



ENTWINED

**When real danger comes from the
place you fear most: within.**

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Issy

“Let’s make a baby,” I say.

Lifting my head, he kisses me gently, each light touch of his lips on my mouth increasing the urgency of my need. Tongues entwined, eyes shining with love, we undress one another. Laying on the top of him, my breasts pressed against his chest, our bodies melt together with desire.

A sharp noise shocks me into consciousness, the dream still echoing selfishly in my head like distant thunder. As I get up, queasiness hits. The persistent ringtone continues to shrill, bringing me back to earth.

“Hello?”

“Ms Lavigne? Are you there?”

“Yes,” I answer.

“It’s Edge Security here. Is everything okay Ms Lavigne? Your alarm has been activated.”

The alarm?

I look around. It’s a battlefield. Hundreds of shattered pieces of glass shine on the carpet with visible blood trails.

What happened? A flash memory hits me. A fight. Screams. A man. A woman. And a third person. Me?

My head hurts.

“Hello? Ms Lavigne?”

“I, I think you might need to call the police. I’ve got a feeling something terrible has happened.”

“I’ve just triggered the police response alert. Please stay calm. They should be there within the next fifteen minutes.”

“Are you hurt, Ms Lavigne?”

Injured? I just don’t know. The throbbing inside my head is the only palpable pain right now. At the touch, my fingers brush something sticky and warm. *Blood?* Moving on further down my face, the ride is bumpy. There’s definitely some swelling, congealed scratches even, from someone else’s finger-nails. My whole body aches. Badly. More glimpses of the struggle surface. Suddenly, everything comes flooding back to me with crystal clarity.

“Ms Lavigne? Is there anybody else I can call for you?”

“No, don’t worry, I shouldn’t have called,” I say dropping my phone. A searing pain breaks apart my soul; salty tears roll down my aching face. I want to go back into the living room, but the thought of it is too much to bear. The room spins. Gasping for air, a silent roar comes out of my mouth followed by hysterical sobs.

Nearby, the scream of the approaching police siren matches my howl. I force myself up and look in the mirror. My clothes are ripped apart, blood stained. My olive-skinned face has turned a ghostly white, badly bruised with swelling around the left eye and a slightly bluish lip. I touch the wound on my head, it hurts.

The buzzing intercom brings me back to reality.

“Officer Novak,” a middle-aged man says as I open the door. “Ms Lavigne. I’m responding to your alarm, is everything OK?”

“No,” I reply, lip trembling.

“M’am, may I come in?”

Knowing I have no choice, I lead the way to the living area, but stop before reaching the door. My body starts shaking, my heart pounds like a drum in my mind. Confusion and vulnerability slowly give way to remorse and shame.

“It all happened so fast. I just acted...”

“M’am, is there anyone else in the house with you?” Officer Novak asks.

“Yes, I mean no, not anymore, it’s just me” I answer.

“Okay. Just to be sure, Officer Callahan here will do a full search of the premises. In the meantime, let’s start at the beginning. Are you able tell me what’s happened Ms Lavigne?”

The flashback of blood splattered across the white living room carpet returns to me.

“M’am?” Officer Novak places a hand on my shoulder. I jump at the contact.

“I’m sorry M’am; I didn’t mean to startle you. Where’s your kitchen? I think a hot drink will do you good.”

“Yes.”

When I reach the end of the corridor, I realise it is the way towards the bedroom, not the kitchen. I turn around. Officer Novak looks at me quizzically.

“My apologies, I’m still slightly disoriented.”

“That’s ok Ma’am... hey, I didn’t realise you were bleeding, let me call a paramedic.”

I look down at my blouse; there’s blood. The realisation makes me lose my balance. I fall into the arms of Officer Novak. For a moment, my eyes lock onto his; an inexplicable curiosity mixed with an acute neediness overwhelms me. But the brief feeling of warmth is quickly replaced by a piercing chill. The brief sympathetic look in his eyes disappears.

