first—see what she has to say—If she shoves a vicious condition into your walnut, then we’d talk it over and come up with a rational decision. The common good decision.”

“NO!!!”

“How many employees are in the list?”

“Altogether? 63 girls.”

“Well, then, the rational decision has just presented itself.”

“We’ve gotta think of something else instead,” I stand firm. “Something that does not involve Alex!”

“It is all about Alex, Ace!” she raises her voice. “I AM ALSO RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS MESS!! I’M JUST SUGGESTING A POSSIBLE CLEANUP!!!”

“How are you exactly responsible for this mess? Because we fell in love? That is NOT MESS, Dylan! That is a DESTINED LIFE all the way to the end of our sacred seven decades together, and it is right

there—clinchd and claimed by the wooden box hidden under our bed!”

“If it hurts 63 girls, I’m jumping out of it.”

“Dylan! Don’t you ever—EVER DO THAT TO US! We’re gonna come up with something more rational than THAT! You understand me?”

“Like what? Sit down with them and make them listen to your moral-shacked speech? Ace, nothing would ever convince them no matter what you say. You should have known them better by now.”

“Baby—please—”

“Ace! I’m just asking you to talk to Alex about the job first! On behalf of your sweet darlings! Then we’d move forward from there!”

“And if she’d shove a vicious condition into my walnut?”

“We’re not there yet! Just talk to her about the job first! God!”

The landline phone dabbles in! “Dad?” I answer, then put him on speaker.

“Honey,” he cackles on the other end, “you are not going to believe this!”

“What is it?” I yelp.

“Some of my clients—you know—from Alex’s jet-set circle—?” he proclaims. “They’ve burst through my emails, apologizing, and—I’ve got them back!”

Dylan and I are exhilarated! “Dad, that’s fantastic!” I cheer. “What’s made them change their minds?”

“Oh, this witch! I don’t know what’s got into you when you—”

“Dad, please, can we go past it now? So what happened?”

“She’s about to do something diabolical again!” he sputters. “She’s told one of my clients—who has also spread the word—that she is going to fire all your sweet darlings today at a meeting!”

“WHAT???!?” Dylan and I thunder in chorus.

"She's already hired new people!" he continues. "OH, THAT WITCH!!! We have to do something about HER!!! My hypertension is calcitrating again!!!"

"Mr. Mason Hansel!" mom butts in. "Let me have the phone—Hi, honey!"

"Hey, mom!" I sigh.

"I've got one of my lucrative accounts back though," she reports.

"That's awesome!" I exclaim.

"I think the world is starting to wake up now," she says. "Anyway, you and Dylan don't go anywhere just yet."

"Why not?" I waggle and kiss Dylan on the cheek.

"There's a despicable video going around," she informs us. "Some girl from Detroit has just barraged through with a Dylan rankling crusade, and it's so sickening that I feel like—throwing up—" A frightened blush flitters across Dylan's face. I grip her hand—"Now your die-hard fans are furious, demanding for a—*divorce*!"

"Mom, the girl has a very complicated last name, and it's probably even spelled backwards!" I blow my savage fuse. "The only reason why she was dying to be with Dylan was because she wanted to manifest her psychic's ho-hum advice! I was there when she witched in to meet Dylan FOR THE FIRST TIME, and her dark energy smoked us all up, and Rahul even validated it for himself! And Dylan had already turned her down long before she invaded Toronto, for god's sake! GOD-DAMMIT!!! I HATE THE WORLD!!!"

"We should yell it out together, honey!" dad interjects.

"I don't think you and Dylan are safe there now though," mom ponders. "Both of you! Come over! NOW!"

"We'd love to," I gasp. "But we've still got a sweet darling mission to accomplish first—We'll be okay, mom. We promise. Thanks."

"All right," she respires. "Just letting you girls know."

"Love you," I utter.

"Love you, too," she replies.

"Tell Dylan I want to do a duet with Mr. Dawson himself!" dad plugs.

"Okay, dad," I giggle, then hang up.

"We're on a house arrest—again!" Dylan grunts.

"Baby—" I tame her up with a kiss— "—let's calm down for a while, and then I'll call Joan—Okay?"

"Walnut," she pants, "I think I'm on the verge of a major meltdown here."

"It'll go away. We'll be fine."

"When? All the way to the end of our sacred seven decades?"

"C'mon. Let's eat. I'm starving."

"Ace, I'm palpitating so badly. I may not be able to breathe sooner in time."

I feel her chest. "Oh, god. It's kicking in like a chase mania. Go back to bed. I'll make us something for breakfast. What do you feel like having?"

"Anything would be fine," she sobs. "Thank you."

I smooth my lips on her temple. "Go on. I'll plunge right in."

"Walnut," she weeps, "I'm—scared—"

A ruthless kiss spotlight takes her sting out. "You have nothing to be scared about. We'll get through it together. They'll get over it soon, anyways. Like bubbles. Or—like a minor pimple."

"Is *it* still sitting there, though?" she innocently asks. "I haven't checked on it yet."

"Like a tiny red mark. Insignificant, which makes it quite historical—in a diva-ish kind of way."

"Walnut."

"Diva."

"Baby carrot."

And I clash back with an assuaging kiss – again—before her famous pout ambushes through!



BREAKFAST IN BED IS served: cheese omelette, buttered toasts, and coffee.

Dylan plucks a mousy face towards me as I lounge beside her. And we meet each other's absorbing eyes. "The world can be cruel, babe," I say. "It is not our job to make a sense out of it. Our job is to keep and nurture whatever it is that fulfills our own happiness."

"Walnut," she moans as her lips stickle, "this is making me feel really sad."

"Oh, god!" My dear heart vibrates to its full strength—battered to death! "Baby, I'll clean it up! I promise! We'll get out of here and get ready for our sacred seven decades!"

"This is all my fault," she thrashes into tears.

"Please don't say that. None of this is your fault at all. Neither mine. It's not our fault that we were meant to meet, and—"

"I've murdered your life, Ace. I've ruined your engagement—I've created the Ace Hansel mania—I've destroyed the sweet darlings' jobs—I take full responsibility for all this mess—And yet here you are sacrificing everything just to keep us together—It's not right! I don't deserve you at all—I don't want to make things harder for you anymore—"

I interrupt her with a fireball-surpassing kiss. "Toronto or Vancouver?"

"Wherever you are," she replies right away, disrupting her nuisance.

"Coffee or tea?"

"Whatever you like."

"Pizza or pasta?"

"Whichever you choose."

"Sweet or spicy?"

"Whatever your taste bud craves."

"Morning or night?"

"Whenever you feel!"

"Fast or smooth?"

"However you run!"

"Stop questioning the universe anymore! Get rid of all your doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities—and you are NOT responsible for all THIS!!! 'Cause the answers are—apart from *All of Lush*— wherever we are, whatever we like, whichever we choose, whatever our taste bud craves, whenever we feel, and however we run—We base our everything on each other's EVERYTHING all the freaking time, which makes the rest of the world COMPLETELY INSIGNIFICANT!!!—I love you, Dylan Dawson. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us—Because the moment that I've got you—I've already got everything that I've wished for—It's mine, and it will always be mine. You will always be mine—including your pimple."

"Why did you have to bring up my pimple, anyway?" she pouts.

"Because you were being so dramatic!" I giggle, then catch her pout with a kiss.

"I'm not kissing you back," she groans—as our lips steam on.

"Why not?" I bite her lower lip.

"'Cause then—I would ruin my plan—" she replies.

"What plan?"

"Our *first time*."

"Now you're making my cramps ramble," I whine.

"Ramble them on." She plops back on a stack of pillows.

"Are you still palpitating?"

"Not anymore. You've shut it off. You yelled at me, for crying out loud."

"Good!" I laugh. "C'mon. Let's eat."

"I thought you were gonna call Joan," she reminds me.

"Right," I reply. "Phone's in the kitchen. Be right back." I scoot out of the bedroom and ravage through Joan's number. She picks up the call in one ring—"Joan, listen to me—"

"We've already made our decision, Ace," she skips right in. "We've called all our staff, alerted them about the situation, and nobody's showing up at work anymore."

"Good," I sigh, relieved.

"Good?" she sounds boggled.

"Cause I've got a word that Alex is gonna fire all of you today," I blab out. "She has already hired new people. They're probably even invading all the stores now—to humiliate all of you—'cause she already knew that you'd all ghost her business out—due to my axed walnut. That's what the meeting was all about."

"That son of a bitch!" she hoots. "She always finds a way to win!"

"Where is the meeting at?" I ask.

"Your conference room," she answers. "Why? What have you got in mind?"

"Face off with the vicious monster," I yelp. "Alone!"

"Hang on, beautiful," she objects. "We don't want to put you through more troubles anymore, alright? Though I've wanted so badly to throw a blizzard of harsh words at her, I've realized—she is just one pathetic creature, crawling around in a mudpit. The hell with that bitch! She doesn't even deserve to spot your shadow anywhere at all. Fuck her and all her fucking power and money. She'll do her time. We'll just leave it, okay? 'Cause if something happens to you—"

"Joan," I interject, "don't worry about me. We're the good guys. We always win."

"Ace," she spurns, "just back off, okay? You fought for us every single day. You fixed all our mistakes behind our backs without even giving us the head's up. You cried and laughed with us whenever we needed somebody. You'd ditch anything just to bring comfort food to a sick staff. You'd even pull us out of our personal misfortunes. You were always there for each one of us—to make us fall in love with life—to make us fall in love with ourselves—That's why we've all been in love with you—and we would try our best to impress you—through

a job well done—and the little things—which might not even be enough—But this time around though—? We want you—to back off! Alrighty? I love you—” And she hangs up.

“That’s it, Alex Avery! Let’s face off!” I spring back into the room and curl up with my *cutesy sexy charming LUSH*. “It’s time to confront the vicious monster, babe. My wrathful walnut is gonna march into the meeting today, and I’ll show her what Ace Hansel is all about.”

“Yell at her until your throat hurts,” she spikes up.

“Oh, absolutely,” I yelp.

Just as we are about to dunk into our breakfast in bed, Dylan’s cell phone meddles in. It’s the delightful man calling. “What’s this about now?” she groans and allows him to raid us through speaker—“Dad—”

“Your mom and I went to pick up a dozen of eggs just a little while ago,” he pants—“And people bullyragged us about you and this ferocious girl from DETROIT!!! WHAT IN THE NAME OF VIRGIN MARY DID YOU DO??? WHO IS SARAH??? HOW ARE YOU GONNA EXPLAIN THIS TO THE ENTIRE COUNTRY NOW??? DOES ACE KNOW ABOUT THIS??? THIS IS DEGRADING!!! WE CANNOT EVEN SHOW OURSELVES TO ANY SPIRIT WANDERING AROUND SHERWOOD PARK ANYMORE OR THEY’D HECKLE US AND PUT US UP FOR A FESTIVAL OF SHAME!!!”

“Dad—” Dylan crouches—

“Mr. Dawson, sir,” I butt in, “I met the girl before Dylan and I flew out of Toronto to Edmonton. Look, Dylan had already turned her down long before—”

“Ace, we’re flying to Vancouver today!” he announces, interrupting me. “We’re going to apologize to your parents personally, and spank Dylan with all our disappointing cattle! Text us your address! Now! I mean it!” And he hangs up!

“I’ve never heard him this crabby before,” Dylan sobs.

"It will be alright," I steel her up with a buzzing kiss. "I'll explain it to them myself. Don't worry."

"My major meltdown has just been waiting for me everywhere, Ace," she bursts out. "I think I'm gonna die!"

And Mr. Dawson carps into the cell phone inbox: *'VANCOUVER ADDRESS!!! NOW!!!'* —I respond right away as my hands seesaw. "Oh, god."

"Ace, I think this is my suicidal pit right here," Dylan laments on.

"I promise," I whisper into her ear, "we will win. The walnut will win."

"They never got mad at me before," she nickers through. "I've just embarrassed them—with worldly consequences on top of that! I hate myself!"

I have to find a way to hooplah her out of the throes. "When I was seven," I cast an anecdote, "I shocked dad big time 'cause I wouldn't wear the *Cinderella* dress that he bought for me for my birthday party. I told him I wanted to look like a *yoyo* instead—"

"A yoyo?" she laughs! "You mean, the thing—?"

"Yeah," I reply. "The thing with a string looping around—"

"For real?" Her amusement transmits around the entire suite!

"Not kidding you!"

"And what did he say?"

"He looked at me in dead horror and asked, '*Why would you rather look like THAT?*' I told him, '*So I can show them yoyo tricks. That I can be a yoyo. I hoop around—roll on the ground—squeak—break an ankle—knot in ugly positions—You know, all yoyo stuff. Because the other kids treat me like a princess. And I'm sick of it.*'—So then he said, '*You don't know how to be a yoyo, honey. You must also practice all the tricks yourself.*' I said, '*How am I supposed to be a yoyo when they wouldn't even give me the chance to? At least, at my birthday party, I would have the chance to show them my yoyo side.*' So he got me a yoyo costume, and it

turned out to be a huge mistake instead. ‘Cause then all the kids loved me more after that—So there’s my yoyo story.”

“That was hilarious!” she giggles. “You’ve still got the yoyo costume, though?”

“In my storage room,” I say. “At the beach house. I’ll show it to you.”

She kisses me on the cheek. “Ah, walnut. It’s so hard for anyone not to fall in love with you at first glance.”

“You know what? I don’t know how you’ve done it—but you’ve made the walnut work—as your term of endearment for me—and in every extraordinary human way possible!”

“It’s all you—I think our breakfast is getting cold now.”

“Let’s dig in,” I reply.

As we start devouring the meal—“I love early morning walks,” she proclaims. “I wish we could do that now, but—”

“I’m sorry, babe. But we’ll find a clever way to accomplish one early morning walk—pretty soon – I promise.”

“Or catch a sunrise! The last time I caught a sunrise was around summer time when I was staying on my grandparents’ farm. I was 9 or something. That’s my dream now. You and I—catching a magical sunrise together—Like a lasting moment.”

Dear *true love wish*: Vancouver. Coffee. Pasta. Spicy. Morning. Smooth. Please—make it happen—for me and my *one and only LUSH*—One of our beautiful lasting moments—as we welcome our sacred seven decades together – clinched and claimed—for a lifetime!

I touch her chin with the tip of my finger, and she smiles through my wishful heart—“Baby, it will come true.”

A tear rolls on her cheek. “Do I really deserve you this much, Ace Hansel?”

“You deserve more of me,” I answer. “You deserve more of my heart.”—And the galvanizing kiss thirsts all the way down into my lower abdomen – ARGH!!! “Baby! We really—REALLY—have to do something about the cramps SOON! It’s goddamn killing me already!”

“Walnut,” she warns me, “*we’re not like that*, and you’re ruining my plan.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumble. “It’s just been irritating me.”

“We’ve still got a hysteria to kill off, for god’s sake,” she complains. “And my parents are up for a Vancouver invasion. We have to get ready for that, too.”

“What’s next? I don’t even wanna know anymore.”

“TV is banned. Computer is banned. Everything that’s crisping out in the outside world—walnut fiasco – Ace Hansel mania’s hurly-burly of our divorce—Sarah from Detroit—the vicious monster—the sweet darlings’ jobs—This is how the universe drives us away to the Northern Territories, and I refuse to go, and I certainly oppose the idea of you dumping us in New York! Don’t even think about it!”

“Okay. If you say so.”

“I’m so angry, and I feel like committing a clean-slate murder!”

“You haven’t even convinced one bug yet,” I giggle.

“The cheese omelette is so yummy!” She crams it down. “How did you do it?”

“Cheese, eggs, salt, pepper, butter, a bit of milk—”

“And—?”

“That’s it.”

“There’s supposed to be something else in there. And—?”

“Ace Hansel!”

“I can’t cook, Ace! How am I supposed to take care of you? This is just fueling up my screaming insecurities more!”

“I’ll be in charge of the kitchen. No problem. Stop brewing.”

“I’m such a loser.”

“Can we, at least, settle one insignificant grain of your screaming insecurities here?” I grumble.

“Claimed,” she mutters, looking away.

“Say that again in a wholehearted pledge!”

“Claimed.”

“Dylan, look at me when you say that,” I rule up.

She is compelled to obey my walnut writ. “Claimed.”

Vapors appear in her eyes—A sharp spice tarts into my fears! *Oh, baby! Please, stop it! You are already way more than perfect for me!* “I love you very much, Dylan Dawson. And it is clinched.”



THE DELIGHTFUL DAWSON folks will land around 1 o'clock PM. It is almost noon time now, and I'm getting my grits ready to face off with the vicious monster—while cleaving to ignorance about the outside world's rumpus.

Dylan occupies the balcony to brainstorm with her quibbled book ideas hashing through her miffed mind. She is poised in the chair—scribbling across a yellow pad—sipping coffee—wearing pajamas—one of her sexiest displays!

Please, cramps! Not right now! Stop bugging my lower abdomen already!

I kneel down before her and rub her legs. “Okay, sexy. I gotta go. Pray for my walnut.” And—the landline phone chisels in, stream-rolling us up on our feet. “What now?” My nerves clutch up to a *life and death wire*.

“Every time that phone rings,” Dylan rattles, “my suicidal pit widens up!”

We run inside and pick up the phone—It's mom! “Please, give us some good news!” I plead, rocking.

“Just press the button now!” my *one and only LUSH* tauts.

We answer the call and put her on speaker—“Hey, mom—” I sigh—

“YOU WERE ENGAGED TO ALEX AVERY????!!” she bashes through—Dylan and I swing our heads, grasping with high-strung breaths—“I will not, we will not tolerate this over our dead bodies, Miss Ace Hansel!” she seethes on – “Do you know what's been clanging

around all over the news since this morning? Photos of you and her together—lounging on *Avery* private jet, on lavish holidays, with all the living luxury lap in the world that only a vulnerable soul would go for! One vulnerable soul! My daughter! Our daughter! What have we ever done to you to deserve this shame? Now all of a sudden – we’ve raised a daughter who has sold her soul away as a gold-digger prostitute! A GOLD-DIGGER PROSTITUTE!!! Your father is about to be rushed to the hospital again – BECAUSE OF THIS SCUMMY SCANDAL that you’ve hurled us into!”

“Mom—”—my waterworks cascade out of my strained chest—“I’m so sorry—please! I did not ask for any of it! I wouldn’t ask for any of it at all! I was just really scared—and—and—”

“SHUT IT!!!” she blasts, interrupting me. “No excuses this time! You and Dylan get ready! We’re picking you both up! And your moral acumen must convince us as to WHY YOU’VE DONE THE MOST RABID THING BEHIND OUR BACKS!!!”

“Mom—Dylan’s parents are about to land from Edmonton,” I stammer—“They’re furious over Sarah’s vengeful thing, so they’ve come to—”

“What time?” she interjects.

“Around 1 o’clock,” I reply.

“Text me their phone numbers,” she orders, “and let them know we’re picking them up. We’re all staying here at the beach house. And YOU—Ugh! I cannot believe that you lost yourself into this Alex pandemonium! I am so ashamed—SO ASHAMED that this has happened!” And she hangs up!

Dylan and I look at each other—like kindergarten best friends who have disobeyed their parents—for playing in grimy playgrounds—away from each other!

“I suppose this would have to be the vicious monster face-off then, huh?”

"Our moms and dads are about to kill us! Great! I'm ready to dive into my suicidal pit now!"

"The vicious monster's full revenge. Oh, god. How am I supposed to show my face to my parents now!"

"The vicious monster will go down the drain. She will, and my gut feeling says so! I know it! I just know it!"

"You can never convince a bug, babe!"—it cracks me up—"Absolutely not!"

"Baby carrot," she pouts.

"Potato!" I yelp, and sabotage her pout with an urgent kiss!



DYLAN IS SIZING UP her suitcase, bucking her cheek—to and fro—with her fist. I know—her screaming insecurities are vexing her mind—I sprawl down beside her on the floor, then pet her hair. She scans my earnest smile with her ominous eyes. My fears are provoked—again—moving me to trickle—but my foolhardy walnut must reign—Or I would melt away into a reservoir of heartaches! "Just grab whatever you need," I say, "and stuff the rest into the closet."

"How long are we staying at the beach house for?" she asks.

"Not sure, really. Perhaps, until we've already pacified their nerves and all the huffs."

"Did you grow up there?"

"Yeah. It's my childhood home."

"I'm sure it's an extravagant house with a lot of fancy stuff in it."

"Baby, it's just a house. It doesn't matter what it looks like or how big it is or what's inside—it's just another shelter—with a roof—standing on posts—with built-in walls—To keep us safe and warm—Where we gather for laughs, stories, and food—and memories—Anything that makes us feel good—that we can't grasp from the outside world—That's all there is to it."

"How big is it?"

"It's big enough for my yoyo tricks," I jest.

"Walnut, just answer my question, please," she gasps.

I gulp. "It's almost—um—6000 square feet—"

"Is that the entire property itself?" she sniffs on.

"It's the—interior living space—" I cower.

"And I'm dumping you into my basement suite that's just the size of your beach house washroom!" She rises and bristles into the kitchen. "This is OUTRAGEOUS!!!"

I revolt after her. "Dylan! It doesn't matter where we live, alright? We could build an igloo wherever if you want, as long as we're together, it's already an entire world for me! For us!"

"You don't understand, Ace!" she blows up. "I badly want to take care of you, give you everything that you want, make you feel special everyday, take you to holidays, and even BUY YOU A DAZZLING RING ONE DAY!!! But I can't do any of that – YET!!! Or I wouldn't even be able to accomplish one AT ALL!!! I'm afraid I would disappoint you, and you'd get sick of our life together, and you'd just run away from me!!! THAT'S WHAT I'M BREWING ABOUT!!! SO EXCUSE ME IF I'M DAMAGING MYSELF THIS MUCH WITH ALL MY DOUBTS, FEARS, AND SCREAMING INSECURITIES, ALRIGHT???!!!"

I saunter closer to her. "Did you really think that I would introduce my walnut to you 'cause that's what I wanted from you? THINGS? HOLIDAYS? DAZZLING RINGS? Is that what you thought I was after? So you'd really think that I'd run away 'cause you couldn't give me—a thing, a holiday, and a dazzling ring? Is that how you define me, Dylan? Is this how you define our *All of Lush* true love dreams and wishes? Is this what your books say about love?"

"Ace—" she surges on, "—I just want to give you a good life—something comfortable—I don't want to disappoint you one way or another—I only work at a dry-clean place and I have a basement suite for a shelter. That's just what I've got. Nothing else—I'm sorry

if this ginormous awakening has scrunched me up all of a sudden—but—”

“Well,” I sigh, interrupting her, “I’m unemployed and you’re all I’ve got. And the public is crushing my walnut.”

“You know what I mean!” she whines. “Don’t tickle me up with your comforting words again!”

“Baby—we’ll live day by day—,” I soothe her out—“We make a living, and it doesn’t matter what it is—We go home together, I cook, you write, we bug each other—eat at our table—plummet in bed—talk, rant, laugh—make love—and do it all over again—Until the end of our sacred seven decades—You see how simple that is? Just don’t ignore my cramps in between your writing immersion, though—I’m sorry, but that’s just my—wild rule there that you must adhere to—or I’d go ballistic—and I have to know which brand of shampoo you use—Just in case I have to do the groceries alone—”

“Ace Hansel,” she sobs, “I will never know why—I deserve you—this much!”

I wrap my arms around her waist and rub my nose against hers. “Stop being a diva already. You’re frightening my walnut out of its nutshell.”

“Are you gonna show me your yoyo costume?” she giggles.

“Absolutely!”

“Can’t wait to see it!”

“Can’t wait for our *first time*.”

“Don’t ruin my plan.”

“What is it, anyway?”

“If you’d keep on pestering me about it, I’d change my mind, and the cramps must suffer for a little long while.”

“Fine! My mouth is shut about it now! Geez!”

“Oh my god. They’re getting more grouchy everyday.”

“Very grouchy! Super grouchy! Incredibly grouchy that they can’t even breathe anymore!”

"That's brutal."

ARGH!!! And we share a snappish kiss! "Grouchier!" I growl.

"You're an aggressive puck," she smirks.

"I was never like this before. What have you done to me?"

"You have no idea what my cramps have been screaming about, so don't give me this soapy sermon now."

"Tell me!" I titter.

"No!" she fusses and hastes back to her suitcase. "We're not staying at the beach house longer than three nights. Right?"

"I don't know, babe. Who knows how long this punishment is gonna last for? I'm sure they're gonna roast us with all their might until our moral conscience is completely forgiven—Just leave your suitcase here. We'll just rustle through my old closet. It's fine."

"Your clothes are too swanky for me!"

"They're not swanky!" I object. "They're clothes! They're fabric!"

"Swanky fabric!" she pouts.

"They're fabric!"

"Swanky, though!"

"DYLAN!!! ENOUGH ALREADY!!!"

"BABY CARROT!!!"

"POTATO!!!"

"Walnut!"

"Shut up!" I laugh.

"Just grab me something—NOT SWANKY—okay?" she yelps.



MOM'S SPARKLING RED 8-seater SUV pulls up in front of the apartment building. Dylan and I catch a sight of it from the balcony—then sink into a silent prayer—There's a profound amount of air blocking my passageway, absorbing me out of reality—the Alex pandemonium a.k.a. *the most rabid thing I have ever done behind their backs*, as my mother would put it—which has just catapulted me to a wall

of flagrant lipstick lesbians—and I abhor myself for condoning the vicious monster’s romantic obsession for my walnut! But—I just HAD TO GIVE IN!!! NO MATTER WHAT!!!

Rewind:

She was my boss! Powerful, sassy, dominating, intimidating, and almighty!

GODDAMMIT!!! I SHOULD HAVE SALVAGED MY DIGNITY EARLY ON!!! But the fears—oh my unforgiving fears—

—I had to protect my job and my sweet darlings—

I should have cracked my walnut out of its nutshell even before the engagement popped through! However, if I had done that—then I would have never flown to Toronto—Dylan and I would have probably met in a different circumstance! Regardless, it was meant to happen. I had to endure the Alex ordeal just to get me to *Luster* that day! Oh, how destiny would sneak in—just like that!

Dylan and I plod our way out of the apartment building, carrying our purses. Nothing else. We hold hands as we approach the SUV.

“I’ve never been so nervous in my entire life,” she murmurs.

“Me neither,” I gasp.

We stand beside the vehicle and look at each other. There’s no noise tattering from inside. “They’re so quiet,” Dylan whispers.

“We are so dead,” I whisper back.

And the back door swipes open! Dylan and I stand in terror—Dad is behind the steering wheel, mom is plopped in the passenger’s seat, and the delightful Dawson folks are both postured in the second row—all heads are fixed straight ahead—all are in hushed fury!

Dylan and I pinch each other’s thighs. I clear my throat—“H-hi—” Nobody responds—We curb into the back seat, and I shut the door, then dad turns on the engines—and we are all set to go!

I slip my hand into Dylan’s fingers—“No hand-holding!” dad yells out. He senses it—Dylan and I exchange daunting looks, and I hoist

back—though my forefinger struggles to reach out for my *one and only LUSH*'s palm.

What are they up to? What would be our harsh punishment? What would happen to me and Dylan?



AFTER A LITTLE OVER 30 minutes of dreadful silence, we pull into the beach house driveway. We all skid out of the SUV, and instantly—mom gongs at us, “Both of you! Get inside! And no fooling around! Living room! Now!”

I lead Dylan to the front door and punch the security code in to unlock it. As I am about to turn the knob—moms and dads herald a laugh—at once, then a merry conversation escalates—as they unload the trunk—We groove on the entertainment—discomfitted yet thrilled—Regardless, our punitive measure awaits!

“I do not feel good about this,” Dylan grunts.

“Me neither,” I agree.

“They’re pulling some atrocious tricks on us.”

“Extremely atrocious.”

Dylan and I step inside—and she zips out a frightening gasp as she looks around—“Walnut—”

“Five bedrooms upstairs,” I shrug. “Painted walls—Walls—Walls—Just walls everywhere—and things—just things—” I grab her by the wrist and drag her into the living room. “Let’s wait for their verdict.” We sit beside each other on the couch, and she screeches. “Calm down,” I yelp. “You’re making me freaking nervous, too.”

“Now all my nerves are in some deadly dogfight,” she groans.

Moms and dads walk in, carrying the delightful Dawson folks’ belongings, then all four of them empty their hands – right away—silently—Moms conquer the sofa chairs, facing us—Dads stand next to each

other, frowning—What’s going to happen now? Please—be nice—My moral acumen is already in perfect place here!

“Why did you do it?” dad questions me.

“I had to protect my job and the sweet darlings,” I answer, and all four of them clock—convinced looks—with a hint of restraint as a side blur!

“Why did you do it?” Mr. Dawson questions Dylan.

“I just wanted to be nice and accommodating to her,” Dylan replies, “though I had already turned her down many times.”

“We have to impose a 1-meter rule between you two as a punishment,” mom concludes.

“WHAAAT???!?” Dylan and I thump on to our feet—at once!

“One meter!” dad yelps. “That’s two inches! Spread away!”

“Wait a minute—” I panic—

“It wasn’t our fault!” Dylan bounces.

“Why would you punish us for something that we didn’t mean to do?” I protest.

“Thank you!” Dylan barks, acknowledging my statement.

“First of all,” dad points at me, “you could work for A SANE BOSS in the same industry, then find ways to rescue the sweet darlings! Second of all, you already knew she was a WITCH no matter what mask she would wear to lure you into her snare! And third of all, YOU’RE OUR DAUGHTER who is a lot SMARTER and has MORAL INTEGRITY to share with the world! Had I known you were with her, I would kidnap you right away—WITHOUT WARNING!!!”

“Mr. Mason Hansel!” mom reprimands him. “Your hypertension. Take it easy.”

“I’m sorry, dad,” I mumble.

“And we have no face to show around Sherwood Park anymore,” Mr. Dawson throws at Dylan. “Let alone the rest of Alberta! Your mother and I could not even get through the egg purchase this morning! How are we gonna get out of this wrack-up now?”

“What was it that they said that almost sent you to the park pond to swim with the ducks?” Mrs. Dawson inquires.

“Oh, I don’t even want to recall any of it anymore,” Mr. Dawson fumes.

“I’m sorry, dad,” Dylan sobs.

“Separate rooms!” mom rules.

“WHAAAT???!!!” Dylan and I squawk in chorus!

“For three consecutive nights!” mom continues. “Cameras can see every hallway and every corner—” —she points to me— “You know that!” —back to the verdict— “You break it once, the restraining order extends to 7 meters and one more week—”

“Oh my god!” Dylan and I gripe – catching each other with a rickety look.

“You break it twice,” she carries on, “you’re both grounded in your rooms for 24 hours long! You don’t want us to keep going, do you?”

“NO!” Dylan and I cringe.

“Until when?” I ask.

“If you’re both in your best behavior,” mom replies, “it should be over by Friday night, 9 o’clock.”

“Oh my god,” Dylan and I moan.

“That’s settled then,” Mr. Dawson yelps.

“Now—” dad says, “let’s get everybody settled.”



WHILE MOMS ARE BUSY making dinner—and dads live it up in the recreation room for a pool game and drinks—Dylan and I indulge around the firepit—with the 1-meter rule chunking between us—

“I’m caressing your neck right now,” I tease.

“Walnut,” she sighs, “don’t make it worse anymore.”

“I’m biting your lower lip—”

“I’m running away now!”

“This sucks!”

"My cramps have just formed into an oblong shape over here."

"Baby," I giggle, "out of all the shapes, and you've managed to choose oblong to describe your confined cramps!"

"Cause it's like—ovulation pain," she replies. "We should have just done it at the apartment last night—or earlier today—"

"I don't even wanna blast 'I told you so' in your face right now!" I rebuke her.

"I just wanted it to be romantic, alright?" she presses.

"Even you—pouting—is already romantic—"

"Just looking at you is already romantic."

And the morning scenario forewarns me with a dagger speared into my heart. "I don't think I can bear waking up without you beside me."

"Me neither," she sobs. "But I don't wanna think of that right now. It's only making me cry."

"Oh, god," I grumble. "What have they ever done to us? This is so unfair."

"Let's not waste our time clamoring about it anymore. Or my suicidal pit would shatter me in." I attempt to step closer, and she tussles away—"If you're up for the first offense, go right ahead!" she howls. "But I am not going for the 7-meter rule and one week of agony, Ace! Would you want that? C'mon! Let's go!"

"We definitely have to figure out some kind of a sneak program here."

"That's disrespectful!"

"The beach walk!"

"Without the sneak program attached to it—sure."

"Dylan! Do you want us to share lasting moments or not?"

"Not while we're under punishment."

"Will you stop being such a staunch prisoner? The beach walk is our only chance!"

"Moms and dads are smarter than us, Ace. They can even read our minds. They even know what we're about to do next way before it pops into our brain wires."

"You're right. Although—they did not see the Alex pandemonium thing coming."

"Because you bobbed around downtown, with your *discreet baby lesbian baby carrot grind*."

"You're right about that, too." I shake my head as remorse whacks in. "I couldn't look them in the eye, you know? I was always terrified to come home for Saturday dinners."

"Was it because you were terrified to come out?" she kicks in. "Or—selling your soul away to the vicious monster—crucified you more?"

"It was mostly about—the vicious monster touching me."

"If Sarah had done it to me, I'd dive into my suicidal pit right away."

"Oh god!" I gag. "How could I let a vicious monster touch me—in the most—" I am about to puke—"I don't even wanna say it! It's disgusting!"

"Don't drop it," she yelps, "or I'm compelled to launch the mushing mission now!"

"Babe," I chuckle, "I can never see you convince one bug in this lifetime at all!"

"I'll show you some courage soon," she smites back. "It's in there. Just waiting to explode."

"Baby lesbian!" I laugh.

"Don't slap it in my face, okay?" she snaps. "'Cause you're a baby lesbian yourself, for god's sake!"

"For your information, Dylan Dawson," I brag, "I—*was*— a baby lesbian! *WAS*! 'Cause with you—I have already—flourished—matured up—though we haven't done *it* yet, but—you're my *one and only LUSH*, so all of a sudden, I've got it all together—in one eruptive spirit and desire." ARGH!!! *Oh baby! I just want to make love to you now!*

“Me too,” she mumbles. “And you have no idea how much it infests my intestines everytime the thought of you being smashed in bed by the vicious monster beats through my consciousness! I can’t believe you disrespected yourself like that, Ace! This is just burning me up a lot more!”

“I’m sorry, babe. But I was just—scared of a lot of things, you know? And I didn’t want to make her mad.”

“And yet it was okay for you to be mad at yourself?”

“I’m sorry—” The self-reproach whomp gores around my chest.

“I’m sorry, too,” she replies, struggling to tug back her dismals. “It just—It—It hurts so much, Ace! I can’t help it! It makes me wanna turn myself into a vicious monster, too! To get even! What she’s done to you! What she’s done to moms and dads!”

“Babe, let’s not try to convince a bug anymore – Clinched?”

“Nope! Don’t make me claim a walnut manifesto that’s torturing my principles! Not happening! Sorry!”

“Can we please—talk about the sneak program instead?” I have to send her on a wild-goose chase.

“NO!” she yelps.

“Baby, c’mon!”

“NO!”

“We can pull it off in a yoyo way.”

“Walnut, I want them to trust us, okay? That’s our prize here! TRUST! We have to respect and obey the punishment no matter what! Even when our cramps heat up all over the place! Do you understand?”

“DINNER IS SERVED!!!”—rigid voices jell together from the wide-open balcony—behind us—just about three meters away! Uh-oh.

Dylan and I whirl around—Moms and dads stand side by side—like a troop—glaring at us – Oh, god. How long have they been there for? This is PHD in Humiliation—right here!

“You may go for a beach walk one at a time!” mom warns us.

"We know what a yoyo way looks like!" dad professes.

"You two are a million steps behind," Mr. Dawson announces.

"And a million thoughts behind!" Mrs. Dawson seconds.

"How did they sneak up on us?" I ask Dylan in a restrained voice.

"That's exactly what I was telling you about," she replies in a raspy tone. "That's why we better be careful, and keep your walnut in the nut-shell, for god's sake."



DINNER: HMM. VEGAN eggplant parmesan pasta, avocado toasts, and red wine! Steaming me up to assault my *one and only LUSH* for our *first time*. But – ARGH!!!

And our odd seating arrangement exasperates my cramps in an amassed combustion—dads are throned up at each end, Mrs. Dawson and Dylan are pickled next to each other, mom is walled beside me—Thank goodness for the liberating view of my *one and only LUSH* in front of my funk—I have to take it for now!

Dylan and I rest our patient ears for their palsy-walsy conversation:

"*Dane Hunter* was an incredible dancer," Mr. Dawson says. "Once upon a time, I wanted to be—just like him."

"Oh! Mom and dad would do the *Willow and Dane* dance every Valentine's Day," dad discloses. "I remember peeking in from the stairs, and—whoo – Boy! Was it ever romantic!"

"It was from a movie," mom butts in. "Wait. It's at the tip of my tongue. Oh, I know that film! I've watched it recently!"

"I didn't know it was from a movie," Mrs. Dawson ponders. "Now my mind is bothered."—she turns to her delightful man—"Do you know what it was?"

"It's dancing up in my head, too!" Mr. Dawson replies. "I can see it in my head very clearly!"

"I'm thinking," dad yelps. "Ooh—it bugs me when something like this happens!"

"I watched it after your Sherwood Park *All of Lush* performance broke into the news," mom says, pinching her brow. "Ugh. I can't remember it anymore. Wait!"

"I should definitely look into it later!" Mrs. Dawson looks determined.

"*Twitch Beau!*" Dylan and I groan jointly. Moms and dads freeze, then lash us with a startling look!

"I beg your pardon?" dad asks me and my *one and only LUSH*.

"*Twitch Beau!*" Dylan and I reply.

"That's it!" mom snaps. "*Twitch Beau!*"

"And what year was that?" Mrs. Dawson inquires.

"1956!" Dylan and I answer—at once!

"How on earth did you two know these things?" dad wonders, switching his eyes between me and Dylan, but—"You know what? I got it—I got it—I ABSOLUTELY GOT IT!" He grasps its romantic complexity right on.

"I got it, too!" mom agrees.

"We should figure out our common vibes, too," Mr. Dawson addresses his delightful wife. "Like that. *Twitch Beau*."

"We've already got a lot of 'em," Mrs. Dawson replies. "All about food, garnishes, spices, and—chemical compounds."

"Yeah, but having a *Twitch Beau* is different," Mr. Dawson argues.

"Do we have a *Twitch Beau*?" mom asks dad.

"We should establish one from now on," dad considers.

"Over three decades later, and we've just thought of having something like – *Twitch Beau!*" mom grumbles.

"This is *Willow and Dane's* fault," dad smirks.

"*Dane Hunter and Willow*—?" Mr. Dawson flicks.

"*Dane Hunter and Willow*—what?" Mrs. Dawson jumps in.

"Oh oh," mom gnarls. "You guys! Now THIS—makes me want to watch the movie again! I forgot *Willow's* last name now! Ugh!"

"*Willow—Willow—*" dad contemplates.

“*Walsh!*” Dylan and I yelp in chorus. Once again, moms and dads freeze—shrinking in their seats now—gaping at us!

“What was it?” dad supplicates—just for validation.

“*Willow Walsh!*” Dylan and I enunciate.

Dad drops his fork. “How did you two—” —he pauses upon realization—“Okay! I got it! I got it!”

“I’m getting envious now,” mom groans. “And I’m disappointed in myself for forgetting the film!” And she scowls at dad—“Over three decades later, and a *Twitch Beau* is just about to be established!”

“We should have *more things*,” Mr. Dawson informs his delightful wife.

“I have just enumerated a ton of them,” Mrs. Dawson replies. “How many more do you need?”

“But they’re not romantic enough,” Mr. Dawson states, then addresses the entire table—“Oh, *Willow Walsh* was also a smooth singer!”

“Really!” Mrs. Dawson taunts. “And how could you have possibly known that?”

“Momma told me!” Mr. Dawson replies. “I just got no proof of it. I haven’t gotten the chance to listen to her record yet.”

“I can’t remember her sing anything in *Twitch Beau*, though,” mom mulls over. “Wait. I’m rewinding it in my head right now—I just remember—being so agitated over the wooing patches all throughout the film—but—” —she ululates out of frustration—“I can’t believe I’ve forgotten about it all of a sudden!”

“The wooing patches are causing your memory rift,” dad smirks at her, then agrees with Mr. Dawson—“I know *Willow Walsh* was also a smooth singer. And what was one of her greatest hits?”

“*All of Lush!*” Dylan and I dive in.

“She recorded it a year after filming *Twitch Beau*,” I add.

“Without *Dane Hunter’s* shadow,” Dylan echoes.

Moms and dads ogle at us—in silence—“And—who wrote *All of Lush?*” Mrs. Dawson asks, almost stuttering—

"*Ava and Vincenzo Vasquez*," Dylan and I answer—in a modest tone.

"A real-life married couple," I snitch.

"And *Twitch Beau* was based on their wooing troubles – And when they finally tied the knot—they even invited their vicious exes and obsessed suitors to the wedding—" Dylan fills in.

Dad shoves his plate away—mom sips her wine—Mr. Dawson scratches his forehead—and Mrs. Dawson gulps down a piece of pasta—synchronized in one tick of the clock!

As for Dylan and I—? "Clinched," I yelp.

"Claimed," she races back, then—we harmonize a winsome clap as an elusive high-five to complete the crotchet! This one-meter rule is already too much for my flips to endure! Argh!

Moms and dads inspect us—with their punchy eyeballs—again! "That's it," dad sighs. "*Twitch Beau* must be established tonight!"

"About time!" mom pronounces.

"I've told you these things have importance," Mr. Dawson tells his delightful wife.

"And how exactly are we gonna do that?" Mrs. Dawson meditates.

"We'll have to come up with something," Mr. Dawson replies.

"How do you do all that?" dad interrogates me and Dylan, then—catches his mind and sits back—"All right! I got it! I got it! Unbelievable!"

"And over three decades later—" mom grumbles again.

"Tonight!" dad interrupts her. "It's established—tonight!"

"You gotta start thinking of something now," Mr. Dawson reminds his delightful wife.

"I'm trying, okay?" Mrs. Dawson mutters.



DOUBLE-CHECKED: MOMS whiz around in the kitchen for cleanup and dads nimble back into the recreation room! So Dylan and

I are safe enough lolling around by the firepit—hemming out our hankering thoughts—

Shut up, cramps! Shut up! You cannot break out of your walnut—just yet! I'm sorry! Bear with the one-meter rule here!

"I've seen the room," she sighs. "It's too extravagant. A lot more extravagant than your luxury hotel in Toronto, for crying out loud. And I'm even afraid to touch anything in that ensuite washroom. My god, Ace. I can't breathe."

"They're just things, Dylan," I reply. "Just—things!"

She sits back in the chair and looks up at the skies. "I'm thinking of grabbing another job."

"Does this have something to do with your D.F.S.I. again?" I mewl back.

"My what?"

"Doubts, fears, screaming insecurities!"

"Why can't you just give me the freedom to entertain them so I could make my economic situation a little better?" she argues. "I'm doing it for us, you know!"

"Your economic situation is already good enough!" I stir up. "And for god's sake, why are you so obsessed with your financial status being scrutinized in our relationship, anyway? There's two of us now, Dylan! In case you haven't noticed—there are two people making it all work—together! This is not a competition! This is a relationship! A relationship! Which means, there's love—there's romance—there's *All of Lush*—and everything else in between! NOT A COMPETITION!!! IT'S A RELATIONSHIP, GODDAMMIT!!! So don't fire at me—like you're the only one who's supposed to be responsible for everything! Like, you're supposed to spoil me with THINGS!!! THINGS!!! GODDAMMIT!!! I HATE THINGS!!! DAZZLING RINGS!!! HOLIDAYS!!! WHAT ELSE???!!!!"

"If you didn't like them, then why do they lay around your life?"

“Because I grew up having them! I got used to the kind of life that THESE THINGS have given me! It’s the world that I have been living in! *This world! My world!* The kind of world that this house may flaunt about! Am I proud of it? I’m proud of having my parents! I’m proud of how they raised me, though at this stage of my life, I must learn my lesson the hardest way for not being honest with them! This lesson! The lesson that is putting me through the one-meter rule away from you! Away from the GREATEST THING that has ever happened to me! Away from my ENTIRE WORLD! Away from my *one and only LUSH!* And even just that—the one-meter distance—IT HURTS!!! It hurts, Dylan! AND I CAN’T STAND IT ANYMORE!!! Now do you really think I care about the THINGS that you’ve been screaming at me about? Your senseless doubts? Your pathetic fears? Do you think I would ever be brave enough to run away from you—or you’d have enough guts to leave me—all because you CAN’T GIVE ME THESE THINGS??? Now you tell me—how much does this one-meter rule hurt?”

“Ace—you’re—everything—You’re the most stunningly beautiful woman that any human around here may have ever seen in their lifetime—You’re rich—Your intelligence skyrockets out of your eyes and words—You have an amazing talent—You captivate all corners wherever you go—And on top of that, you have the kindest and purest heart—You’re somebody—You can even run the *United Nations* if you want to—or invade *Hollywood*—or do and be anything you want—And people, every single one of them, worship you—and all your wonders—and the wonders that you can share with the rest of mankind—So you can’t blame me for having all these doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities—Because there are times when I believe—my love, and all the vain feelings that I have for you—are insignificant—that I can be insignificant—I am insignificant—You’re too much—And you deserve a lot better than this—This. Us. Me—”

"Just answer my question, Dylan. How much does this one-meter rule hurt?"

"You did not hear me," she urges.

"I heard every word you said!" I blaze back. "And they're all IN-SIGNIFICANT TO ME!!! I'm only asking you one simple question! HOW MUCH DOES THIS ONE-METER RULE HURT???!!"

—hazy silence flies along with the wind—

"The oblong shape is about to break," she mumbles.

I laugh! "I'll definitely give you the *I told you so bounce* once we've survived this punishment!"

"But Ace—I'm serious, though. I gotta grab another job."

"Baby, don't, please! We'll work through with whatever we have. Besides, I want us both to have more time together, and you also need time for your writing. What would happen to our cramps then?"

"Are you sure you're gonna be okay living in the basement suite?" Her eyes dazzle with tears.

"It doesn't matter where we live," I hearten her up, "as long as our sacred seven decades are sheltered inside—we'll do great." *Oh baby! Stop hurting my heart anymore!*

She submerges me into her devout eyes. "I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us."

ARGH!!! I want to kiss her – NOW!!! "I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us."

"The beach walk aches me," she snuffles.

"I know," I reply. "One at a time—not gonna work!"

"What time are we going to bed?"

"Now that's another problem. 'Cause I don't think I'll be able to sleep not having you around me."

"Me neither."

"Maybe we should sleep in the living room."

"What?"

"We'll ask them. C'mon."

“Do you wanna get spanked?”

“Dylan, do you want us to see each other first thing in the morning or not?”

“Baby carrot,” she pouts.

“Please don’t do that now!” I giggle. “I can’t kiss off the pout!”



WE REEL BACK INSIDE the house to corner moms and dads. Alas! An eerie silence grogs our heads. Recreation room, dining area, kitchen, movie theater, upstairs—hallways – EMPTY!!! They can’t be in their rooms now—for the *Twitch Beau* conference! “Where are they?” Dylan yelps.

All of a sudden—movements and muffled voices pitch through—from the pool terrace! “How did they do that?” I whisper.

“Where did they come from?”

“You think they were eavesdropping?”

“You’re scaring me now.”

“They’re at the pool terrace. It’s closer to the firepit.”

“I can’t handle any more humiliation, Ace!” she whirrs.

“Me neither,” I reply. “C’mon. Let’s go talk to them.” We wing out into the pool terrace—terminating their disarming babble about *All of Lush* versions—moms are having wine and dads are sipping beer—They welcome us with a casual gesture and an immaculate look—No trace of eavesdropping guilt – but—! Or – did they – catch it all? Oh, god—I refuse to accept my PHD diploma in Humiliation! Really! “Um—Dylan and I—” I stammer—“We were just wondering if we could—sleep in the living room—instead—” And so—

They exchange looks—as if asking each other for a unified answer—“If that would be okay,” Dylan mumbles.

“With the lights on,” dad replies.

“YES??” Dylan and I delight in chorus.

And they exchange looks again—scandalizing the *Twitch Beau* romantic virtue—Mr. Dawson affirms, “Yes, it’s okay.”

“YES!!!” Dylan and I cheer, then trot back inside, into the living room—and crash down on the couches—“Whew,” I gasp. “That was easy!”

“I really do hope they were not eavesdropping, though,” Dylan worries.

“I’ve just accepted my PHD diploma in Humiliation, actually,” I second.

“I think that’s exactly what’s twirling around my hand right now.”

“Oh. Let’s wash up first, and I gotta grab you a pair of pajamas.”

“Swanky pajamas?”

“Fabric—pajamas.”

“Swanky fabric?”

“Fabric.”

“Swanky.”

“Dylan!”

“Have you seen how normal my pajamas look?” she bombards on.

“Normal pajamas are made of fabric,” is my defense. “Some kind of fabric. And they’re up in my storage room.”

“Define *your* normal pajamas.”

“Woven fabric. Textile.”

“What kind?”

“A cloth to wear.”

“What kind of fabric? How expensive? What luxury clothing brand?”

“They’re worth enough to sleep in.”

“I’m not wearing a pair of pajamas that must cost over a grand, Ace!” she guns on. “I’m sorry!”

“They’re pajamas, Dylan!” I reason out.

“Worth over a grand! NO!”

“They didn’t cost that much!”

"How much?"

"I've had them since high school! I can't remember anymore!"

"Roughly. Give me a price tag."

"Dylan! I can't remember anymore, alright?"

"Any least expensive pair you've got up there?" she rants on.

"Oh my god!" I pound my forehead with my relentless fist. "You're goddamn killing me now!"

"Just grab me something—NOT EXPENSIVE!"

"I don't know which one, okay? I don't know."

"You must know," she insists. "You're an expert at luxury clothing brands, for crying out loud."

Mom walks in on our debate. "What's this squabble all about?"

"Dylan doesn't wanna wear my pajamas because she says they're too expensive," I groan.

"I'm sorry," Dylan mumbles. "I just can't wear those things."

Mom sits beside her and holds her hand. "Sweetheart, they're *still* pajamas."

"That's exactly what I told her!" I grunt. "They're FABRIC!!!"

"It doesn't matter how much they cost," mom comforts her, "you—you will always be beautiful in anything—"—Aw! My mother! My loving and warm mother!—And yet Dylan is still trapped inside her principle. Mom arrays her arm around my *one and only LUSH*, and—"Sweetheart, if there would be anyone to blame for—whatever it is that terrifies and overwhelms you—it's us—However, I want you to keep this in mind—Us?—Moms and dads—do not have something like – *Twitch Beau* or *All of Lush* or how your minds jump at the same speed or clinched and claimed or the clap—and everything else that both of you share—And those pajamas—would feel privileged to be worn by you."

Dylan belches into tears and gives in for a tight hug—and my loving mother hails the moment, with blissful tears sparkling in her eyes—

I OWN THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE!!!

I mouth—*I love you*—to mom. And she responds with—*I love you*—in the same effect.

Without a word, I decamp upstairs, into my old bedroom—and jumble through my storage. I spot a blue pair that I know she will adore. But first—brand check—huh—Ookay—It's a—meh. My *one and only LUSH* would dismiss it—I hope—especially after her solacing talk with mom.

I bustle my way back—almost flying down the long-winding staircase—And awww—my baby—enervated from all the repugnant slapdash—She is falling asleep fast in a lopsided position—with her cherubic luminosity—and charismatic beauty—that she is unaware of! I throb for a kiss—to awaken her. But I can only admire this lasting moment from a meter away.

Mom has rejoined with the group, and their subdued chitchats and giggles probe inside. Dylan moves and opens her eyes. I rest my knees on the floor for our gaze to meet—in between the one-meter rule—that plagues all my love and romantic jitters—She smiles under a dreamy thought. “Walnut,” she moans, “I’ve had a flashing dream.”

“What was it about?” I ask.

“We’ve got two little girls,” she replies.

“You mean—*our*—two little girls?” I rejoice.

“Yeah,” she mumbles. “Now I’m worried.”

“Worried about what?”

“I’m scared to get pregnant. And I don’t want you to get pregnant either ‘cause I don’t want anything to happen to you. Pregnancy seems like—a precarious thing to me. So we’re dumping this notion. Completely.”

“Baby,” I say, “I’d like to—carry—them.”

“NO!” She flees out of the couch, and I get on my feet at once—then place the pajamas on the center table. “We don’t want any more Ace Hansel genes streaming around in the world,” she objects. “It’s too dangerous!”

"Well," I counter, "I want both our genes streaming in our kids' DNA, and I'm carrying the pregnancy!"

She snatches the fabric and rolls her eyes. "You're out of your mind. It was just a random dream that whimmed by, and I was only laying out my personal thoughts on it. Don't take it seriously."

"Every dream whims by for a reason," I insist. "I'm saying—"

"Ace!" she interjects, sighing. "We'll talk about it once we've surmounted—ALL THIS! Would that be okay?"

"Clinched," I mutter.

"Claimed," she replies, then scampers away upstairs.



I TAKE A SHOWER AND put on a pair of blue pajamas to match with my *one and only LUSH's* night cloth color, then haste down the stairs and run into dad half way. Oh dear angel—Concerns cover his face, and my heartbeat taps on—defeating my grits. Uh-oh. Another trouble torrenting in between me and Dylan? *Please please please! Make it all go away!*

"Honey, we need to talk," he says.

"Dad," I shiver, "you're scaring me."

"It's something—serious," he replies. "Follow me." We hide away into the movie theatre for a clandestine discussion. "Sit," he orders, and we take our seats—next to each other. He takes a deep breath and stares at the humongous flat-screen TV. "Once this—witch riot has died out—what's your plan? You and Dylan. What's on the plate?"

"Toronto," I reply. "We're gonna be living in Toronto. I'll look for a job—and Dylan already feels secure and beloved in her workplace—so—"

"Same kind of job?" he asks.

"Y-yeah," I gasp. "Hopefully—"

"Hopefully?"

"Dad, I'm gonna work on it. It'll be fine. Dylan and I will be fine."

"I trust you," he says. "I trust you and Dylan. No doubt about that. How you two blow our minds—It's incredible—Even more romantic than watching my parents do the *Dane and Willow* dance every Valentine's Day—In fact, it's too romantic and beautiful that it's making me and your mother cry. Tears of joy. Just like when you were born."

I am flying over the moon! "Thank you, dad."

He sits back and looks at me. "Your mom and I have talked to David and Bev—And—Ooh—these—folks have blown us away—It has left us—speechless—and even embarrassed—So noble. Very noble. You're so lucky. We're so lucky to have ever found them—" A tear spins its way down on his face, and he quickly wipes it away with his sleeve.

"Dad—" I hold his hand.

"They've politely rejected our offers. Every single one of them. Not even a simple shot in the arm. They're just happy to be here—spending time with us for a few days."

"This is even more heartbreaking—and embarrassing—Now what do we do?"

"Your mom and I have had a culminating decision," he opens up. "It's something that we had thought of a couple of years ago, but—we were reluctant to—present it to you—since you were so passionate about your job."

"Dad," I panic, "I hope it's not something that would throw Dylan off."

"With a master's degree in fashion business management under your belt," he says, "you may either build a clothing line company from the ground up—or own a fashion retail franchise—Here. In Vancouver."

"Dad—" I object.

"Your mom and I will invest—" he continues.

"Dad, please—" I rasp on, sliding out of my seat.

"You run the business," he suggests, "and bring Dylan on board—with you."

“Dad—” I loop away— “—you don’t understand—”

“I already know what you’re going to say,” he lets out a softhearted sigh. “Your mom has told me about Dylan’s—issues. But—I’ll talk to her myself. I’ll make her understand. That this is her life now. And it’s not a choice to make. It has already been designed to happen. Even before you two met.”

“Dad,” I blub out, “she’d grill me for this. You’ve no idea how she goes manic over these things. The hospital bill was already a huge blow into her screaming insecurities, and her embarrassment was over the top. It traumatized me!”

“Your mom told me about that, too,” he replies. “Honey, talk to her first. Because we’d love for you both to stay in the city. For family time. Saturday dinners. And it would be more convenient for David and Bev to come for visits as well—If it would upset her that much, and she wouldn’t accept—this new life—let us know right away. Your mom and I would sit down with her.”

“Thanks, dad.” I kiss him on the cheek. “I love you so much.”

“Ooohhh!” he growls! “And that – WITCH!!! Alex!!! I STILL CANNOT BELIEVE YOU ALLOWED YOURSELF—”

“Dad!” I interject. “Please—you have no idea how sorry I have been—I even want to rise all the saints from the dead—just so—I’d be forgiven—I am so sorry that I terribly disappointed you and mom—That I disrespected you and myself this way—That I wasn’t—”

“—that you weren’t being honest—?” he edges in.

“Y-yeah,” I shuffle off. “Please, dad. Can we try to put it behind us from now on?”

“Okay,” he gasps. “We will try. But – ooohhhh!!! My hypertension knocks me out every time that WITCH crosses my mind!!! THAT WITCH!!! THAT UGLY—”

“Dad!” I wean him down. “Please! Anger won’t help us.”

“Okay,” he agrees. “But you can’t stop me once my resentment triggers from time to time!!! It makes me wanna do something really – BAD!!!”

“You and Dylan!” I giggle. “You can never convince a bug!”

“Honey, I can be really—BAD—you know?” He clears his throat, then thrusts out a confident sigh.

“Sure, dad,” I smirk. “I know you’d scare me sometimes, but—c’mon—you’re a therapist, who deals with the most arrogant clients, who crave for your calming presence and indulgently gentle words just to keep their human horns going.”

“Well—” he fidgets, “—that’s a different—realm of my life—”

“You’re scared of wasps!” I yelp.

“Who isn’t?”

“I’m not!”

“They sting more than once! And just one single wasp buzzes around like a swarm of bees!” he points out. “You’re supposed to be scared of them.”

I kiss him on the forehead. “Love you, dad.”

“Talk to Dylan,” he reminds me.

It puts the cuffs on my nerves. “I will. Good night.” I exit the movie theater, and dyspnea starts to strangle my chest. “Oh, god. What am I gonna do now?”



I WHISK MY WAY BACK downstairs—stuffed with pillows and blankets in both arms. Dylan is curled up in a sofa chair—feeling her forehead—dressed in the blue pajamas—streaking out her *cutesy sexy charming* spell that lunges my lower abdomen—with a serious snarl! To make it worse – oh, god—her refreshing and innate scent—like the smell of a spring garden—glorifies the atmosphere! Hmm.

I rest her pillows and blanket on the couch, then dump the rest on my corner. “What’s up with your head?” I ask.

"Butting headache," she replies.

"Hang on. I've gotta get you some aspirin."

"It's okay. Peppermint tea would be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"It's better. Trust me."

"Okay. C'mon." We scud into the kitchen, and I gear up to boil some water. She sits at the counter—with a conscious effort not to break the one-meter rule. As we wait—we exchange looks—and the clothing line business ferments my crusts—that I cannot even look her in the eye anymore.

"I have to talk to your dad tomorrow," she says.

"Huh? What about?"

"I'm paying him back for the hospital bill."

My walnut is persecuted! "Dylan, we've already talked about this."

"No, Ace," she protests. "It's not right. I gotta do it. Or my conscience would kill me."

"Well, have you ever thought that you're not the only one with a conscience here?" I jump on her case.

"Excuse me?" she yelps—thrown off balance.

"He did it out of good heart! Because he knows how much you love his daughter. Because he knows how beautiful your heart is. Because he knows you're not just another girl—you are his daughter's *one and only LUSH*. Why can't you just accept the truth, Dylan, and deal with this new life? Your new life. With me. With them?"

"If a new life means I'm taking advantage of the most beautiful hearts I have ever come across, I don't want it."

"You are not taking advantage of them, alright?" I bluster. "Your definition of it is twisted enough for you and me and everybody else to slam it out of any human books. We've been talking about beautiful hearts—your doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities—Well, here's a newsflash for you. Love does not calculate all the good things it does. Because all the good things it does must be respected and honored

through a wholehearted acceptance. So forget about all your doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities because they do not have a room in this house, within this family, and around me. Would you be kind enough to uphold to that?"—The kettle whistles in. I shut off the stove and fix a cup of peppermint tea—as she observes me in glum silence—Oh, god. Her pensive heart's grinding pain makes me want to drum into the loudest mourns!—I place the hot drink on the counter and step back—afraid to commit the first offense—"There," I say, nodding at it.

"Thanks," she utters and takes the cup, then walks away.

"Dylan," I sprint after her—with the one-meter rule stride—"—please—just forget about the hospital bill, alright?"

"Ace," she responds, "you, your parents—are way too perfect for *my world*. I have to fix my life."

"What are you saying?"

"I love you very much and you deserve so much better!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I have to fix my life!"

"WHAT'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN, DYLAN????!!!" I scream, and we face off in the middle of the vast living area—Movements intrude from upstairs. Moms and dads string out of their rooms. But Dylan and I seem oblivious to their presence—as frustrations thud in—"What did you mean by that?" I defy my tears!

"It means—" she yammers—"I don't want anything from you. I don't want anything from your parents. I don't want you to define a beautiful heart by nurturing my weaknesses and pampering my shortcomings. So okay, they're just things. They're just walls. They're privileges. It's the blinding beauty—right here—standing a meter away from me. And she loves me very much—But I have nothing to offer you. I don't even know how to take care of you, look out for your needs, and even cook for you. All I know is—my heart cries for you all the time—and I struggle around the idea of how to improve my life just

to justify how much I love you—because I just don’t want to keep it in a vain jar—This is why I have to fix my life. Because right now—my love for you—is nothing—but a full load of vain cramps—AND I DON’T WANT TO DEFINE MY LOVE FOR YOU AS JUST THE VAIN CRAMPS!!! I WANT TO DO EVERYTHING TO MAKE YOU HAPPY!!! I WANT TO TAKE CARE OF YOU REALLY GOOD!!! I WANT TO LOOK OUT FOR YOUR NEEDS!!! I WANT TO COOK FOR YOU!!!—This is why I have to fix my life—AND THIS IS WHY I DESERVE TO KEEP MY DOUBTS, FEARS, AND SCREAMING INSECURITIES WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT!!!—If you can’t accept that—then I do NOT deserve somebody like you! Because I never deserved you to begin with! You deserve someone better! Someone who doesn’t have doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities to worry about! So I’m sorry if I am a huge disappointment to your definition of a beautiful heart!”

“Dylan—our sunrise has been waiting for us to catch it. Our sacred seven decades, too. And our *All of Lush* dance. So the life that you want to fix—is catching the sunrise with me—spending the sacred seven decades with me—and having the *All of Lush* dance with me—It means—life is now inhibited by you and me—Not only you—Why can’t you see that?”

“My goodness, Ace! Why do you always find ways to make me feel better? Can’t I even fix myself alone and have a little courage to face my own music?”

“No, you can’t! Because you’re my *one and only LUSH* and I’m your *one and only LUSH*! You and I share each other’s LUSH, and all the LUSH that we’ve already created together! So *All of Lush* is ours! It’s us! It’s you and I! Together!”

“I hate you.”

“Potato!” I sneer.

“Baby carrot!” she yelps.

"Diva!"

"Walnut!"

"Drink your tea now. It's gonna get cold!"

"Okay!"

We spree our way back onto the couches and look up. Moms and dads break away from the huddle and vacate the hallway, into their respective rooms. "Well," I sigh, "they have just witnessed us accepting our PHD diplomas in Humiliation, alright."

"I'm getting closer to my suicidal pit now," she groans and takes a sip of her tea.

"Hey, I have an idea."

"Walnut, everytime you say that, my diva kink is dunked into a snafu ocean."

"Let's go to the firepit."

"For what? We're about to sleep now."

"I'm not sleepy yet, though."

"Me neither. But I've still got the headache."

"I'm sorry—Finish your tea. I'll wait."

"What are you itching about now?"

"Just finish your tea, then we'll hit the firepit."

"What is it, anyway? Tell me."

"Can't tell you yet. Drink you tea, darn it."

"Walnut—"

"Baby, c'mon—" I beg—"—I'm dying here—"

She struggles to finish her tea. "If it's something nasty, I'd be mad at you."

"How's the headache?"

"It'll go away."

"Are you sure?"

"You said you were dying. Shouldn't we worry more about that?"

"Now I feel bad," I moan.

"Now you're acting up," she replies and rests her empty cup on the center table, then rises and ambles away—"Are you coming?" I smile and sprint up after her—with the one-meter rule in mind—And we spring out into the fire pit—mooch into the chairs—then our wishful eyes meet—"Now what?" she giggles.

"Close your eyes," I say.

"Walnut," she pouts, "I don't like the sound of that."

"Don't give me the pout now!" I chuckle. "You're tempting me! Just do as I say!" I entice her with an assuaging smile—"C'mon, babe. Close your eyes."

"Fine," she sighs and obeys.

"Just imagine—" I orate in a dreamy voice—"—it's one beautiful evening, you're sitting in a balcony, typing away on a laptop, and I'm in the kitchen making supper. After a while, I emerge, lean in, press my lips against yours, and we share a lasting kiss. Then we get inside and sit down to eat. We talk about your new book, the 45th sunrise that we've recently caught, the upcoming 30th holiday, and the thousandth beach walk that is due very soon. All of a sudden, the phone rings. An automatic voicemail picks it up, and we hear two happy voices, two grown wonderful girls, greeting us, 'Happy 30th Anniversary, moms!', with nonstop *I love you* shoutouts. Their names, *Zea and Kai*, named after *Zea Schiavione* and *Kai Cannon*. Then we wash the dishes together, clean up our kitchen, and share more lasting kisses in between. Then—we take a shower, lay in bed, and I tease you for our nine thousandth time. And as always, our vain cramps never fail to surprise us—while our drabbles are still hidden away in the wooden box—under our bed—looking forward to spending the rest of the years to complete our sacred seven decades together—as it pays its grateful tribute—to our *All of Lush* true love dreams—and wishes—"—I pause and wipe away my tears with my fingers—"Open your eyes."

She obeys and gazes at me—as her pungent teardrops ruffle down on her face—And we smile at each other—“I so want to spend the sacred seven decades with you!” she cops a plea.

“Baby—will you—really—spend the sacred seven decades with me?”

“YES!”

“No matter what happens? No matter what pops in? No matter what my walnut cracks through?”

“Wait a minute. Now you’re scaring me.”

“Babe, c’mon! Can we please—clinch and claim it already?”

“I’m sorry. But I’m still working through my D.F.S.I. here.”

“How am I supposed to know when the goddamn D.F.S.I. has already been completely washed out?”

“You’ll know.”

“How, Dylan? How?”

“Your heart will know.”

“I already tried it several times. It didn’t work.”

“Ace, don’t rush me, okay? I’m coming to terms with myself, so we wouldn’t hurt each other like this anymore.”

“All right,” I sob. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t cry,” she pleads. “It’s hurting me a lot more.”

“You know what I’d really like to do? I just want to lock you in. With me. All the time. Just to dissolve all my fears. The fears of you running away. Maybe if I weren’t Ace Hansel, I didn’t have these loving parents, I was a completely different person—or if I were some girl like Sarah instead—then things would have been clinched and claimed right away all through the sacred seven decades—without doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities butting in any second—”

“Clinched and claimed would never be born if you were a completely different person.”

“Then for the love of god, Dylan—junk your D.F.S.I. now!”

“I will, Ace! Just give me a little more time—Please—”

“Okay,” I sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“Would you like to sleep now?” she asks.

“I don’t know. My mind is still fully awake. I feel like staying up all night long and read—or something. I don’t know.”

“How can I sleep then—if you’re—like this?”

“How can I sleep—when your doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities still tyrannize us!”

“I wish I could just shut them off right away—But I can’t! I don’t know how yet. I’m still having a talk with my moral philosophy here.”

“Your moral philosophy has already been foxtrotting around how much you love your parents, having a modest life without regard for worldly assimilation, your work ethics and how much Rahul adores you, your willingness to be nice and accommodating to Sarah despite her voodoo tunnel vision, being excited about simple pleasures—like catching the sunrise or going for a beach walk—That’s your moral philosophy! Now I feel like—I don’t deserve anything—the most important things—like happiness and love – *All of Lush true love wish*—because apparently—my walnut must be displayed in the grandest museum somewhere in New York or in Paris—alone—And all I gotta do is just stand there to be praised or be sucked into their reveries and dreams at night—And I must stay on my post until I rot away—That’s what I am! A display! I am clinched and claimed—like that! For the rest of my life!”

“Ace, please—stop it!”

“Aw, shut it, Dylan!” I erupt, rashing back my heartaches! “All I know is – Ace Hansel is in love with Dylan Dawson—above and beyond the sunrise, *All of Lush true love wish*, the dance, the drabbles, the sacred seven decades—That her heart gushes around her all the time—That she can’t sleep because she’s afraid that she’d wake up one morning without her by her side—That she was, still is, and will always be brave enough to capture her and drag her away—so they could build a home together!”

"I've already known that!" she heaves up. "There is nothing wrong with you, alright? You're too perfect for someone like me! Just give me a little more time to trash out all my issues first—and then everything—EVERYTHING—must be clinched and claimed! So stop rushing! Please!"

"I'm sorry."

"I'm working on it, Ace. I'm working on it really hard inside. Because I don't want to disappoint you. I don't want to disappoint our future. I don't want to disappoint our sacred seven decades together. I don't want to disappoint – *Zea and Kai*—"

And in one fairish snuff, my heart is cradled. I smile. "Do you like the names?"

"Yeah," she replies. "*Kai* sounds like a unisex name, though. Right?"

"It is a unisex name."

"No middle names?"

"You got suggestions?"

"I think *Zea* and *Kai* sound cute already."

"*Zea—Dawson—dash—Hansel—*" I ponder. "*Kai—Dawson—dash—Hansel—*"

"What's with the *dash*—thing?" she asks.

"Our hyphenated surnames. That'll be our surnames—once we get married."

"And it would take me quite a few years to buy you a ring."

"Let's not talk about rings, okay? It only ruins the mood."

"Okay."

"Hey, would you like us to catch our first sunrise later?"

"Not until the D.F.S.I. is already completely washed out."

"And when is that ever gonna happen?" I rag on.

"I don't know, Ace," she says. "I've got things that I gotta sort through my mind first—Plans—Stuff—Once I feel secure about them, then—nothing would hold me back anymore." "You better hurry up already! My cramps are getting more vain every second here!"

"I can't believe your cramps are just as vain as mine."

"Dylan! Really! I'll show you what vain cramps are made of! You better get ready for it!"

"Did you do—*it—on—with—Alex?*"

"Nope!" I gag.

"Was it a one-way thing?" she asks.

"Yep!" I want to puke.

"You didn't even—reciprocate?" she continues.

"I couldn't get myself to it. So I'd just let her do—stuff—on me—instead."

"Did she ever ask you to—?"

"Yeah. And I'd always manage to dodge it."

"What about—the cassava—though?"

"Stacey!" I giggle.

"Yeah! How was it—with her?" she asks.

"Same thing."

"You mean—"

"It means—everything that I do with you—or how I bug you—with teases and jitters—it all just fizzes on—like that—And you're the only one who gives me these convulsive cramps. You're the only one who makes me feel so impatient and irritated—because your books say—we cannot do something about them yet! And you're supposed to say sorry to your oblong shape by now!"

"Walnut—I haven't really done the—all-out—thing—myself—yet—And everything that I do with you—around you—anything—it also just fizzes on—like that—And I've never had these—vain cramps before either. And you're the only one who's transformed them into an oblong shape!"

"Baby, that gives me the ultimate permission for the first attack!"

"I believe we need to—chime with each other—for it—"

ARGH!!! "Dylan, we're gonna do something about the vain cramps once this is all over! I mean it!"

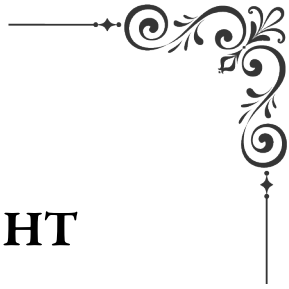
“Why are you mad now?” she smirks.

“Because once we’ve done it, it would clinch and claim EVERY-
THING!!!”

“Catching the sunrise would do!”

“Aw, c’mon!” I protest.

“D.F.S.I. wash out first,” she yelps.
GODDAMMIT!!!



CHAPTER EIGHT

March 27, 2019. Wednesday.

I open my snoozy eyes to a crawly silence. The colossal ceiling—with all its affluence—bows down before me. Listen—listen a bit more—The tranquil beach house whispers on—A fear sheens by—And—

Full consciousness coals up! I leap off of the couch! DYLAN! Dylan is out of sight! Her pillows and blanket are neatly done—stacked on her corner! My heart THUMPS as if pouncing through hurdles in a long marathon!

“DYLAN!!!” I scream out—and scam around the house—upstairs, her bedroom, the recreation room, the movie theater—back downstairs—the dining area, the kitchen, the pool terrace—NOWHERE TO BE FOUND!!! I am about to pass out now—“DYLAN!!!” I wail—as loud as my fears can wring out! I stumble my way out into the firepit—And—

She shuns herself out of her usual chair, almost splashing away the cup of coffee—“What?” she yelps.

I smile. In the midst of my consuming fears. I want to seize her in my arms for a lasting kiss! “Don’t you ever—EVER DO THAT TO ME AGAIN!!!” I lash at her.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbles. “I caught moms and dads early. They went for a beach walk. They wanted me to tag along, but—I didn’t wanna do it without you—so I fixed myself a cup of coffee instead. I’m sorry if you woke up without me.”

"You've just terrorized the hell out of my fears!" I exclaim.

"I'm sorry, alright?" she pouts.

"Oh, baby," I giggle. "Don't tease me with the pout now! Please!"

"I feel really bad now," she sobs.

"It's okay," I reply. "Just don't do it again. Or I'd kill myself—Hey, I gotta make us breakfast. C'mon." We bustle inside the house—into the kitchen—"What do you feel like having?"

She sits at the counter, making sure we're a meter apart. "Pancakes."

"Okay. Do you know what time they're coming back?"

"They didn't say."

"It might probably take quite a while," I figure. "I'll just make something for us then. Cold breakfast for moms and dads would be like—the kickstart of a trippy day. We don't want that to happen."

"Trippy day," she giggles.

"They'd start ganging up on us about—our witches—Sarah and Alex—" I set myself up for a pancake pursuit as my *one and only LUSH* monitors my moves with her provocative eyes. And my lower abdomen is even more induced! ARGH!!! "Have you made pancakes before?"

"I tried," she sighs. "But they were nasty."

"It's all about the batter," I reply—as I slog on with the tasks. "Make sure it's smoothened out. Then you test it with a spoon. It has to be thick—and yet it flights down slowly—like this—" I show it to her, and she displays a skittish smile—like the cutest doll I had had when I was five. I halt it off for a moment and admire her come-hither look. "Dylan Dawson—you have no idea—how much you're gliding everything inside of me each time I look at you—"

"The oblong shape is about to crack," she jabs. "Don't start now."

I labor on. "Around this time—on the same day—last week—a *cutesy sexy charming* woman attacked me with pouts and a lot of eye-rolling—in Toronto—"

"Oh, it was Wednesday, wasn't it?" she laughs.

"And how our lives have changed so much since," I muse over it.

"Don't you find it scary, though?" she ponders.

"Nope," I yelp. "Can't fight back destiny. It's the *All of Lush true love wish* coming true—given as the most wonderful present—by the universe. And we've clinched it. I've claimed it with a full heart—as I should. 'Cause it already belonged to me. It will always be mine. I just hope that you feel the same way about it, too. 'Cause it shouldn't have been accompanied by D.F.S.I. to begin with." Her face turns glum. I ignore it and finish up the pancake pursuit. "Now—all your doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities have exiled their fangs all over me. I'm sure you'd have a second thought about that, too, huh? Then call me a lunatic?"

"Ace," she weeps, "can we please not talk about it now?"

"I'm sorry. D.F.S.I. has just been making me paranoid—If I had a magic wand, I'd just turn myself into somebody who deserves your clinch and claim pledge right off the bat. Then we wouldn't have this problem."

"Ace! PLEASE!!! You're the one who's having the trippy day here, for god's sake!!! I'M WORKING MY WAY OUT OF IT, OKAY??? STOP PUSHING!!!"

"WHEN EXACTLY ARE YOU GONNA GIVE ME THE ANSWER, DYLAN??? BECAUSE I'M ALREADY GOING INSANE HERE!!! CAN'T YOU SEE THAT???"

"After we've survived the punishment! I'll give you a pledge—once I've already made peace with myself."

"A PLEDGE??? A PLEDGE???"

"Whatever it is, alright?"

"There is only ONE PLEDGE here, Dylan! ONE PLEDGE!!! AND THAT'S CLINCHED AND CLAIMED!!! NOTHING ELSE!!!"

"You're breaking my heart now!"

"I'm breaking your heart??? I'M BREAKING YOUR HEART??? Why, what a selfish way to put it!!! How about YOU BREAKING

MY HEART SINCE THE VERY FIRST MOMENT, HUH???

HOW ABOUT THAT???"

"I'm here, Ace! I'm here! And I'm sorry if I'm being stubborn! I just don't like it when you're hurrying me up while I'm still working through my personal intricacies here and figuring things out for you and me! On top of that, we're still trapped inside the vicious witches' evil revenge! I've already told you—give me a little more time—"

"There's only ONE PLEDGE that I'm expecting from you," I rack on. "And you already know what it is. So please—DO NOT DISAPPOINT ME!!!"

"I'll be by the firepit," she says and walks away.

Dear *true love wish*: You could have warned me—it would hurt this much—the most pivotal pledge would either break my heart forever or keep the sacred seven decades safe—and my entire life would swerve into a staggering turn—soon! Very soon!

Please! Keep our sacred seven decades safe! It is ours. It will always be ours. CLINCHED! CLAIMED!

After a whist meltdown, I deliver our breakfast to the firepit and set it up on the patio table. She stands back as she regards my gesture, with her red puffy eyes. "C'mon," I say. "Let's dig in."

We take our seats—across from each other—after validating the one-meter measurement. "Thank you," she moans.

"You're welcome," I reply. As we glut down our breakfast, she sits back and stares at me. Oh, god. *Baby, I don't want any more fights!* "What is it?" I ask.

"You've gotta teach me how to make those pancakes," she says.

A hopeful glow yields into my heart! "Absolutely!"

And she's back to wolf down the rest—"Walnut, I'm really sorry that we've been fighting a lot lately."

"Well, I suppose it's part of it."

"Not when it's already been clinched and claimed."

"Then what are you still waiting for?"

"I just want all this to be over first. I want to make sure everything is clear. So I can think—with a full heart. So I can figure out what to do for us. So I would know how to keep you happy—my own way."

"All you have to do is be with me, Dylan. We'll show our love for each other our own way. That's all I want. That's my happiness."

"Let me wash it all out first, okay? Whatever my pledge would be, it would be for our own good. For the greatest good."

"You already know the pledge that is meant for the greatest good. Our pledge. There's nothing else out there anymore."

"There should be."

"What?" I exclaim.

"*I love you very much* is a pledge," she mumbles.

"You are such a diva," I giggle.

Moms and dads are now back from the beach walk. They spot us and tread in for an aimless intrusion. "Pancakes!" dad yelps.

"They look exquisite!" Mom checks out our plates.

"Fluffy, too!" Mrs. Dawson compliments.

"I'm craving now!" Mr. Dawson snaps. "Brrr!"

"Who made them?" dad asks.

"I did!" I reply—"She did!" Dylan chimes in—AT ONCE! Moms and dads exchange a surprising look—as Dylan and I seem zonked in.

"Honey," mom says, "I didn't know you could make pancakes like that."

"I always struggle with the fluffs," Mrs. Dawson says. "How did you do it?"

"It's all about the batter," Dylan and I reply. "Make sure it's smoothened out."

"Then you test it with a spoon," I continue.

"It has to be thick," Dylan rams in.

"And yet it flights down slowly," Dylan and I finish it up in chorus.

It spooks out moms and dads. "I got it!" dad shakes. "I GOT IT!—Let's get inside, and leave them alone." And he marches away.

"*Twitch Beau* is still in the works," mom says, then turns to Mrs. Dawson—"C'mon, Bev. Let's make our own fluffy pancakes." And moms waltz inside the house, arm in arm.

"I'm afraid to say a word," Mr. Dawson groans, then dashes after them.

"What has just happened?" Dylan wonders.

"I don't know," I shrug. "We were just answering their questions."

"Mom can never make pancakes this fluffy," she says.

"Mom is only great at main courses," I reply. "Never breakfast. My babysitter would make me breakfast. She taught me how to make fluffy pancakes."

"At how old?" she giggles.

"I was probably around ten," I boast on.

"And yet you still remembered all through this time," she says, smiling.

"Of course," I vaunt up. "*And when I finally got it right, it made me feel like—I could take care of anybody.*" And—right in an instant—it darkens her eyes with guilt, sinking me away into all the grim fears looming inside my chest—"Oh baby—I'm sorry—I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," she mumbles. "I'll work on it."

"Dylan!" My heartaches are already jammed full! I spare out more drips, and she escapes away with more weeps. We both listen to each other's pains—until—"The only way for you to take care of me," I blubber on—"—is to just be there—WITH ME—FOR US! We'll live a simple life together. You don't have to worry about – THINGS!!! Please—believe me—THAT'S NOT WHAT I WANT FROM YOU!!! I'm in love with you! My heart—everything inside of me—everything about me—everything in my head—IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU!!! And IT'S ALL YOURS!!! I'd never been so happy—and so nervous—and so brave—until I met you! I had no idea who I was or what I wanted to do with my pathetic life—until I got you! I didn't even realize for one second that a wish would find a way

for it to come true—until I got to know you in our first few moments! And yet along with all that—fears broke in! My fear of losing you any-time and any day! And out of that one fear alone—has been fencing me into a lot—A WHOLE LOT OF THEM!!! So I don't think it's fair that we're both disrespecting US!!! Or betraying our dreams and wishes! Or forsaking our drabbles and making OUR PLEDGE WAIT LONGER all because you believe you're with me empty-handed! Well, you did not come with me empty-handed, Dylan! You came with me with a full heart! You've just been confusing it with your empty hands all along! This is why you've got all these doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities—when this whole time—YOU'VE ALREADY GOT WHAT I'VE WANTED FROM YOU—and YOU SHOULD NEVER DENY ME OF IT—and abandon the rest of what we have!”

“What if you'd get sick of me?” she replies. “What would happen to my full heart then?”

“Oh my god!” I soar out of the chair. “I do not believe this!”

“What if you'd suddenly fall in love with someone who deserves you more?” she provokes.

“YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE WHO DESERVES ME, DYLAN!!!” I scream. “The only one!!! ‘Cause there's nobody else out there who shares *All of Lush* with me, the drabbles, the sacred seven decades, the pledge—and EVERYTHING ELSE that we've already created together all through this short time period!!! And what does it say on our drabble envelopes? How did our hearts—our full hearts—clinch and claim each other early on? MY ONE AND ONLY LUSH!!! My one and only LUSH!!! There is a beautiful reason as to why it happened just like that!!! There is a beautiful reason as to why we instinctively called each other MY ONE AND ONLY LUSH!!! And that beautiful reason is – I will always be yours and you will always be mine! And my full heart – and all the lush that you make me feel – have known *it*—right from the very first glance! DON'T YOU GET IT??? WE'RE MEANT FOR EACH OTHER!!!”

"Walnut," she mumbles, "your beautiful heart always manages to wound up my vultures."

"And you're wounding up my vultures each time you pout away with your D.F.S.I. drama!"

"And I will never afford a ring. That's for sure."

"Oh baby—it's not important—I'd wear a ring that's worth seven bucks—as long as it's from you—I'd be proud and happy—"

"You would never wear something like that anywhere!"

"I would!" I smile. "And I'd wear it all the way through our sacred seven decades."

"You're just making me feel better," she pouts.

"Don't pout!" I laugh. "My vain cramps are woofing up!" I fall back into my chair.

"Sometimes—I don't wanna look at you—" she says.

"Why is that?"

"Cause it makes me wanna go for the impulsive attack."

I hee-haw! "Really! Despite you—being a baby lesbian?"

"I'll—I'll—" she stutters—

"Okay," I giggle—"—tell me—what would you wanna do first?"

"I'll just do it!" she yelps.

"And how is the—*it*—supposed to be done?"

"Ace! You're embarrassing me! I know what to do, okay? Just shut up about it now!"

"Fine!" I laugh—

"Don't laugh," she groans. "It's making me nervous."

"How about—"

"There you are again with your sinister opening line."

"I'll go first."

"Why would you wanna go first?"

"To satisfy my vain cramps!"

"You've never done it before. How would you justify that?"

"My vain cramps have already justified it for me—since our first meeting! Way before the walnut introduction!"

"I don't believe you."

"Believe it, babe," I grunt. "I've been mad and hungry."

"I'll go first," she insists.

"Why would you wanna go first?"

"To gratify my vain cramps, too!"

"Baby—I'm going first—clinched?"

"Nope. Not claimed here. I'm going first."

"Dylan!" I protest.

"I'm calling the shots here," she growls. "I'm supposed to make the first move, and I've still got the D.F.S.I. torture to flee away from. Let me work through it myself—really good—from now on! Would you be kind enough to deal with that?"

"Clinched."

"Claimed."

"I think this one-meter rule is making it all worse."

"Tell me about it."

"I wanna kiss you right now."

"Walnut, stop! The oblong shape is rolling around now."

"Let it roll!" I giggle.

"I can't," she says. "Or I'd drag you away somewhere and—"

"Oh god!" I interrupt her, feeling my lower abdomen. "I can't take it anymore. I CAN'T TAKE THIS ONE-METER RULE ANY-MORE!!! My vain cramps are fighting their way out now!"

"Mine too," she gasps.

"We've definitely got to do something here. Back to the sneaking program agenda."

"I don't wanna do that."

"Dylan! Please! We have to do it some time soon! It's been killing me! And we've been fighting a lot as a result! We've got to man up now!"

"I know. But I don't wanna disobey them, Ace. We have to earn their trust."

"Do we really have to be staunch about it?"

"Yes. Because they're our parents. We know how much they love us. We love them just as much. So we're supposed to be staunch about the whole thing."

ARGH!!! "But I can't stand the fights anymore, babe. I can't. I'm sorry. It's been depressing, and grating up the D.F.S.I. to its whacked torment big time. We've got to sneak away at some point here."

"As much as I would love to," she says, "I'm not with you on this one. I'm sorry. Not disobeying them no matter what. No matter what!"

"I can't be staunch about it anymore."

"We're supposed to be. Don't throw a tantrum now."

"So you're really staunch about it, huh?"

"We're staunch about it."

"Yeah, but I seriously wanna do things—on you—with you—right now!"

"We're staunch about it. Say it!"

"I don't want to!"

"Say it!"

"Babe, my vain cramps are steaming up!"

"Walnut, say it—please—"

"Fine," I own up. "We're staunch about it."

"I'm kissing you right now," she teases.

I grin. "I'm kissing you back. In the wildest—and most passionate tongue moves—"

"Okay, stop!" she interjects, panicking.

"I'm giving you the tongue. That's how we always kiss."

"We're not gonna get that body part involved right now."

"It's the most crucial body part."

"I know! Just not right now!"

"Our tongues—" I tease on—

“Walnut!” she warns me.

“My tongue journeys its way down—”

“I’m running away!”

“Baby—just play along—please—”

“ARGH!!!”

“What?” I laugh.

“I’m protesting!” she replies. “ARGH!!!”

“Baby, that’s my constant internal expression!”

“Well, that’s my protest expression!”

“My tongue is in—”

“Shut up!”

“My tongue dips into—”

“I’m gonna kill you!”

I laugh! “I’ll definitely attack you first!”

“I’m calling the shots!” she yelps.

“Hurry it up already!”

“Stop rushing me!”

“C’mon,” I say. “Let’s get inside and take a shower.” We pick up our plates and cups of coffee, then—a raunchy idea drenches through – And she pauses to snag off my thought—the sexy fleshy thought! “So yeah—” I play dumb—clearing my throat—

“We are not taking a shower together!” she squeaks.

“Baby, relax. Moms and dads will never find out.”

“We’re not gonna disrespect your parents’ house, Ace!”

“My vain cramps are already getting right up into my head. I’m dying here!”

“NOT IN THIS HOUSE! I mean it! We’ll do it somewhere else! NOT HERE!”

“Let’s go, then. Where would you like?”

“We have to endure this punishment first!”

“I can’t wait that long anymore, Dylan!”

“I’m calling the shots, anyway!”

“ARGH!!!”

“ARGH!!!”



MOMS AND DADS ARE BRIMMED around in the kitchen—Moms are in a meticulous pancake operation and dads are having coffee at the counter. Dylan and I encroach in to dump our dishes—one at a time—adhering to the one-meter rule—as they all observe us in a revered fashion.

“So how’s the one-meter rule doing so far?” dad asks.

“We’re staunch about it,” Dylan and I groan a reply. Instantly, moms and dads FREEZE—even more badgered now! Their blanched reaction causes us to pause—“What?” we roar at them.

“This is already too much for my *Twitch Beau* quest,” dad says.

“And after over three decades later—” mom grumbles.

“I’ll do some research on this,” dad interrupts her.

“How many more of—*these things* you two have?” Mrs. Dawson asks me and Dylan.

“What things?” Dylan and I reply in chorus. And—a breakout! Moms and dads go to pieces—facing us! “What’s going on?” my *one and only LUSH* and I boggle over the commotion.

“We have to do some investigation here,” Mr. Dawson snaps.

Dylan and I are about to respond, but—“Hold it!” dad interjects, flittering. “Talk—one at a time—”

“Is that supposed to be another rule?” Dylan and I pipe back.

“One at a time!” dad reechoes.

“This is an insult,” mom booms back.

“To what?” Dylan and I bat on.

“One at a time!” dad yells.

“Oh dear—” Mrs. Dawson croaks away.

“I’m not saying a word,” Mr. Dawson nudges.

“Girls—” dad gasps—“—please talk—one at a time—”

“Why?” Dylan and I shriek.

Dad turns to Mr. Dawson. “Dave, you talk!”

“I can’t even feel my pulse anymore,” Mr. Dawson replies.

“I’ll talk,” mom presides and looks at us. “Honey—sweetheart—we already know that you two belong together—but please—don’t over do it in front of us—”

“Over do what?” Dylan and I exclaim—in an innocent bash.

“Like that!” dad snaps. “I’ve said—talk—one at a time—!”

“I’m scared to ask anything now,” Mrs. Dawson snorts.

“And my pulse is on a cardiac arrest,” Mr. Dawson yelps.

“You two—” Dad points at us—“—better get away from us for a while.”

Dylan and I walk away. “ARGH!!!”

“ONE AT A TIME!!!” dad shouts after us.

And we sojourn in the living room—“I don’t know why they’re making a fuss over it,” I say and dive into the couch. “We’re just responding with no intention whatsoever to spook them out.”

“I know!” Dylan falls into the sofa chair. “Just an initial impulse.”

“Babe—” I tease her—“—the shower—?”

“I’m not doing it,” she blurts out.

“We’ll be very careful.”

“Walnut, we’re not doing it in this house.”

“Okay then, pick a place. Right now.”

“I’m still calling the shots here.”

“Our vain cramps are calling the shots here, Dylan.”

“Our vain cramps can wait.”

“For how long? I can’t even last a minute anymore.”

“The second rule is even more brutal. Would you like to endure that instead?”

“Enduring the vain cramps is the most brutal.”

“Disrespecting moms and dads is the most brutal.”

“But I wanna kiss you now—and make love to you—It hurts!”

"Our *first time* is not happening in this house."

"Hmmm—" I moan—"—my tongue is—"

"I'm running away!" She hoofs out—leading into the firepit.

I run after her, and she foils down into her usual chair. "Baby, please!" I instigate on.

"It's your parents' house, Ace," she lectures me. "It's your childhood home. Please respect that."

"I'm sorry." I blush, then take a seat.

"I want our first time to be lasting—and all that—" she says. "Why do you keep on rushing things, anyway?"

"I guess—it's because—*my* doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities have already jacked up into paranoia—'Cause I just want to make sure—you will always be mine—all through the sacred seven decades—And that—you wouldn't run away from me—ever—No matter what *my world* throws at us—"

"I love a simple life, Ace. I don't have social activities. And my only friend is Rahul. He's my *mantra*—I just go to work, come home, listen to Jazz, struggle to keep my thoughts together for a good story to write, listen to *All of Lush* for a reverie, then go to bed—to dream—to dream about a girl like you—About a girl with the most beautiful heart—I just didn't realize that she would wham in—like this—In a perfect form—It's overwhelming—It scares the hell out of my heart—"

"Baby, do you regret meeting me?"

"It's not fair for you to ask me that!"

"Just be honest, Dylan! Do you regret meeting me?"

"How could you ask me such a cruel question?"

"Because you've been overly dramatic about us, our situation, *my world* since the first day—while I've been kneeling down for mercy this whole time! You regret meeting me, don't you? Is that what it is?"

"If you could grasp my heart, Ace—what do you think it says?"

"I don't know what it says!" I break down—"That's why I'm asking you!"

“You should know what it says!” she presses. “Cause I’m still right here—trying really hard to smack myself out of my principles! The harsh principles that have been flaming along with pride! The pride of being a man—of taking care of you—of building a future with you—of holding the sacred seven decades in my hands—in my empty hands—THAT’S WHAT MY HEART SAYS!!!”

“Then I dare you to do the pledge right now!” I challenge her.

“See, this is the problem with you,” she argues. “You do not hear a word that I say, then you push me to do something while I’m still coming to my senses and deliberating with my conscience to make things right for both of us!”

“How to make things right for both of us? It’s easy, Dylan! Just do the pledge with me, so we can set ourselves free from all our doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities, then we can get on with our sacred seven decades together! It’s *THAT* easy! This is how our hearts and hands become full! Stop complicating things anymore!”

“It’s easy for you to tell me that because you’ve already got everything in the world! And you’re just expecting me to ride along! Like – oh, by the way—don’t worry about our rent, it’s already covered—don’t worry about our groceries, I’ve already grabbed them along the way—don’t worry about our next holiday, it’s already booked—don’t worry about our wedding rings, I’ve already got them—don’t worry about the wedding, I’ve already paid it all off—I’M SMASHED IN THIS RELATIONSHIP, ACE!!! And along with that, I can’t even cook for you! I may be good at domestic chores, but that’s just about it. How can I make you proud? How could I make *Zea and Kai* proud?”

“Baby—” Oh my heart! It has never been this crushed before! “—do you love me? Do you love us? Are you in love with our drabbles, our sacred seven decades together, our clinched and claimed, our sunrises, our beach walks, our childhood dreams and wishes, our dance, our *All of Lush*—having *Zea and Kai*?”

“Why do you always manage to do this to me?” she yaps.

"Do what?"

"THIS! Making me feel better!"

"Initial impulse."

"Oh my god, Ace Hansel! ARGH!!!"

"You cannot protest. Oh, I forgot one more thing."

"The vain cramps."

"Are you in love with our vain cramps?"

"The oblong shape is about to wreck its way out now."

"Can we please not fight anymore?"

"I know. It's killing me, too."

"Stupid one-meter rule!"

"It's our punishment! Let's just—suck it up."

I smile—the wily hunky smile—"The shower?"

"Walnut!" she snaps. "Stop it!"

"ARGH!!!"

"ARGH!!!"

"Let's sneak away for our first beach walk then."

"Ace, I've told you, we are not gonna disobey and disrespect them!"

"We can ask them. I'm pretty sure they'd trust us with the one-meter rule—regardless—"

"NO! My conscience would kill me if we'd violate the rule behind their backs! Not doing it! I'm sorry!"

"Why do we really have to be staunch about it, anyway? We're grown women, you know?"

"Grown women who have put their parents up to shame! We deserve this!"

"It wasn't our fault!"

"It doesn't matter! We're grown women who have admitted their mistakes, and are now serving their time. Let's just be in our best behavior and get it over with."

"When was the last time you had ever hurt your parents—before this?"

"When I moved to Toronto."

"Why did you move?"

"Some—mystical—click—told me to."

"Some mystical click?" I laugh.

"Something," she shrugs. "I don't know what it was. But I knew I just had to do it 'cause it wouldn't shut off anyhow—So then—one night—I just started packing up, browsed through for an apartment, my landlord got back to me the next day, booked a flight, shocked my parents, then flew out of Edmonton."

"That was very brave of you," I say in a dreamy gush. *Oh baby! The mystical click was for us to meet!* "I could say the same thing about my trip to *Luster* that day as well."—She squeals, rolling in the aisles—"What's funny?" I yelp. "I've already told you—the mystical click in that story—remember?"

"I know!" she laughs — "But really—*What's my deal? I'm a walnut! I'm a walnut! You see me otherwise, I know! But inside—I'm a walnut!*"

Our joined hilarity reverberates along with the wind! "Oh god!" I holler on—"I'm sure *you're gonna* keep on teasing me about it all the way through our sacred seven decades!"

"*I'll tell Zea and Kai about it, too!*" she woofs.

"Don't embarrass me that much!"

"Oh, *they're gonna* love it!"

"*They're—gonna—*love it?" I ask— for the pledge stamp.

"Walnut—" she warns me.

"You can't fight it back anymore, babe. It's already stuffed inside of you, and it's not just full—It's overflowing—"

"Exactly! It's overflowing! That's why it's a problem! 'Cause I have to figure out how to catch the spills and leave the space clean!"

"I'm not fighting anymore."

"Me neither."

"Babe, the beach walk. Please?"

"Not doing it!"

"I'll ask them myself!"

"Walnut, would you mind waiting? We'll make it a lasting moment. Not like this. It would terrorize me out of proportion. I don't want that feeling kicking me around every second."

"You're such a staunch diva!"

"Baby carrot!"

"Potato!"

"ARGH!!!"



THE VAIN CRAMPS. JUSTIFIED—FULL-fledged—genuine—divine – HONORED!!!

My first time. Oh, how it tremors all over me. Like mouth-watery chocolates—or the illustrious beauty of a sunrise—or the immortal lyrics and melody of *All of Lush*—I cannot wait!

To savor all the love and romance. The sanctified touch. The pervading moans. The sublime skin. She is perfect!

With her—a heart becomes godlike—a smile becomes a lasting happiness – Ace Hansel matters more in the world!

ARGH!!! *Baby, take me home now! Wherever it is—just take me home—Let's run away together! Kiss moms and dads I love yous—and hasty goodbyes—for a day or two—Then plead—for their forgiveness! PLEASE!!!*

The shower is splashing me into the sharpened steamiest thoughts that I would have never thought—in this lifetime—would enrapture me in a way that—that – ARGH!!!

STOP!!!

Oh baby, read my thoughts. Please! We have to do something about the vain cramps now! The pledge! Get ready for our sacred seven decades together! Zea and Kai have been getting impatient to be born! What are we still waiting for? We cannot betray all this anymore! WE CAN'T!!! We just can't!!!

But wait! My parents' business proposal is still grappling around my fears! How am I supposed to lay it out on the table in front of my *one and only LUSH* a.k.a. staunch diva?

I blow dry my hair and get dressed, then run downstairs and scan my anxious eyes around. She is probably still up in her room, finishing up her shower. My heart squirms in agony whenever she is out of my sight.

Moms are cleaning up in the kitchen and dads are up in the recreation room. I can hear their larking prattles chirping around the house.

I sit in the living room to weigh it all in. The business would be an opportune chance: not only for the greatest good of our sacred seven decades, for the sweet darlings as well! And I still can't bear the noxious thought of them being jobless in the midst of the vicious monster's revenge! Argh!

But first—I have to convince my *one and only LUSH*! Oh, god. My nerves can't stop zigzagging now. *Please baby—say yes! Let's not fight anymore! Just say yes!*

Mom trudges in and sits beside me. "Have you talked to Dylan yet?"

"Oh mom," I sap—"I'm about to faint just by thinking about it."

"Would you want us to sit down with her instead?"

"I'll try to—convince her myself first. Thank you."

She kisses me on my temple. "She's perfect, honey. We're proud—and envious of you."

I clasp around her. "I know. I love you. I love you all. You have no idea."

"We have an extended family now. All of a sudden, this house lights up. And it's even more beautiful." And she looks into my jaunty eyes—"Thank you—for all this!"

"Oh, mom!" I embrace her. "*Thank you—for all this!*"

She pulls away and kisses me on the forehead. “Moms and dads are going downtown to pick up some stuff. Do you and Dylan need anything?”

“We’re fine,” I reply. “Thanks.”

“All right—And just a little reminder, Miss Ace Hansel—no sneaking around and no beach walks!”

“You may count on it. Your other prisoner is a staunch diva, for crying out loud—with a doctrine that stretches beyond the *conscience* horizon.”

“We know,” she giggles, then rises. “I hope you can still breathe!”

“Barely,” I yelp.

And just as mom disappears into the kitchen, Dylan animates her way down the stairs and joins me on the couch—a meter away. Hmm. Oh, god. Her scent! Her silky long brown hair! Her stunning simplicity! Dressed in my old denim pants and white slim top—that she did not protest against—thank goodness! The vain cramps are balking in a violent way now! ARGH!!! It’s—all beauty—right here—packed in one staunch diva—my *one and only LUSH!* “Let’s grab some wine and sit by the firepit,” I say.

“Wine at brunch time?” she snaps. “What are you up to?”

“Babe,” I sigh, “please—just wait for me by the firepit—okay?”

She studies my emanating look. “Okay.” And she obeys.

I prance into the dining area and steal off a bottle of red wine from the cellar, then nab two glasses from the cupboard—and dad flashes before me—“Why are you two having wine around this time?” he asks.

“Dad,” I quaver, “I need my grits up. I’m just about to spill the beans to Dylan, and I’m choked up.”

“Your mom and I can talk to her,” he says, “no problem.”

“Dad—” I bellow—“—I don’t wanna lose her!”

“You don’t wanna lose each other! We all know that for sure!”

“You don’t understand how firm she is about her principles! It’s ridiculous! I’m already running out of defenses here!”

“Honey,” he says and looks at me—“we’ll talk to her. It’ll be fine.”

“She even refused to wear my pajamas ‘cause she said they were too swanky and expensive,” I convulse.

“We will sit down with her, and it’ll be okay. I promise.”

“I’m sorry for all the troubles that we’ve caused you—You—moms and dads—It’s disgraceful—”

“You’ve just reminded me of that—WITCH—again,” he thunders. “Ooohhh!!! That WITCH!!! GRRR!!! She’s so evil that she—!!!”

“Dad!” I snap, interrupting him. “Your hypertension.”

“What she’s done to us all is unforgivable! And inhumane!” he pauses to sigh—“Anyway, I’ve already got all my clients back. And it’s funny how some of your mom’s lucrative accounts are knocking back in, too—We should watch the news later. See what’s going on—around this witch riot—now.”

“Okay,” I reply and kiss him on the cheek. “Love you.”

“Moms and dads are going downtown,” he reminds me. “One meter! And no yoyo way!”

“I promise!” I yelp.



I JOIN DYLAN BY THE firepit and serve us our wine—conforming to the one-meter penance—as tizzy fusses around my chest, hands, and legs. We are seated in our usual chairs, sipping away in fidgety silence—until—“Is there something that you’d like to tell me about?” she asks.

“What’s made you say that?” I reply.

“I already know your moves, Ace. I already have an idea as to how you run—things.”

“As to how I run things? What’s that supposed to mean, Dylan?”

“How you want to run my principles—my life—my decisions—”

“Don’t you think it’s a little harsh for you to say that?”

"It is harsh. But I'm not sorry for it. 'Cause I'm just thinking of ways as to how to make things right for us. If you'd just listen to my words."

"Dylan, all I ever want is for us to keep our sacred seven decades safe. To keep our own happiness. To keep you—with me."

She takes a sip of her wine and sits back. "I've already got all your answers."

"Answers?" I gasp.

She clears her throat and looks at me. "Vancouver or Toronto? Coffee or tea? Pizza or pasta? Sweet or spicy? Morning or night? Fast or smooth?—It is not wherever you are, whatever you like, whichever you choose, whatever your taste bud craves, whenever you feel, and however you run—"

Guilt zips me into a scathing third degree! "Dylan!"

"It is Vancouver, coffee, pasta, spicy, morning, and smooth!" she sobs. "Am I right?"

"Dylan!" I wail, whiffing out of my chair.

"Please—tell me I'm wrong!"

"Dylan, not right now, please!"

She skitters away from the table. "Ace, please tell me I did NOT get the answers right!"

I gaze at her. "I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us."

"Just answer me, please," she says and gulps down her wine. "Ace—did you lie to me?"

"No, I didn't," I weep. "I meant all the answers. I swear to god, Dylan. I MEANT THEM ALL!!!"

"Then tell me I didn't get all the answers right! Tell me, Ace—Please—tell me—"

"Mom and dad—"

"I'm sorry?" she interjects.

"Mom and dad want us to stay here in Vancouver," I confess—"—and they're offering us a business that you and I can run, then—"

"I'm not hearing this," she flutters. "Please, Ace—don't shove it in my face! It's too much for me to take on!"

"Dylan, please!" I beg—"Listen to me for a minute here—They were gonna offer it to me a long while back—but they waited for the right time to talk to me about it. Then THIS happened! So they've offered it to us instead—And I know that you and I can make it work together. We can also grab the sweet darlings to work with us. We will all do great! Please! Think about it! It's for us! It's for the sweet darlings! It's for *Zea and Kai*! Please, baby—Please—"

"I just want to be alone right now!"

"Baby—they're not hurting your principles—Nobody is hurting your principles—Your principles define your integrity, your heart—who you are—how much you love—how much you take pride in your work, your simple life—how staunch you are about moms and dads' punishment, how you honor it despite the vain cramps—how you reprimand my tantrums about sneaking away 'cause you don't want us to disobey and disrespect them—how you condemn the idea of doing our *first time* in this house—my parents' house, my childhood home—because of its dignified value—Don't you see how you amaze all of us? How you amaze all our hearts? How you still amaze your parents' hearts? How amazing your heart is?—This is why we've been given this opportunity—Because moms and dads already know—that we belong with each other—We deserve to be with each other—"

"Ace—business—That's already a scary thought. I'm afraid I would disappoint them. You and the sweet darlings can run it. I want you to take it. For you. For them—"

"Dylan, what are you saying?"

"I don't know anything about it!"

"You will learn! I'll teach you—"

"Right! You'll teach me. Of course."

"Baby, please—"

"I can't do it, Ace," she attests. "I don't want to disappoint your parents. I don't want to disappoint you. I don't want us to work together. I don't want to be a part of it—because I know—I know what I'm capable of. And it's NOT THIS ONE!"

"Then—what do you want, Dylan?" I go on bended knee.

"I want a simple life."

"Your simple life? Or *our* simple life?"

"You can never have a simple life, Ace," she hisses. "That would be unrealistic for you to even *try it for once*."

"GODDAMMIT, DYLAN!!" I sweep out more tears! "You're always underestimating me! I can make fluffy pancakes, for god's sake! I can cook pasta! I can clean kitchens! I can't wait for our beach walks! I'm excited to catch our sunrises! I can grab groceries! The only friends that I've got are the sweet darlings! I'd rather wear yoyo costumes than princess dresses! AND YOU'RE TELLING ME IT'S UNREALISTIC FOR ME TO LIVE A SIMPLE LIFE??? Have you ever heard me ache for anything grand? Have you seen how my parents work around the house? And have you ever heard them brag about their jobs or throwing parties or other people's wealth or their money? You've been underestimating me and my parents since day one—and it hurts! So THAT'S MY WORLD, DYLAN! You wanna see *my world*? You've already seen all of it! Squished at once! There it is!"

—a profound stillness whooshes in—She wheels back into the chair and refills her glass—then takes a sip and dwells on her thoughts—"I can't do the business, Ace," she says. "I can't. I just can't."

I take my seat and contemplate, then look at her—"Baby—what do you want?"

"Just do the business with the sweet darlings. You all deserve it. It's meant for you and them. Not meant for you and me."

"Dylan, I'm asking you—what do you want?"

"I don't know what I want now. I'm getting all confused."

"Does our love confuse you?"

"Our love doesn't confuse me, Ace. It's what's around it."

"You've already seen it all. What else do I need to prove to you?"

"It's not that. It's who I am in this. It's what I need to do to make it work for us. It's pride and principles. It's—too much."

"Baby—no matter what you say—our drabbles will be hidden away for our sacred seven decades—"

"Just let me clear my head for now," she raises her voice.

"You're not thinking of running away, are you?" I panic.

She looks at me. "I wouldn't do that to you—without a proper goodbye—would I?"

I crumple into all my fierce heartaches! "Baby—please—don't do this to us – PLEASE!!!"

"STOP!!!" she blusters—"STOP THAT!!! Don't cry like that, Ace Hansel!!! Not in front of me!!!"

"What do you want me to do, Dylan?" I eat my heart out! "TELL ME!!! WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO???"

"I want you to stop crying now! That's what I want you to do!"

"Then stop hurting me already!"

"I'm not hurting you, Ace! I'm sorting out my issues here! My god-damn issues that I need to get rid of so I would know what to do for us—in this relationship! That's just what I've been doing!"

"All you gotta do is stay with me!"

"I already know that part! It's how to keep you! That's just what I'm worried about!"

"How to keep me? Look at me, Dylan! Look at me! This is me—begging—crying my heart out—This is me—being afraid—SO AFRAID THAT YOU'D LEAVE ME!!! WHO'S GOT THE ISSUES NOW???"

"I just wanna be able to take care of you, Ace! I don't want you taking care of me ALL THE FREAKING TIME! I don't want you to get

sick of me and regret all this after a while! This is why I need to clear my head and figure things out as to how to do that!”

“It’s not that complicated, Dylan. It’s not even close to your doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities. We’ll live our life here in Vancouver, and if you don’t want the business, that’s fine. You may grab any job you like. That’s how simple it is.”

“I can’t believe how easy it is for you to say these things to me!”

“Because you’re complicating simple things!”

“Now what? You’re hauling me out of Toronto—just like that? I move here to be with you, and what would happen to me once you’d realize that—*us—this*—would never work after all?”

“Let me ask you—who had all the courage to make the first move? Who begged for happiness at the coffee shop that day? Who broke off an engagement with the vicious monster? Which discreet gay daughter would brag about a charming girl to her parents? Which discreet gay woman would show off her *one and only LUSH* to the sweet darlings and to the entire country? Who insisted for us to do the drabbles? Who presented the sacred seven decades? Who named *Zea and Kai*? Who cries to her parents because she’s scared to lose her *All of Lush true love*? Can you answer that?”

“I hate you,” she groans.

“Baby—please—” I take a sip of my wine—“—we already knew—even moms and dads have also known—that you and I—”

“Ace! I have to do something first, okay? Just let me do something!”

“Like what?”

“Something!”

“What is it?”

“Just something—Whatever—I don’t know yet—I’ll have to think—”

“Something for what?”

“Please, Ace! Allow me to think and figure it out for myself, okay? Stop stirring my mind for now.”

"Is it something for us?"

"ARGH!!!"

"ARGH!!!"

"I don't know how you manage to handle us!" she whines.

"Is that good or bad?" I ask.

"It's both ways."

"Why is that?"

"Cause you make me feel better about things, and I lose myself."

"You lose yourself in what way?"

"Like—I can't even think on my own anymore. 'Cause everything that you blast out—it's—"

"Everything that I blast out is for the greatest good."

"Y-yeah," she agrees. "And I hate you for it!"

I laugh! "Is this one of your screaming insecurities, too?"

"It's not funny!"

"C'mon, babe. You gotta shut them all off now. They'll never win. Once they're all gone, my D.F.S.I. will dissipate, too."

"For now—it's not that easy—"

"How long do we have to wait for?"

"Once I've come up with something, and if it works—then—that'd be the end of D.F.S.I. tempest."

"Let me help you with that something then."

"Ace!!! This is exactly what I've been telling you about! You gotta stop pampering me around, okay? Once I'm figuring something out on my own, I don't want you butting in—please! 'Cause it's not just for me! It's for us! If I can't handle it myself anymore, I'll let you know!"

"Cause this D.F.S.I. thing is causing our catfights!"

"Oh my goodness, Ace Hansel," she giggles.

"What?" I yelp. "Well, it's true! It's been smashing our heads non-stop!"

"It's not only that. It's the one-meter rule."

"I've told you we've gotta sneak away."

"Where are moms and dads, though?"

"They took off. Downtown."

"Oh."

"Babe—"

"Walnut!" she warns me.

"Would you please—" I plead— "—do *it* now?"

"The pledge?"

"Please?"

"I've told you, I'm still coming up with something here. If it works, then I'd do the pledge."

"What is it, anyway?"

"Oh my god, walnut! Just let me do it myself, okay? Please! No butting in!"

"Fine. Would it make me cry—or smile for the rest of my life?"

"ARGH!!!"

"ARGH!!!"

"I've gotta learn how to make those fluffy pancakes," she says.

"I'll teach you," I reply. "When would you like?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Clinched."

"Claimed."

"My vain cramps cannot survive overnight anymore!"

"The oblong shape is barely breathing now."

"Then what on earth are we still waiting for?"

"We both know what we're still waiting for!"

"Baby, I've told you, I've been mad and hungry! I'm becoming like a vicious monster, and I can't stand it anymore!"

"We'll get through it," she says. "Trust me. We'll survive like a big bang."

"Really!" I protest. "You're a staunch diva, for crying out loud! How are we gonna survive like a big bang?"

"I made love to you in my dream last night," she confesses.

Awwwww! I palpitate! *Oh baby! I can't wait to attack you now!* "I made love to you in the shower a while ago."

"You did not do *it!*" she laughs.

"It hurt!" I snap. "I had to relieve myself! I was thinking of—doing *it*—on you!"

"Walnut!" she squirms.

"Oh geez, babe," I sneer. "Don't protest now. I'm about to—"

"Let's not talk about it anymore, okay?"

"It's all we can do while we're serving our time here."

"I know. But you're making my vain cramps worse."

"You're making my vain cramps worse."

"You've just told me about what you did in the shower, for god's sake!"

"Well, I couldn't help it anymore, all right? I've been dying to jump on you, and I don't think it's happening anytime soon—given your staunch diva-ish glory getting in the way!"

"My goodness, Ace Hansel!"

"Did you think about me while you were in the shower?"

"I think about you all the time," she utters in a dreamy tone.

AND—my heart is glammed up—with love and romance—and every beautiful thing found in the entire universe! "Baby—"—rosy teardrops moisten in my eyes—"—I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us."

"I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us."

"Is that clinched and claimed yet?"

"*That one*—is clinched and claimed! For sure!"

"What else is there to clinch and claim, anyway?"

"A LOT MORE!!!"

"Name one."

“Well—you gotta let me do—my *thing* first—and annihilate the D.F.S.I. all on my own—If it works, then it’s clinched and claimed—all the way through our sacred seven decades.”

“You’re making me nervous.”

“You should be.”

“DYLAN!!!”

“What?”

“Please—whatever it is—I hope it’s for our greatest good!”

“It should be.”

“Our greatest good—together.”

“We’ll see. If it works or not.”

“DYLAN!!!”

“What?”

“YOU’RE SCARING THE HELL OUT OF ME NOW!!!”

“You’re scaring the hell out of me. ‘Cause you pamper me around, and you don’t let me do things on my own. Even just this—me coming up with something to flee my way out of my internal issues—you feel the need to butt in and yank me out of them yourself. Like you always do. I just wanna be able to get my heart and mind to evaluate my bugs without you swooping in, flicking them out, and making me feel better. Would you be kind enough to deal with that?”

“Clinched.”

“Claimed.”

“I can’t breathe anymore.”

“Ace Hansel—we can’t have tantrums now.”

“You’re not running away, though—are you?”

“I already ran away!” she declares.

“WHAT?!” I exclaim, almost jumping off of my chair.

“With you!” she says, gazing at me. “I already ran away—with you.”

I smile. “Oh baby—I can’t wait to jump on you now!”

“Hey! You already did something in the shower! Not fair!”

“You may do it, too. Tomorrow morning.”

"I'll do it tonight."

"Oh, god. I'm thinking about it now. ARGH!!!"

"Baby carrot!" she giggles.

"Potato!" I yelp back.

"*What's my deal? I'm a walnut! I'm a walnut! You see me otherwise, I know. But inside, I'm a walnut!*" Our hysterical kicks glee up to the skies! "Oh, walnut!" she says—"—I still can't believe you did that!"

"I had to brave up and introduce my walnut cracks," I laugh on, "just to catch your attention—and hopefully wipe out your pouts and eye-rolling! Or I'd murder myself!"

"And here we are now—all because of that—"

"With our drabbles, sacred seven decades, clinched and claimed, *All of Lush* true love dreams and wishes – *Zea and Kai*—"

"With vain cramps—and one-meter rule under parental punishment!"

"We've definitely got to do something about the vain cramps soon! I mean it, Dylan!"

"Walnut!"

"C'mon. I've gotta make us lunch. What do you feel like having?"

"Spicy prawn linguine pasta," she moans.

I smile. "Clinched."

"Claimed."

ARGH!!! VAIN CRAMPS!!!



HAMMERING AWAY IN THE kitchen for spicy prawn linguine pasta as my *one and only LUSH's* absorbing presence plugs my happy heart into all the allurements of—our *first time*, our pledge, our sacred seven decades, our sunrises and beach walks, having *Zea and Kai*—I am clinched and claimed for life—though she is still calling the shots once she has already accomplished—*that something*—which churns my veins each time it crosses my mind now.

She is seated at the counter, still sipping her wine, watching me—a meter away—with her tantalizing oculus—escalating my vain cramps more. “If only we didn’t have this one-meter rule barricading between us now,” she says, “I’d help you.”

“Baby,” I reply, “from now on—if there is anything—anything at all that you’d like to do for us—I promise—I wouldn’t butt in anymore.”

“Claimed,” she smirks.

“Clinched,” I second.

“And that includes the first attack!”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve already clinched it up. There is nothing that you can do about it anymore.”

“You’ve just tricked me!”

“The first attack is mine.”

“I did something in the shower in honor of my first attack, for crying out loud!”

“Walnut, the oblong shape is busting its way out now!”

“My vain cramps have just sprouted around everywhere!”

“It’s clinched and claimed! That’s THAT!”

“Babe, the walnut will always win.”

“Not this time around. Nope.”

“I’ve told you, I’ve been mad and hungry.”

“Hey, you’ve gotta call the sweet darlings about the business,” she reminds me. “Surprise them all.”

“I will,” I reply. “And I can’t wait to work with them again.”

“You’re so kind, Ace.”

“It’s not about being kind, babe. It’s about how you cherish all the good hearts.”

“And your beautiful heart just keeps on bouncing around all over,” she moans.

“It makes us feel secure about ourselves.”—And a meshy reticence clings out of her smile—“What are you smiling about?” I ask.

"Ah, walnut. I will never know why I deserve you this much!"

"Baby, you're intensifying my vain cramps here. Stop it."

"The big bang. Soon."

"I can't wait much longer anymore! I mean it, Dylan! I MEAN IT!!!"

"You're rushing me again."

"I'm sorry. I just can't help it, alright? And this one-meter rule SUCKS!!! ARGH!!!"

"It'll be over soon."

"That's Friday night! I'm not up for more shower deeds here without you! Just the thought of it is already killing me!"

"Ace Hansel!" she laughs.

"What?" I snap. "I mean it!"

"I can't believe your tantrums are worse than mine!"

"You're dead when I bug you for it in the middle of your writing."

"I already see it coming," she says. "It's scary."

—back to the serious domestic matter—"Are you sure you don't wanna do the business with me?"

"I can't," she replies. "I'm sorry. It's not for me. You and the sweet darlings will do great at it. I'll do something else instead."

"You'll do something else instead. With me. For us. Here in Vancouver."

"Walnut," she sighs, "I've gotta work on—*that something*—first—okay? If it works, then—it's clinched and claimed—D.F.S.I. is vanished—all the way through our sacred seven decades."

My legs start to wag again. "Okay."

"Don't be sad. I'm doing it for me. It's a test. To know my place in this. How to cope with you. 'Cause you're too much. Everything about you—everything that you do for me, to me—it's drowning all my principles—and I'm getting weak as a result. I don't want you calling the signals all the time. How am I supposed to know how to take care

of you and even surprise you with something—or give you little joys here and there—if you’d just keep on—influencing my thoughts, my heart—with your beautiful—EVERYTHING?! Do you understand?”

“I hope it wouldn’t make me cry, though.”

“Ace! Let’s not talk about it anymore, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Don’t throw tantrums at me. You’ve already got my heart. My full heart. My overflowing heart. Just let me take care of the spills myself. Because it would help me clean off the D.F.S.I.—without your interventions.”

“Clinched.”

“Claimed.”

“I’m scared to lose you, Dylan. What if it wouldn’t work?”

“It wouldn’t work if you’d keep on butting in. So back off. Please. And I don’t mean that in a harsh way. I mean it—in a—*walnut way*—”

“You really mean it in a *walnut way*?”

“ACE!!! OH MY GOODNESS!!! PLEASE!!!”

“ARGH!!!”

“ARGH!!!” she protests.

“Baby, I’m just scared, alright?” I whine.

“You should be scared if you’d keep on pushing yourself into this.”

“I’m not pushing myself into it. I just want to make sure we’re all set for the sacred seven decades.”

“Would you want me to read the drabbles now?”

“Not until I take my last breath!”

“Then stop pushing and rushing!”

“I’m just nervous!”

“You should be nervous if you wouldn’t shut up about it!”

“What is it, anyway?”

“Oh my god! I’m running away now!”

“DYLAN!!! I’M FREAKING OUT, OKAY??? I’m sorry!!! Just let me freak out about it! I have the right to freak out about it! *Zea and Kai* are at stake here, for crying out loud!”

“JUST LET ME HANDLE US, ACE!!! Let me handle US—MY OWN WAY!!!”

“And it sounds like a threat to our sacred seven decades!”

“It is not a threat if you’d just let me handle—you and I – myself!” she cries. “And it is for our sacred seven decades!”

My breaths are wielding off to an excruciating full stop! “Fine.”

“And I’ll brew a pot of coffee to go with the pasta.”

“I’ll get everything ready, babe. Don’t worry.”

“Ace Hansel!”

“What?”

“ARGH!!!”

“ARGH!!!”



WE SIT BY THE FIREPIT to blimp out on lunch. She slicks through her bowl of spicy prawn linguine pasta and chases it with coffee—as I mitigate through the meal and sip the prime hot drink—in meek silence!

Moms and dads emerge, then pile their way towards us—all in a jolly mood! “What’s for lunch?” dad asks.

“Spicy prawn linguine pasta,” Dylan and I reply. As always, it makes their blood run cold over our initial impulse banging out of our heedless slams.

“There should be a name for this,” Mr. Dawson says, then turns to dad—“Mason, you gotta get them books to work soon.”

“Oh, I will!” dad yelps. “Since my hypertension is on the rise every time they pull off this trick. It’s driving me insane now.”

Mom notices our docile strain. “What’s causing the morose faces?”

"Sacred seven decades," Dylan and I murmur in chorus. And—FLIP OUT!!! Moms and dads skid away all at once! It startles us—"What?" we snap at them!

"We should never ask them anything anymore!" Mrs. Dawson blasts.

"We shouldn't even be around them a minute longer!" dad echoes. "Let's watch some news, and leave them alone!" And they all head inside the house—smoldered up!

"I don't understand why it's a big deal," I mumble.

"Tell me about it," Dylan shrugs.

"Oh, they're about to watch news. What's next for the walnut? Another wicked whop? I don't even wanna know anymore."

"The vicious monster will be destroyed. I know it. I just know it deep down in my stirring guts."

"Babe—" I smirk, "—you haven't even convinced a bug yet."

"I will!" she swaggers. "Pretty soon! You watch!"

"Really!"

"I'm telling you, the bug will be mushed out of my own hands!"

"Hmm—sexy!"

"Don't rouse my vain cramps now!"

"Don't rouse my vain cramps now either," I say in a commanding tone – And she gives me an overindulgent look—that my lower abdomen bonks through with the most dangerous aphrodisiac ever invented in mankind history! "Baby, don't do that," I fidget. "Please!"

"I just wanna say—" she moans—"—thank you for—coffee, pasta, spicy, the morning in Vancouver—nestled by the sparkling beach—and your smooth sexy runs in the kitchen—"

I gaze at her—with the promising gush of our sacred seven decades—"Oh my god, Dylan Dawson. You have no idea how excited I am to spend the rest of my life with you."

"Me too," she replies. "But—I gotta win the test first. No butting!"

"Okay."

"No more interrogations about it either!"

"Okay. God. You're scaring me."

"It must kick off right this minute."

"Dylan, I'm really freaking out now! Seriously!"

"I gotta go."

I caper out of my chair. "What? Where are you going?"

"Ace!" She frisks up to her feet. "We've already talked about this!"

"I'm just asking where you're off to!"

"No butting!"

"Dylan! I don't want you out of my sight, okay? It scares the hell out of me!"

"I don't want you out of my sight either! But I just need to do something! Something for me! Something for us! Something that would wake me up and tell me, 'Dylan Dawson, you're officially free from all your doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities! You can do this! You can handle her just fine! You will never disappoint her at all because she will always be happy with you no matter what's in your hands! You're free to go and sail away for your sacred seven decades with the most beautiful heart that you dreamed about all through these years! —*It is time to dance!*"

"Baby—" I weep—"—can I come with you?"

"I'm taking you with me once I've won the test," she replies.

"Right now. I'd like to come with you—right now!"

"Walnut—you can't. I'm sorry. I've gotta stay out of your sight—for a while—just for a while—and let me win this—on my own—"

"But where are you going, though?"

"Just around. Just away from you. For a bit."

"Baby—you're not gonna leave me—right?"

"Walnut—just let me do this first—Just let me win it—Please! I'm begging you—It's really—REALLY—important to me!"

"Promise me first!"

“ACE!!! I CAN’T PROMISE ANYTHING FOR NOW, OKAY?! First, I have to know for sure—that I would never disappoint you—that I could handle you and take care of you my own way—that it would make us fall in love with each other everyday all the way through our sacred seven decades—that even our vain cramps would keep on pestering us every minute—So please—I’m asking you—to just leave me alone for a while—and let me work through it myself.”

“I’m terrified, Dylan.”

“Be terrified if I’d ask you to take me to the airport.”

My entire body goes numb! “Dylan! What are you saying? Are you thinking of flying back to Toronto anytime soon? Is that what it is?”

She succumbs to tears. “Ace—are you gonna let me win it or not?”

“You are NOT flying back to Toronto, Dylan! I swear to god!”

“ARE YOU GONNA LET ME WIN IT OR NOT?!”

“I AM NOT LETTING YOU GO!!!”

“JUST ANSWER MY QUESTION!!! ARE YOU GONNA LET ME WIN IT OR NOT?!”

“DYLAN!!!” I break down—“Please—don’t leave me—!”

“I wouldn’t,” she replies, “if you’d just let me win this test.”

“Dylan—you’re my one and only LUSH—you’re the only one—THE ONLY ONE!!! I am not letting you go!!! I swear to god!!!”

“Then let me win this!”

“MISS ACE HANSEL!!!” mom shatters out from the balcony, ENRAGED!!!

Dylan and I haste our heads to her. “Oh my god,” I pant. “What’s going on now?”

“DYLAN!” mom orders—“Stay where you are!”—back to me—“Movie theatre! NOW!!!”



I CONVOY MOM ALL THE way up into the movie theater as my chest drums through! Upon our entrance—dad uproars out of his

seat – HYPERVENTILATING!!! Mom shuts the door behind us—and—“SIT!!!” she nettles.

I slump back down and look up at my chafed parents—I am running out of breath! “W-what’s going on?”

“You do it!” dad commands mom—“Or I’m gonna die in no time!”

“Who—is Stacey Peckinham?” mom interrogates.

Oh my god! What has the cassava done now? “Mom—” I stammer.

“WHO IS SHE??!!” mom lets off her steam.

“I—I—” I can’t move anymore! “—I dated her—”

“AND YOU DATED ANOTHER WITCH!!!” dad rails at me.

“What have you found out?” I falter.

“What have we found out?” mom crackles—“Just the most shameful, the most detestable, and the most ignoble thing that we would have never thought OUR DAUGHTER would have ever done!”

It rings me back to—OH MY GOD!!! NO NO NO NO NO!!! That’s what she threatened me about!!! My BOUDOIR PHOTOS that I had done for her a couple of years ago—FOR A GOOD CAUSE!!!—I smack away into a remorseful cry—“Mom—dad—”

“She flaunted off your skin on the NEWS!!!” mom scorches—“A SPECIAL ENTERTAINMENT REPORT—if I may add!!! Apparently, she knew how to publicize THE STUFF!!! Here’s another ACE HANSEL SHAME floundering around the entire country, everybody!!! HERE!!! TAKE A GREAT LOOK AT IT!!! WHY DID YOU DO THAT???”

“DID YOU SIGN A CONSENT FORM FOR IT??!!” dad asks.

“It was supposed to be for her fundraising campaign,” I burst out—“Free photography workshops and free cameras for lesbian seniors. But then I backed off after I’d seen the photos and asked her not to use them anymore. The sweet darlings even knew about it—”—Mom and dad exchange looks—“Please—” I plead—“—I wouldn’t have done it for nothing! Trust me, I wouldn’t! It was the most degrading decision, and I’m so ashamed of it! I’m so sorry for

disappointing you this much—It's unforgivable—I don't know what to say—I've got no face to show to both of you—to anybody—any more—"—Oh god—especially to my *one and only LUSH*—I WANT TO DIE NOW!!! "—And I will regret it for the rest of my life—I'M REALLY AWFULLY SORRY!!! MOM!!! DAD!!! PLEASE!!! BELIEVE ME!!! You can ask the sweet darlings about it – PLEASE!!!"

Dad launches a deep sigh. "Did you sign a consent form for it?" he asks again.

"Yes, I did," I reply.

"Did you sign a contract withdrawal form?" he guns on.

"It was a verbal discussion," I confess.

"Oh my god!" mom shirks away—in disbelief!

"Do you realize what has just happened here?" dad reproves. "Everything—every single one of those—repulsive photos—they're all gonna be around FOREVER—abhorrently CONSUMED by PERVERTS ALL OVER THE WORLD!!! Did you not think of that vile consequence before you even thought of doing it?"

"Mom—dad—" I wail—"—I WAS STUPID, OKAY??? I WAS STUPID AND NAIVE AND VULNERABLE!!! I'M SO SORRY!!!"

"I don't wanna see you right now," dad fights back his tears, then rushes out of the movie theater.

"MOM!!!" I plead, almost kneeling down—"Please—I'm really sorry—!!!" Mom stands still on her spot for a moment to reflect on it, then sits beside me—"MOM—PLEASE—!!!" I deplore on—"I'M SO SORRY!!! I'M SO SORRY!!!"

She locks me inside her loving and forgiving arms—I hasp around her and squash out more WAILS!!! "No matter what—" she says, almost whispering—"—you will always have a beautiful heart—You were being selfish and disrespectful to yourself in exchange for something good—but honey—you must learn how to draw the line—Self-sacrifice can be harmful sometimes—"

"I know—" I weep on—"I'm so sorry! I'm really ashamed of it! I'm sorry for hurting you and dad again! I'm sorry!"

"Forgiven." She kisses me on the temple. "Your dad will come out in time. You know that."

I panic out of my fulminating fears. "Mom—I'm scared to tell Dylan about it—She'd freak out and—and—she'd probably even dump me once she found out – MOM!!! I CAN'T LOSE HER!!! I DON'T WANNA LOSE HER!!! SHE'S MY ONE AND ONLY LUSH!!! I AM NOT GONNA LOSE HER!!!"

"Ssshhh—Honey—Honey, listen—"

"Mom—I CAN'T—I'M SCARED—I'M REALLY SCARED!!! I CAN'T LOSE DYLAN!!! I CAN'T I CAN'T I CAN'T!!!"

"Honey—"

"MOM!!! She's pure and beautiful—and cannot—will NOT—stand these things!!! I'D KILL MYSELF ONCE SHE'D LEAVE ME!!!"

"HONEY!!!" mom snaps, holding my chin—"Look at me!"—I obey—"Listen to me—" she says in a lulling voice—"—it is already—meant to be—that you two belong with each other—"

"Mom—" I panic on—"—you don't understand—She's staunch about her principles—everything—Even the one-meter rule! Now she's up to something—to prove to herself that she—she would never disappoint me—that she would know how to keep me happy because she's scared that she would never be enough for me—that she would know how to take care of me—her own way—Because she doesn't like me pampering her around all the time and doing things for her—and making her do things out of what I do or say—"

"Honey—" she cinches—"—trust me when I say—that she will never leave you—because she's also known all along—that she's already found—the most beautiful heart—just as beautiful as hers—"

"But mom—!" I bolt on—

"I've already said it!" she braces up. "You've got nothing to worry about. Now go on. It'll be fine. Go."

I kiss her on the cheek. "Thanks, mom. I love you."

"Love you, too," she replies.



I SPUR MY WAY DOWNSTAIRS and hear stifled voices droning in from the kitchen. In a flash, I catch Dylan's distinct sound, yielding me to intrude. Pronto! Dylan, dad, and the delightful Dawson folks whish up in a composed hush. Oh, god. What was their meeting all about now? "Dylan—?" I say—almost pleading—

"I'll meet you by the firepit," she replies. "Would you like something to drink?"

Fears joggle me up! This scenario fuddles my walnut! "Y-yeah," I utter. "Anything will do."

"Give me a name," she strikes back. "What would you like to drink?"

I flicker. "Red wine, please."

"You've already had some red wine this morning," she says. "A non-alcoholic beverage. Which one?"

"Iced tea," I mumble.

"Okay," she yelps. "Be right there."

I scrutinize dad and the delightful Dawson folks' condensed faces as Dylan bustles away to the fridge. "What's going on?" I ask. *Oh, god. I hope it has nothing to do with Stacey Peckinham's hideous revenge!*

"Firepit, please!" Dylan snaps.

"She says firepit," dad reminds me in a fierce tone.

Mom joins us. "What have I missed?"

Dad and Mr. Dawson move their shoulders. Mrs. Dawson gives mom a meaningful look.

Dylan resurfaces with two cans of iced tea and turns to me—"C'mon," she orders and marches out into the firepit—as I tail

along—She rests one of the drinks on the patio table and flicks the other one open, then puts it down before me. “Drink it while it’s still cold,” she says and settles in her usual chair—I recline in my frequent spot and take a sip—with a conscious and fainthearted breath—She flips her can open and gulps down—“Your dad has told me about the news—” she opens fire—

“Baby—” I panic—“—please—hear me out—”

“I know why you did it,” she interjects, then scowls at me—“But WHY, Ace?”

“I swear—I would do anything to take it all back, but—”

“You can’t! It’s already out there! How could you embarrass yourself LIKE THAT?!!!”

“I know! And I don’t even know how to get myself out of it! It’s disgraceful!”

“You should have thought of your parents’ faces first before you jumped into this dirty pool!”

“Dylan!” I pound out more wails—“I have been crying here non-stop! I can’t take any more heartaches—any more pains—any more shame—I think I’ve gotta steal off your suicidal pit now, and just get it all over with! Please—forgive me—I’m so sorry for all this—I didn’t mean—”

“You’re a lot wiser than this, Ace,” she says. “A lot wiser and a lot more conscientious than this!”

“I’m so sorry for disappointing you big time. I’m so sorry, baby—please—”

“Don’t cry now. There’s nothing that we can do about it anymore.”

“But baby—please—Will you forgive me? Please—?”

“Yeah. It’s done.”

“Is that clinched and claimed?”

“Well—your dad—came to the rescue—so—”

“What did he say?”

“That’s just between me and him.”

"Babe, please don't be mad at me anymore."

"I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at the wicked world. I'm mad at myself for being trapped in doubts, fears, and screaming insecurities. You, on the other hand, are just a victim. The victim of vicious monsters. Like—Alex—Stacey—and *me*—"

"Why would you swoop yourself into the vicious monster arena for?" I exclaim, disconcerted.

"Out of all the vicious monsters here," she replies, "I'm the worst!"

"Baby, why on earth would you say that?"

"Because I'm breathlessly in love with you, walnut! I'm breathlessly in love with you that I've got a suicidal pit hanging around all corners! And because you love me sooo much that you've turned yourself into an aggressive puck! And we've already created some of the most beautiful things together, and yet—I'VE BEEN HURTING YOU ALL THIS TIME!!! That's why I'm your WORST VICIOUS MONSTER in this arena!!!"

"Baby, please—don't say that—"

"Walnut—just—let me be mad at myself, okay? I deserve it!"

"Well, I don't want you to be mad at yourself."

"There you are again."

"What?"

"You're butting in!"

"If it's something that makes you feel bad, I have the right to butt in. 'Cause I don't want you to feel bad about anything at all. I mean—except for those shameful things that I did—then you are entitled to be mad at me—"

"Oh my goodness, Ace Hansel! Please—stop damaging yourself too much just to make other people feel better."

"You're not *other people*. You're my *one and only LUSH*. You own my full heart. And everything else inside of me—about me—"

"Even so. It's still not right."

"Baby—can we please—PLEASE—not fight anymore?"

“Claimed.”

“Clinched.”

“Which means—whatever it is that I need to do, we can’t throw a fit at each other – ANYMORE!!!”

“Okay, now you’re scaring me again,” I shrink away.

“And I want you to do one important thing for me,” she says.

“What is it?”

“I don’t want to see you cry anymore. Ever!”

“Dylan!” I panic.

“Ace, promise me!” she propels on. “PROMISE ME! NO MORE CRYING!”

“Dylan,” I break down—

“I’m begging you—” she pleads—“—tears—all gone!”

“You’re gonna do something, aren’t you?”

“Walnut—do you want me to win this?”

“Of course I do!”

“Then stop crying!”

“I want to kiss you right now!”

“Me too! The oblong shape just broke!”

I laugh! “What?”

“There!” she yelps. “I want you to laugh like that! I want us to share giggles—kisses—lasting moments—”

I gaze at her—feeling my chest—“I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us.”

She emulates my gesture. “I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us.”

“Babe—my vain cramps are already in a—VERY BAD SHAPE HERE! Oh, god! I can’t take it anymore! I can’t take this one-meter rule anymore! We have to talk to them now, and I mean – NOW!!! NOW!!!”

“There’s nothing that we can do for now. Just take it easy.”

"Take it easy? I've told you, I've been mad and hungry, and I'm going paranoid! I'm dead tomorrow if we're still stuck in here! Let's go talk to them! I mean it, Dylan!"

"I'm still calling the shots here."

"Then call the shots now! We've gotta sneak away! NOW!!! Now, Dylan! NOW!!!"

"You're always impatient and rushing things. Relax."

"I can't believe how staunch you are about this!" I whine. "I'm already going insane, goddammit!"

"Ace Hansel!" she giggles.

"What's funny? This is NOT funny at all! I refuse to do the shower deeds again—without you! NO!!!"

"Walnut, the tantrum. It's bad and ugly."

"I DON'T CARE!!!"

"Oh my goodness."

"Baby, I'm serious! I'm dying here! Please! Let's go talk to them! Let's sneak away! Let's do something nasty! I've been aching to touch you and kiss you and jump on you and do all these wild things with you! Please please please!!! PLEASE!!!"

"Let's just wait. It'll be over. Soon."

"FRIDAY NIGHT!!!" I explode—"AND IT'S ONLY WEDNESDAY!!! You're already shoving me into a mental asylum tomorrow!!! ARGH!!!"

"ARGH!!!"—and she bursts out laughing!

"IT IS NOT FUNNY!!!"

"Walnut, relax. We'll be fine."

"The oblong shape just broke, for god's sake!"

"I know. It'll be fine."

"How on earth could you just sit there, so poised in your chair, when your oblong shape just broke?"

"Because it'll be fine."

"I don't believe this!" I scoff.

"You'll be fine," she assures me.

"I don't like the way you say it! It's like—you don't even care about our vain cramps anymore!"

"Oh, you have no idea how much I care about them."

"Then why are you still so staunch about the whole thing?"

"Because I know the vain cramps will be fine."

"How? How? Tell me! In between this one-meter rule! In front of moms and dads! How? How, Dylan? Show it to me! How?"

"My goodness, walnut. Stop freaking out. We'll be okay."

"I'm angry! I'm so angry that I'm turning myself into the only crowned vicious monster in this arena, and I'm so smoked up!"

"Walnut, this is too much tantrum now."

"You know what I wanna do? I wanna waltz in there and announce—*moms, dads, I'm so sorry for disappointing you—but I have to kiss my one and only LUSH now!*"

"You can't do that."

"Let's go do it! C'mon! C'mon, baby—please—I'm begging you—I'm literally dying here!"

"Ace! Please—let's wait—okay? Be patient. Let's not talk about the vain cramps right now. They'll survive."

"Dylan," I say, sensing the cold-shoulder treatment, "how come you're not so—indulged—about our vain cramps anymore? Is there something going on?"

"I am indulged," she yelps. "I'm just being patient, that's all."

"No, this doesn't look—patient to me. It looks more like—you don't even care—now. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Just working through with my issues here. Don't worry about it. It'll all be fine."

"No, Dylan, it won't be fine! You're scaring the hell out of me again!"

"Ace, we've already clinched and claimed the greatest good stuff – instead of the fights—the crying—and all the other gripping emotions here. Please—don't start now."

"Is there something that I should know about?"

"Walnut, you have no idea how much I'd love to kiss you and make love to you and do all these wild things with you right now. But I just don't like it when you're throwing tantrums like this. It's ridiculous. I want you to listen to me every time I say something—When I tell you, it'll be fine, we'll be fine—*and it will all be fine—and we will be fine—*"

"Okay," I moan.

"That was not the response that I was expecting from you," she objects.

"Clinched."

"Claimed."

"Baby—please tell me you wouldn't do something that would terrify me—"

"Walnut—my baby carrot, my princess—my *one and only LUSH*—Would you please—be kind enough to be in your best behavior? Because I don't wanna see you like this. It hurts me, and it makes me wanna stick a knife into my chest. I can't bear the thought of giving you heartaches anymore. You've already gone through so much here. I don't wanna add up to that. Not now. Not ever."

"Do you really mean it?"

"Walnut, I will never know why I deserve you this much. You're too—beautiful and vulnerable—sensible and kind—all the loveliest and the most wonderful things kicking out of a dictionary—around the entire universe—and I've—I've been hurting you all the way through—Despite all the undeserving things that I've made you feel, you're still begging – Like the aggressive puck that you have always been—Since our first trip to the coffee shop—I've been selfish and disrespectful. I've insulted you too much. I haven't been kind to your feelings. I've treated you in a way that should not even be in the love

and romance books. You could have shunned me off early on, but you didn't. Instead, you would keep on begging. Begging for love and happiness. The love and happiness that should not have been questioned—because it's yours. All yours. But I've never been kind at all. Not one bit. And I'm really sorry for all that. For your heartaches. For however I've treated you all along. I don't know when I'll ever forgive myself, but I'll try to whisk it all out—into thin air—every morning and every night. Because you—my walnut—my *one and only LUSH*—the only tear that you solely deserve—is a happy one. The happiest one—If another vicious monster out there would even try to hurt you, I'm going for a massive destruction."

"Baby! Massive destruction! How many bugs are there now?"

"I'll convince a bug later. There's something I have to tell you."

"Oh god!" I have no fight left. "Babe, please!"

"I've booked a flight just a while ago," she confesses.

I twitch out of my chair—for a major MELTDOWN!!! "Oh my god! Oh my god! Dylan, don't do this to me right now! Oh, god!"

"Ace," she sighs, "sit down. We'll take this calmly. Don't cry. We've already pledged to it."

I obey. "But you're hurting me again!"

"I'm not gonna hurt you," she replies. "Did you even listen to every word that I said?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"That you're sorry and all—for how you've treated me."

"And?"

"Dylan—" I beg, wailing—"please don't leave me!"

"You do not deserve to beg, walnut," she utters. "You don't. Please – don't cry in front of me anymore. This won't hurt. I promise. What did I say a while ago? When I say—it'll be fine, we'll be fine—*and it will all be fine and we will be fine* —"

"Yes."

"I've already talked to moms and dads about this. Rahul's wife gave birth last night. I need to fly back to Toronto and sort some things out. Now—I want you to drive us to the apartment—and—"

"Baby, what's gonna happen to us after this?"

"It will all be fine and we will be fine."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Please, listen to every word that I say."

"I'm listening!"

"No, you're not. 'Cause you're freaking out again. Let's get inside."

"I don't wanna get inside until you promise me—"

"Ace! Let's get inside!"

"You have to promise me first!"

"Walnut, please don't cry anymore."

"Baby, you're not leaving me!"

"I'm still here, walnut."

"PROMISE ME YOU'RE NOT LEAVING ME EVER, DYLAN!!!"

"Walnut, STOP CRYING, PLEASE!!! It'll all be fine. We'll be fine."

"When are you coming back?"

"I don't know yet."

"Is it just a one-way flight?"

"Ace, let's get inside. Now."

"NO!!!"

"I'll explain all the details to you once I get it all sorted out."

"Why can't you explain everything to me now?"

"Because it's not the right time yet."

"When is the right time?"

"I'll let you know."

"I don't want you out of my sight, Dylan! I can't take it! I can't! I can't!"

"Are you gonna keep on crying and throwing tantrums—or drive us to the apartment? Moms and dads are waiting!"

"How come you did this behind my back?"

"You already knew why!"

"Baby—"

"Walnut—please—enough of it—Stop crying now—"

"I'm scared! I'm scared that I wouldn't see you again!"

"Then listen to every word that I say."

"I'm listening!"

"You're still crying."

"Because I'm scared!"

"It's only for a while."

"For how long?"

"I'll let you know."

"All set yet?" dad intrudes. Dylan and I purl our heads to the balcony—where moms and dads await—Mom is holding our purses up in her hands, granting them to us—We meander towards them and grab our belongings—then dad hands me the car keys.

"Aw, darling," Mrs. Dawson comforts me, "don't cry."

"You two are still up for the one-meter rule, you hear?" dad reminds us.

"Yes, sir," Dylan and I murmur a quenching reply—and instantly, moms and dads clatter around—even more outraged now!

"I haven't gotten to the books yet," dad flips.

"We have to figure out our *Twitch Beau* now!" mom says and clutches arms with Mrs. Dawson.

"My pulse is officially dead!" Mr. Dawson yelps.

"Go girls!" mom hollers.

In a haunting stroke—without a word—without shifting hugs and kisses for a hasty goodbye—Dylan and I laze away from the warm and loving troop—whose minds and hearts are still swarmed into the wonders of – *All of Lush* and *Twitch Beau*—and true love!

Dylan and I slip inside dad's personal vehicle—as my hands and legs wriggle out of towering fears. She notices my tremor and gawks at me. I respond with more woeful splash, and—“ARGH!!!” she protests.

“Baby—” I plead—

“I can't stand looking at you like this anymore! It's hurting me so much!”

“You have to promise me first—please—baby – PLEASE!!!”

“Okay,” she gasps. “So I guess—this is the right time then—Do you really think I've booked a flight just for myself?”

“What?” I beam.

“It's for us!” she confesses.

“Baby!” I cheer.

“We're flying back to Toronto to grab my stuff and see Rahul's baby!” she says. “And we're going to be godmothers!”

“Oh my god!” I frolic. “Then why did you still have to make me cry for?”

“It's part of my test! I wanted to know if you'd listen to my words! But you still didn't!”

“Awwwww! Babe, c'mon now! How was I supposed to react?”

“Ace Hansel, I will never know why I deserve you this much!”

“Dylan Dawson, I will never know why I deserve you this much—despite all my vain cramp tantrums! And all the other tantrums! And—”

“You—being *the* aggressive puck,” she finishes my statement.

“Yes!” I laugh. “I am—*the* aggressive puck!”

“Drive!”

“Oh my god. You sound like—”

“DRIVE!!!”

“Baby—”

“I'm about to mush some vicious monsters!” she creaks, rugged.

“Huh?” I yelp.

“Walnut, let's go!” she orders.

"Babe, what are you up to?" I turn on the engines.



WE DRIVE AWAY FROM the beach house and jaunt towards downtown. "When are we flying?" I ask.

"Saturday morning," she replies.

I grin. "What did you tell moms and dads, anyway?"

"I just told them," she says, "I missed you so much—and I gotta do something to keep you happy—and we couldn't betray our beautiful things anymore—"

And a happy cry saltates out of my immense *sacred seven decades* treasure of pride! "Awwww – baby!"

"But we still have to go back there tonight, though," she brings it to mind—"—to complete the punishment and all!"

"What about the one-meter rule? Are we still up for that right now?"

"Not until we get back."

"Baby! That's how you've rescued our vain cramps?! Oh my god!"

"What did I tell you?"

"It will all be fine. We will be fine."

"Exactly!"

"Can we pull over? I wanna kiss you right now!"

"Not until we set foot inside the apartment!"

"Baby—please—c'mon c'mon c'mon—I'm dying here!"

"Walnut, this is your dad's car. Don't forget that."

"Oh, god. You're such a staunch diva."

"Now—it's time for revenge!"

"Revenge?" I yelp.

"At first, Alex was the only target," she powers up. "Now there's two of them. I'll do the cassava first. Take us to her photo exhibit. NOW!!!"

"Babe, what are you gonna do?"

"Oh, simple. I'll walk up to her, introduce myself, and destroy her in any way I can."

"Destroy her how?"

"Whatever impulse jolts out of me!"

"Baby, it's not worth it."

"Walnut! I'm sick of these people, alright? I'm so sick of what they've done to you! I'm sick of what they've done to moms and dads! I'm sick of it all! They deserve it! Trust me, they know they're wrong! Everything about it is wrong! And I don't care how powerful they are because I know—I know that—what I'm about to do—they'd regret all the evil things that they've done!"

"Please, babe—I don't want anything to happen to you—"

"Nothing's gonna happen to me! I'm just gonna snap them out of the vicious monster arena! That's all I'm going to do!"

"Snap them out of the vicious monster arena?" I horn in.

"And turn them into HUMANS!!!" she proclaims.

"I love the sound of that!"

"Claimed!"

"Clinched!"

"The cassava first! Photo exhibit! Now!"

"We're gracing in! HERE WE COME!"

"The woody shrub will be mushed!"

"You make *woody shrub* sound cute!"

Stacey Peckinham's photo exhibit embellishes a sumptuous artsy spot of downtown—methodized up with snazzy crowd—languishing around, holding plush glasses of wine, simulated smile and word exchanges—as their mien flashes through the stupendous exterior glass walls.

Dylan and I spy on their hopper from the car—like chickened sleuths! Uh-oh. "Is there really a photo exhibit going on inside that—*Hollywoodish* room?" she pries.

"It's a Stacey Peckinham venue," I respond.

"Why would she hold her exhibits here? Are they only supposed to be exclusive for the chic and the moneyed kicks?"

"Something like that."

"So she's restricting her art?"

"Because only these people can afford it."

"So what happened to her fundraising campaign after you backed off?" she asks.

"She pulled the plug altogether and just went on with her personal prestige hunt," I reply.

She cross-examines my austere eyes. "Walnut—"

I clear my throat and collect myself. "Yeah—?"

"The free photography workshops and camera giveaways," she analyzes, "was it all your idea? And—*this* was her kickback deal?"

I lower my head. "Yes."—She dumps back and squeezes her eyes closed, then convulses into tears. I hold her hand – Oh, god! How I missed her skin—her velvety florid skin! "Baby—please—"

"Walnut! You've gotta stop doing it, okay? Sacrificing yourself all the time!" She looks at me as her tears stream down—uncontrollably—"Why do you just let these people abuse you? You get yourself into situations, not realizing how treacherous they are because the first thing that ticks in your heart is protecting the vulnerable ones or making the world happy without even taking into account that you're just as vulnerable—even more vulnerable—and you deserve your own happiness just as much as those who you deem to be more deserving of it!"

"Baby—it's done—" I assure her, "—it's done—"

"I'm not letting you sacrifice yourself like this again!" she takes charge. "No! I'm calling the shots from now on when it comes to these things! When I say, no—you have to respect it! When I say, set your beautiful heart aside because it damages you—don't beat yourself up around it anymore! When I say, you gotta be kind to Ace Hansel—do it without hesitation whatsoever! Have I made myself clear?"

I live in a heavenly paradise! "Clinched."

“Claimed,” she utters, then caresses my cheek—with her daydreaming eyes maddening up my vain cramps—“Goddammit, Ace Hansel,” she moans—“I missed you so much!”

“Baby—” I lean in—“can we please—apologize to dad later—for—doing something—in his car?”

“Just this one time—Just—”

And—we grapple each other for a RAVENOUS KISS!!! The insatiable—lasting moment—just a sprinkle of our vain cramp stockpile – Oh, how much I missed my *one and only* LUSH—My girl crazy love sick breaths sweeten around her succulent tongue that I can never get enough of! I AM MAD AND HUNGRY!!!



DYLAN AND I GRACE THE photo exhibit, and our subtle entrance turns all heads. It strikes the entire room—DUMB! Well—look at us—the babe-in-woods sapphic couple—flaunting off their hair down, blue denim pants, white tops, and sneakers—free from makeup and any other spurious body adornment—except for honor, pride, dignity, and truth!

Sure, they recognize us—They recognize Ace Hansel—their *personal and subconscious* conception of her—the ritzy reputation! And maybe even her enthusiastic heart—and her smile—her signature smile—The smile drawn out of her naivete—and perhaps—sincerity—though the latter is only enamored by kind faces.

The giant framed boudoir photos surround the haughty walls—with SOLD stickers boasting on them—catching my mortified eyes. Oh, god. I want to PUKE!!!

The sheepish attendees bestow us with *bellos*—keeping their respectful distance—regardless. Innocent smiles greet us along the way. Some even attempt to mosey towards me—but hold back—Perhaps, out of civility or principled double whammy. One thing is for sure—
—they understand something!

“What’s going on over there?” Stacey’s overwrought voice breaks out from the far-end corner of this—*Hollywoodish* room! And – *Ace Hansel’s here* whispers rise into air! “Whaaat?” She erupts through the taciturn crowd and weakens off to an alarming pause the moment her disturbed eyes claw through me and my *cutesy sexy charming one and only LUSH!*

Dylan and I smirk at each other, then accost her—in the middle of her SNAZZY PATRONS!!!—her nervous, enlightened, opulent fans!!! “So—” I launch the face-off, sniggering at the cassava—“—we’re here to grace your photo exhibit. Just like what you’ve wanted.”

Stacey pores over Dylan—from head to toe—then turns to me—“And how do you like it?”

“Well—” I sigh, “there’s only one way to put it, Stacey. This—all this—” I address the crowd, “What do you think, guys? Are they—beautiful?”—the crowd grins and flies off with exuberant ‘Yeahs!’ into air—back to the cassava—“They all agree. They’re beautiful. BUT! Here’s how I see it—They’re only beautiful once all the grands that you get out of these—go to where they belong—where they belonged to begin with—”

“Free photography workshops and camera giveaways!!!” Dylan announces, and it pumps up the attendees—with a whole lot of earnest transport! “AND NOT ONE CENT SPARED!!!”

“This is outrageous, Ace,” Stacey grunts at me in a quiet blow.

“SHE SAYS IT’S OUTRAGEOUS!!!” Dylan trumpets it to the crowd—who initially responds with a startling *WHAT?!*”

And Stacey grimaces at my *one and only LUSH*. “You can go to hell.”

“SHE SAYS I CAN GO TO HELL!!!” Dylan reports, and protesting murmurs blast across the—*Hollywoodish* room!

“Everybody!” I proclaim—“This is Dylan Dawson!”—and the crowd’s genuine attention is shot at us—“My *one and only LUSH!* My *true love wish!* The cutesy sexy charming girl with the most beautiful

heart—a staunch diva of moral conscience—who has dragged me in here—to—”

“To snap Stacey Peckinham out of the vicious monster arena!” she interrupts me—in a convulsing voice—“And convince a bug! All bugs! That—one—art belongs to all humans, and it is not supposed to be restricted—LIKE THIS! And such truth—snaps along with LOVE! Two—we have to be very kind to each other’s feelings—no matter what you see otherwise—because we’re all—WALNUTS—cracking our way out, looking for happiness! And three—anyone—anyone at all—who does a wrong thing, and betrays moral integrity—will never—EVER—have sacred seven decades with a beautiful heart that they have been dreaming about since their childhood dances with their imaginary true love—the prince or the princess who can only make them feel—*All of Lush!* So—if you have ever wished for an Ace Hansel—or any names that you may have met along the way—make sure you see the walnut hidden in them—Because we all deserve to be happy—and we should never deny ourselves—and them—of it! Because it’s ours. It is meant to be ours. It’s theirs, and it is meant to be theirs—So the girl displayed around these walls—no matter how much these photos have embarrassed her mom and dad—the dignified value that must come out of them—must be as priceless as *that girl’s* intention and beautiful heart! Because *that girl* – is and will always be—a princess! My princess! Her parents’ princess! Her sweet darlings’ princess! OUR PRINCESS!”

“Baby—” I wrap my arm around my *one and only LUSH’s* waist to express my pride and full gratitude—as Stacey’s guilty tears sluice down—while the crowd is enthralled!

“So why don’t we all do ourselves a favor here?” Dylan raves on—“For the greatest good! Just to make sure the money goes to where it belongs! And just to make sure—our princess would not be sad anymore—Grab your purchased photos, take them home with you, don’t

give the money to Stacey Peckinham, and donate it to cherished hearts!
CAN WE DO THAT?!"

"YEAH!!!" the crowd cheers at once and scrambles around for their photographs! While Stacey is left frozen in a helpless doom!

Dylan and I smile at each other. "Baby—you've won!" I exult.

"The walnut has won," she replies, then presents her open palm before me.

I meet it with a high-five. "Clinched!"

"Claimed!" she yelps.

I capture my *potato's* hand, then turn to the cassava. "TRUCE!!!"
And we snake our way out of the—rhapsodic *Hollywoodish* room!

As we approach the car—the racket torpedoes behind us—We swirl around and watch them swaying into different directions—carrying their frames—in meticulous yet ecstatic reflexes!

"Another Ace Hansel mania to watch out for," my *one and only LUSH* moans.

"No, babe," I giggle. "It's Dylan Dawson mania now."

"Don't scare me," she grunts.

"Come here." I wrap my arms around her waist, and we look into each other's conquering eyes. "I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us."

She smiles. The provocative vain-cramp smile. "I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us."

And—we clasp for another—voracious kiss!!! "Can we not do Alex anymore?" I say.

"Uh-uh," she protests. "*That* vicious monster must go down the drain before dark!"

"But babe," I insist, "my vain cramps are completely amplified now, ready to explode all over Vancouver!"

She rewards my lips with a smack. "Your vain cramp tantrum scares me. Let's go."



DEAR *true love wish*: How dare you introduce me to vain cramps and withhold their meteoric magnificence for a lacerating period of time!

ARGH!!!

This! Finally! It is happening! My mad and hungry medleys fused at once—as her spine glides up for more! It is all beauty—It is statuesque, transcendent, and venerable—in honor of love and romance! As my heart – oh, my joyous heart—sweeps away into our sacred seven decades together—when all the beach walks, sunrises, and *All of Lush* dances await—along with *Zea and Kai*!

And when it's my *one and only LUSH*'s turn for her hallowed attack—all the euphoric moans raptured into our exorbitant room—thunder out of my love-drug tinges—the love-drug tinges that she keeps on building inside of me—the love-drug tinges that she can only slide out for gratifying releases—the love-drug tinges clinched and claimed in lasting moments—The lasting moments—clinched and claimed—

—by our sacred seven decades!

And so—

We lay back down in bed and listen to our adorable and satisfying wheezes!

“Baby—” I moan—

“What?” she gasps.

“You’re an aggressive puck,” I giggle.

“I hate you,” she laughs!

“Let’s order pizza!”

“I’ll do it!”

“I already know what you’re gonna order.”

“All right. Baby carrot, tell me.”

“Slammed veggie with sweet potato sauce.”

“There are times when I just want to hide my mind from you. It’s scary.”

I rest my arm over her bare stomach. Argh! I'm tempted for MORE!!! "Hey, I have an idea."

"Oh my god, walnut," she groans. "You scare the hell out of me every time you throw this opening line."

"Why don't—" I roll on top of her—"—why don't we read our old drabbles and write new ones—"

She renders me with a riveting kiss. "No! Bad idea!"

"We'll write our new drabbles first, hide them away into the wooden box, then read the old ones."

"Walnut, no!"

"C'mon, babe! C'mon c'mon c'mon!"

"Then we should have something to say goodbye to first—before we do that."

"I already know what we should say goodbye to!"

"Ace Hansel, reading each other's minds is scary! Too scary!"

"D.F.S.I.!!!" we snap in chorus.

"Let's order pizza first," I say.

"And make tea!" she yelps, then grabs the landline phone and attempts to make a call, but—

I toss over to her side and succumb to an effusive snuggle. "Don't move yet."

She kisses me on the forehead. "Lasting moment."

"Love you with all the beauty—my heart can give."

"Love you—with all—my staunch diva heart—can give—"

"Baby!" I laugh. "Staunch diva heart?"

"We've just mushed Stacey Peckinham," she replies. "And I'm mushing all the vicious monsters who would even attempt to crush my walnut!"

"Babe, all the bugs are convinced now. And they're scared of you."

"They should be!—Ah, walnut. My heart aches for you all the time. You gotta stop being—you – Ace Hansel—the most beautiful heart—once in a while—'cause it makes me lose my head. And I still

can't forgive myself for all the bad things that I've made you feel since our first meeting, and I'm coming to terms with that now. On my own. Because—the only moment that I would make you cry—would be when I trick you into a little surprise—like this. Rescuing our vain cramps—”

“And it's the greatest surprise!”

“You deserve all the happiest cries in the world—And if someone out there gives you a nasty cry or even makes you feel bad about anything, I'm mushing them out. And it is claimed.”

“Clinched,” I moan—under a romantic breath intoxicating my proud and endowed walnut.

“I'll order pizza and make us tea.” She kisses me on the lips and jumps out of the bed.

—Oh, god. My *one and only LUSH*. Her gauzy skin—her graceful moves—her nectarious scent—everything about her—my heart—the vigorous beats overflowing with all the praiseworthy desires hidden in all mystical clicks—Being with her—makes me feel—

—like—

I'M THE MOST BEAUTIFUL HUMAN IN THE WORLD!!!

After she has already ordered pizza, she takes over the kitchen to make us a pot of tea. Hmm. I surprise her with a teeming hug from behind, and she lets out a sexy gasp—another vain cramp attack!

She sways around for a hedonic kiss and looks into my eyes. “You know what makes me feel beautiful?”

Our minds REALLY DO SYNCHRONIZE!!! “Baby—please tell me—it's not the same thing as I've just thought of a while ago—”

“Ace Hansel,” she yelps. “This is too scary now! Too scary!”

“Well—I've said to myself—what makes me feel like—I'm the most beautiful human in the world—?”

“My goodness! Please tell me—it's something different—”

“What have you got in mind?”

“What have you got in mind?”

"I don't wanna say it. Yet. You first."

"No. You go first."

"Baby, please—you go first!"

"I'm scared to say it. You first! Please!"

"You first! And if a happy cry blasts out of me—then it's the same thing!"

"Now this is one happy cry that I don't wanna see!"

"C'mon, babe!" I giggle. "Tell me. What makes you feel beautiful?" And—without warning—she dissolves into a happy cry—I touch her face—"So what makes you feel beautiful, Dylan Dawson?"

"Being with you!" she responds, and—I cave in around her—for the loudest happy cry breathing out—around our HOME!!!—"Being with Ace Hansel," she continues.

"Being with you—" I utter—"—being with Dylan Dawson—is what makes Ace Hansel feel like—she's the most beautiful human in the world!"



IT IS GETTING DARK now—when we sit down in the dining area—digging into slammed veggie pizza with sweet potato sauce, and chasing it with hot tea—as the wooden box—primed on the table—awaits our new drabbles.

As usual—my *one and only LUSH* is immersed into the writing task—as if it's up for a major defense in front of an academic committee—The engrossing silence gushes along—until—pencils are up!

We seal them up inside the envelopes, then dunk them into the wooden box and retrieve the old ones—

"Goodbye, D.F.S.I.," I say.

"Goodbye, D.F.S.I.," she echoes.

Now—for the heart-thumping anticipated moment—reading our old drabbles—And—pause—!

"Babe—" I tremble—

“Walnut—” she shudders—

“I know—it’s nerve-racking—Oh god—”

“I can’t believe we’re reading them now!”

“I can’t breathe anymore.”

“Do you still wanna do it?”

“How about—”

“Please don’t start with that opening line anymore.”

“We should do this every year!”

“Do we have to have something to say goodbye to each time?”

“What about something—to say hello to—for our greatest good—Clinched?”

“Claimed!”

“Wait,” I catch a thought—“—our new drabbles—Do they count as a *hello greatest good*?”

“Sounds like—a *hello greatest good*—written in mine,” she says.

“Same here—Okay. I’ll go first. I’m gonna read it out loud.”

“Walnut!”

“Babe, you’re shaking all my nerves, too!”

“Then let’s just leave it!”

It rips out my chest—because I would have to agree—As guilt steers its glint out of my eyes—*One hundred words about a beautiful moment that we wished to happen in the future—being with each other!* I have just grasped my fleeting consciousness – Oh, god!

I have betrayed my *one and only LUSH!* This is where all the agitation swifts from! As I did not follow the rule! Did she follow the rule? The *time* rule! The future! Our future! Being with each other!

Because I wrote something about the PAST! Why did I do that? What moved me to do that? Which initial impulse was at fault?

Oh—

My unwavering heart that sang along with the kind universe!

—here’s what I scribbled down—The words carved away from my childhood wish—

Dear All of Lush true love,

My name is Ace Hansel. I'm 12 years old. In my beautiful mind, I am dancing with you tonight. We are dancing together to our song. Our happiness song. Our forever heart song. All of Lush.

Also, in my beautiful mind, I have made you fluffy pancakes in the morning. We sit by the firepit and talk about our life together. Our future together. We tease each other, we laugh, and we also cry. We cry because we can't hold each other yet.

I know someday, I will hold you and make you mine.

And a happy cry strews out of my full—sacred seven decades – HEART!!! *All of Lush* —fluffy pancakes—firepit—talks about our life and future together—teases—laughs—cries—the one-meter rule!

The drabble is only eight days old! And this was my wish when I was twelve!

I WANT TO MARRY MY ONE AND ONLY LUSH NOW!!!

"Baby—" I gush on—"—what did you write about?"

"Read it," she replies.

"Did you follow the rule?"

"Just—read it."

"Now I'm gonna say this to you—whatever it is that you wrote about—by the time we get back to the beach house—we'll tell moms and dads that we're getting married!"

"What did you write about?"

"Baby! By the time we get back to the beach house, we'll tell moms and dads that we're getting married!"

"Walnut—please read it first—"

—here's my *one and only LUSH's* drabble—

You are a sad princess. You are a princess with the most beautiful heart. People hurt you. But I will protect you, take care of you, and make sure you're always happy. I can give you little surprises, too. Because I can read your thoughts. But right now, it's only saved in my dreams. Because I am only nine years old and you're very far away from me. You live in a

marvelous castle where sunrises can peek in. If I could get to you someday, I would ask you for a dance. Would you like to dance with me?

"Baby!" I dash away and snatch her off the chair, then bestow her with a frantic kiss—"I will dance with you all the way through the sacred seven decades!"

"Walnut," she moans, "what has just happened?"

"We both did the same thing! The future that we wrote about—it has already happened, and it's happening! And *that future*—it came all the way from our childhood dreams and wishes—Baby, we're all set for our sacred seven decades together—having *Zea and Kai* along the way—!"

She rustles the drabble out of the envelope and reads it—almost in haste—and a happy cry snivels through—in impetuous chokes—Then she gapes at me—"What did you say about the universe?"

"We don't question it anymore," I reply, smiling.

She grants me with a—clinched and claimed kiss! "*It is ours. It will always be ours.*"

"I've already known that all along! Baby—the thing that you wrote—*would you like to dance with me?*—Don't you think—don't you think—?"

"Sounds like *it*."

"Then we're telling moms and dads as soon as we get back to the beach house!"

"Claimed!"

"Clinched!"

"Let's wolf down the pizza!"

We plunge back at the table and relish—tea, pizza, sweet, night, FAST!!!—and Vancouver!

"We're very lucky and blessed—and so rich—" I say—"We've got drabbles, sacred seven decades, *All of Lush* dances, childhood dreams and wishes, the pledge, sunrises, beach walks—"

“Vancouver, coffee and tea, pasta and pizza, sweet and spicy, morning and night, fast and smooth—” she continues.

“And *Zea* and *Kai*! I wish—other hearts out there would have what we have, too—”

“They should. So—our anniversary date would be—?”

“When we found each other.”

“Claimed!”

“Clinched!—Babe, you remember what time we’re supposed to drive back?”

“Before nine o’clock. What time is it?”

We check the clock! It is 8.49 PM! And—“We’re dead!” we snap in chorus and bustle away!



10.38 PM. THE BEACH house is all lit up. Moms and dads are still wide awake. Perhaps, waiting to raise another verdict—even worse than the one-meter rule! We are in deep trouble! ARGH!!!

We pull into the driveway and look at each other—in sweating bullets. “Can we kiss first?” I plead.

“I wish,” she replies.

We slide out of the car and freeze to an entertaining fete cavorting from the pool terrace. Dads are clanging to an acapella duet of a *Dane Hunter* hit. While moms’ chatting raillery slams along.

“Do you like the sound of that?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she shrugs. “Do you think they’re up to something—atrocious?”

“I can’t say.”

“Me neither.”

We toddle inside the house and reveal our wussy faces before them. And—hush! Their stern eyes regard us, sticking more dread into the excruciating one-meter rule!

“Who’s gonna talk first?” dad asks the troop.

"Oh god," I draw back.

"We're very sorry that we've disappointed you all again," Dylan apologizes.

—moms and dads exchange looks, then—

YIPPIES AND HURRAYS HAIL INTO THE NIGHT!!! As they all fly the coop towards us for hugs and kisses!!! Dylan and I are taken aback—"What's going on?" we ask in chorus—And—moms and dads go numb—but—click out of their stupor as their grip hits in.

"THE WITCHES' BROOMSTICKS HAVE BEEN BURNT TO ASHES!!!" dad cheers.

"What?" Dylan and I buck up.

"The sweet darlings came to your defense," mom informs. "They appeared on the local evening news—bragging about you—all the most remarkable things that they could ever say about their—faithful friend—and former fellow employee—And how you've made them feel important—and beautiful all through this time."

"And you—" dad addresses Dylan—"—thank you for being so brave—standing up for our daughter—in front of—"

"—*Hollywoodish* people—" Mr. Dawson butts in.

"Awww darlings!" Mrs. Dawson clasps her hands together. "We're so happy and relieved now."

"Was *that* on the news, too?" Dylan mutters.

"Obviously, there were press at Stacey Peckinham's event," dad says.

"Oh my goodness." Dylan feels her head.

"It's okay, babe," I hold my *one and only LUSH's* hand, and dad catches a sight of our affection display, then signals the troop and points down to it with a sly nod. "Are we still up for the one-meter rule?" I ask in a restive tone.

Mom kisses me and Dylan on our foreheads. "It's over now."

Dylan and I regale with a hug! "Oh, we got it!" dad yelps, then turns to the troop—"All right, folks! Time to party!"

"Honey—sweetheart—could you please bring out some drinks?" mom orders, then dunks back into the gaiety.

Dylan and I panic in the kitchen as we nab beers, a bottle of wine, and glasses—all set on trays—"Why are we so nervous?" she panics.

"Because we're about to ask them!" I gasp.

"I can't believe we're getting married soon after the walnut introduction."

"We don't question the universe anymore."

She checks the trays. "Beer for dads. Wine for moms." She pauses to sigh. "Okay. Let's go."

"Let's do it," I reply, then we deliver the drinks and rest them on the patio table—as we interrupt their repartee.

They examine our panicky maneuvers and gape at us. Dylan and I stand close to each other, swishing away sniffles. "What's this?" dad asks.

"We're getting married!" Dylan and I announce at once.

Moms and dads exchange looks—in awe! "We haven't even established our *Twitch Beau* yet!" dad objects.

"After over three decades later—" mom grumbles.

"Tonight!" dad interjects, pointing at her. "We'll do it tonight!"

"Have you come up with our romantic things yet?" Mr. Dawson asks his delightful wife.

"You've asked me about mineral oil this morning," Mrs. Dawson responds.

"Well, is it good for face wash or not?" Mr. Dawson boffs back.

"I'll look into it," Mrs. Dawson stutters.

"It's not!" Dylan and I answer in chorus.

"Girls!" dad warns us, panting—"Please talk—one at a time—"

"Let's not add to that anymore," mom busts in, then turns to us—"Our *Twitch Beau* is still in the works. You'll have to wait."

"That's right!" dad yelps.

"But—" Dylan and I protest at once—

“Talk one at a time!” dad snaps at us, then sighs—“We have to do something about this—” —to the troop—“Questions! Who wants to go first?” —back to me and *my one and only LUSH*—“Let’s see if you two can still outfox us!” —to Mr. Dawson—“Dave, do the interrogation first!”

“When did you two meet?” Mr. Dawson fires up.

“March 20th!” Dylan and I answer.

“Anniversary date?” mom asks.

“March 20th!” Dylan and I yelp—without hesitation.

“Is that even conceivable?” dad whines.

“It’s clinched and claimed!” Dylan and I respond.

—moms and dads struggle to keep their composure—“Let’s not ask about dates anymore!” dad reminds the troop. “Throw in impossible questions! Who has one?” —and growls at us— “—Let’s end this heebie-jeebie now!”

“Name all your—*things!*” Mrs. Dawson challenges us.

“A-HA!!!” dad cheers at her—“Good call, Bev!”

“If they still can do this,” mom groans, then turns to dad— “—we can’t procrastinate over our *Twitch Beau* anymore! And I can’t believe we even waited for something like this—after over three decades later!”

“Tonight!” dad grunts at mom.

“Well—?” Mr. Dawson dares us—

“What are your *other things* hidden in there?” Mrs. Dawson repeats the question.

—Dylan and I look at each other—as moms and dads anticipate for our answer—then dad draws a winning grin across his flushed face—“We’re gonna win!” he gnashes.

Dylan and I gasp at once, then—“Drabbles, sacred seven decades, *All of Lush* dances, childhood dreams and wishes, the pledge, sunrises, beach walks—” —we pause for a bit and look at each other—as moms and dads are frozen in dead silence—back to them—“Vancouver, coffee and tea, pasta and pizza, sweet and spicy, morning and night—” —we

suddenly suspend our thoughts—over *fast and smooth*—“—do we have to say it?” we ask each other—“No!”—

“One more thing,” I say.

“*Zea and Kai!*” we continue—AND!!!

“I want to swear so bad!!” dad rages.

“My pulse has just run away for good!” Mr. Dawson groans.

“My envy is about to kill me now!” mom mutters.

“I’m afraid to ask any more questions,” Mrs. Dawson reacts.

“So—” Dylan and I say in a casual tone—

“One at a time!” dad squeaks at us.

“Fine,” Dylan and I sigh—obliviously—

“Girls—” dad breathes—“—one at a time—”

Dylan and I look at each other. “You go first.”

“THAT’S IT!!!” dad gives up—“We’ll have to come up with a new rule here!”

“WHAT?!” Dylan and I snap at once.

“We don’t like this!” dad roars on. “What is this? What is this called? Do you two have a name for it?”—then realizes something and flicks at the troop—“That’s a difficult one! We’ve got no name for it! No name! I haven’t gotten to the books yet, but it’s something inconceivable!”—back to us—with a weighty frown—“So what is it called?”

Dylan and I tilt down our heads. “Initial impulse.”

“I beg your pardon?” dad exclaims.

“Initial impulse,” Dylan and I enunciate.

—moms and dads bounce away – BUGGED UP!!! “You two—” dad prompts us—“—get away from us for a while!”

Dylan and I trek into the living room, then hurl down on the couch—for a snuggle—“They’re so unnerved about it,” I yelp.

“I know,” she replies.

I kiss her on the cheek. “It feels sooo great cuddling you in the house now!”

“Walnut—” she moans— “—show me the yoyo costume—”

“Let’s go!” I whoop, and we speed our way upstairs, into my old childhood bedroom—

“Don’t lock the door,” she reminds me.

“Baby,” I smirk, “don’t worry. I respect your sentiment about it now.” I open the storage closet and yank out the dilapidated yoyo costume, then flash it to her—“Voila!”

She gushes! “It’s cute! It’s pink! And—smashed!” —she checks the strings—“What do you do with the strings?”

“I’d roll through them!”

“And you really did that?”

“Like a skipping rope,” I say. “But the bulky joined discs would make it so difficult, that’s why I had to come up with tricks to get through the strings.”

“Oh my goodness, walnut,” she giggles. “I can’t believe you thought of something like this—at seven years old! Ahh—that’s amazing—” Her dreamy face is making me mad and hungry—provoking the vain cramps! She looks at me, and—“No!”

“Not even a kiss?”

“It’s a vain cramp danger alert! No!”

I shove the yoyo costume back into the storage closet. “I can’t believe we can’t even kiss in here!”

“Not inside the house,” she lays out the rule. “Not ever.”

“Okay,” I groan. “God. Your staunch diva thing can’t even give me a little leeway. Let’s go to the firepit then.”

We rush down the stairs and take a startling pause—as moms and dads are huddled together in the living room—splintering us with an autocratic look! “We didn’t do *it*!” Dylan and I defend our—bedroom trip!

“Ace just showed me her yoyo costume!” Dylan fusses.

“And she’s a staunch diva about—things like—*that*!” I second. “I mean—around the house—so—”

—dads exchange signalling looks—moms impart each other with a shrewd smile—Dylan and I swan closer—in marvelled stillness – THEN!!!

—dads flick their fingers in rhythmic beats—and in a blending a capella melody—they serenade us with our song—our beautiful song—our *happiness* song—our forever heart song—singing and dancing all the way from our childhood dreams and wishes – *All of Lush!*—

—Dylan and I ooze into a happy cry—then face each other—She holds my hand and kisses it—“Ace Hansel, my baby carrot, my walnut, my princess—” she says, “—would you like to dance with me?”

“Yes!” I exclaim! “I’ve been waiting for this all along!”

—and our first *All of Lush* dance swings on—conjured by our warm and loving moms and dads—

Dear true love:

My name—will be Ace Dawson-Hansel soon. I’m 30 years old now. Tonight is the most beautiful night of my life as I am here dancing with you. We are dancing together to our song. Our happiness song. Our forever heart song. All of Lush.

My someday has finally come. Holding you and knowing that you are mine. Thank you for making my heart sooo happy. Thank you for making my entire world even more beautiful. Thank you for sharing your overflowing soul of love with me.

I will always be yours. You will always be mine.

And I will always dance with you until I take my last giggle. As the universe—our universe—will continue to listen to our greatest good whis-pers all the way through the end of our sacred seven decades—

Our sacred seven decades. Our happily ever after.

Baby, I love you—very much—way more than what this crazy world can offer us! And you will always be—my only priceless one—my only divine dazzling ring—my most wonderful holiday—and my most treasured home!

This. Us. You and I. Hold the truth! As there is nothing more powerful than—

Trusting the kind universe!

Our kind universe!

Where All of Lush is found—

You. My one and only.

I. Your one and only.

LUSH!

And so—

—we snuggle by the firepit after our clinched and claimed flight of fancy—with a gagged-up realization—“This place has witnessed all our fights and crying,” I giggle. “How embarrassing is that?”

“Well—” she kisses me on the cheek—“—it has also caught some of your nasty teases—”

“Oh!” I laugh! “The tongue thing!”

“Naughty walnut!” she yelps.

“Excuse me, staunch diva! There was nothing nasty and naughty about it at all!”

“Don’t trigger another oblong shape now!”

“My vain cramps have turned into one gigantic missile here!”

“Walnut, I have something to tell you.”

“Oh god,” I shrink—“—baby—your opening line always scares the hell out of me—”

“It’s not that bad,” she sighs. “It’s just—nasty and naughty!”

“Would it make me cry or smile?”

“I don’t know.”

“What is it?”

“After you dropped off your clothes, I hugged all of them at once.”

“Really?”

“While wishing for you to come back sooner—But then I got sad—thinking—oh, you know, such an impossible wish, and I should just dump it—So I ran into the washroom and cried—because deep

down inside—I struggled around my heart—because I could feel and see your beautiful heart at first glance—And at that exact moment—I knew you were the sad princess who danced with me when I was nine—and I wished for a chance to be closer to you so I could protect you and take care of you—And when you flashed back in, I got more terrified—I whispered to myself, ‘no no, that was still an impossible wish, and if I were to do something about it, I’d only end up—in a suicidal pit!’—So then—I had to keep the diva thing together, and just shove it all back into my daydreams and dreams instead! But—”

“My grits harassed your diva-ish whimsy minutes after you dismissed my casual intrusion,” I laugh.

“Along with the walnut introduction!” she yelps.

“And then you asked me—*where is this walnut introduction going, Miss Ace Hansel?*”

“All the way through our sacred seven decades together. With Zea Dawson-Hansel. And Kai Dawson-Hansel.”

“I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us.”

“I love you. Very much. Way more than what this crazy world can offer us.”

And—our endearing kiss—honors the beautiful night! “So what brand of shampoo do you use, anyway?” I ask.

“*What’s my deal? I’m a walnut! I’m a walnut! You see me otherwise, I know! But inside, I’m a walnut!*” she recalls.

And a hilarious burst echoes across the beach—reminding our first sunrise—to get ready!



CHAPTER NINE

March 28, 2019. Thursday.

Our first beach walk. Our first sunrise. Welcoming our sacred seven decades in. With outpouring and grateful hearts locked together inside all the love and romance *things* summoned by our childhood dreams and wishes.

We are still in awe of *our kind universe*. Its mystical clicks. How my *true love* and I have created our own fanciful acts of *All of Lush* phenomenon. The phenomenon with promises of lasting moments, *greatest good* drabbles, and happiest cries. As they wait for *Zea* and *Kai* to be born.

By this morning, she has just learned how to make *fluffy pancakes* as we celebrate our engagement with moms and dads – who are now more bound and determined to create their own *Twitch Beau* impulses and flashes.

“What did you say about the universe?” she teases.

“We trust it—with a full heart,” I moan a reply.

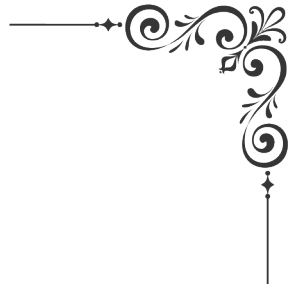
“Claimed!”

“Clinched!”

Dear All of Lush true love:

It is ours. It will always be ours.

It will all be fine. We will be fine.



THE END

*No matter how your heart has danced along, please let Dylan Dawson
and Ace Hansel know by joining their drabbles—clinging and claiming
a spot in the review section!*

Thank you very much! Mwah!



“Trust the kind universe!”

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Ali Light is a Sapphic Twin Flame Fiction author who falls in love with human magic everyday.

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And once upon a time, she was an English teacher.

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