Professional distance. Instinctively, I wrap my arms around my body.

“I think I’d better sit down.”

“Good idea. Where’s your bathroom, M’am?”

“Please call me... Issy. It’s on your left.”

When he comes back, Officer Novak hands me a towel and tells me to press it against the wound until the medics arrive. My stomach tightens at the pressure and nausea creeps in.

“Let’s get that coffee, shall we?” he offers, holding me steady.

As we reach the kitchen, I edge myself up onto a stool at the breakfast bar.

“May I?” Officer Novak asks, pointing at the coffee machine. I nod. “This is an amazing piece of machinery you’ve got here M’am... Issy,” he continues pressing the touch screen. “Milk?”

“Black please.”

“Maher, over here,” Officer Novak shouts at the arriving paramedics.

“What’s up Novak?” Maher asks.

“This is Ms Lavigne. Looks like she’s been stabbed.”

Like a good girl, I lift my shirt. There’s a horizontal knife laceration across my stomach. The examination of the gash and contact of her cold hands against my skin only exacerbates the tightness in my body.

“You’re in luck,” Maher concludes. “Although impressive, it’s shallow. You won’t need stitches, but I’m going to clean the wound for you and put some antibiotic ointment on the cut. I’ll use some closure strips to keep it tight and dress it with a sterile bandage.”

“Thank you,” I manage to say before a cold sweat washes over me. “I think I’m going to be sick...” Officer Novak pulls out a paper bag from his coat pocket just in time. I wretch into the bag.

Once it’s over, I clean myself up with some paper tissue that miraculously appears out of his pocket. The paramedic and I stare at him in puzzlement.

“You’re awfully prepared,” Maher says.

“Let’s just say, I’ve learnt the hard way,” Officer Novak offers.

A childish laugh suddenly escapes me.

“Well, at least you’re looking healthier,” Maher giggles as she picks up her medical bag. “Do you need me for anything else, Ms Lavigne?”

“No, thank you. I’m good,” I reply, a smile still playing on my lips.

Before leaving, Maher whispers something in Inspector Novak’s ear.

Unblinking, Officer Novak stares at me with cold hostility. His jaw clenches, his icy gaze slices through me.

“Is there something wrong?” I ask hesitantly.

“Nothing for you to worry about right now,” he replies, his mouth softening into an over-bright smile. “Anyway. Are you ready to tell me what happened earlier?”

“If we must,” I respond. “To have to relive the whole drama again is...”

“Difficult?”

“Yes. Indeed.”

I take a sip of my now lukewarm coffee. In spite of its acidity and tired flavour, the caffeine kicks in immediately.

“Have you ever felt like there’s a part of you missing, Officer Novak?”

“I can’t say I have. No. Why do you ask, Ms Lavigne?” Officer Novak asks.

I’ve experienced a sense of loss all my life, a yearning void that never leaves me. Growing up in an orphanage from five to ten, at times my loneliness became so acute that it developed into a psychological pain. At the age of six, I manifested an imaginary friend. Lucille. She was fun to start with, a creative way to fill a hole; someone to play with when nobody else would. Slowly she became a permanent feature of my childhood; an unbreakable bond that lasted for years. But eventually over time, she faded away.

“Issy!”

“What?” I look up surprised. “I’m sorry; I was just remembering something...”

“Anything related to the assault?”

“No.” *I’m just deflecting the inevitable.* “My apologies.”

“Let’s move to the other room so you can walk me through what happened?”

“Do we have to?” I lament childishly. “I just can’t face it... perhaps it was just a bad dream that turned into a nightmare.”

“What makes you think that? The laceration on your body seems real to me. It’s probably your brain strategising and finding ways to avoid reality, even denying that anything happened,” he tells me.

As we walk closer to the crime scene, my inner monologue fires up: *What have you done? You’re going to get caught. There’s no coming back!* I’m unable to rationalise the thoughts, to shut the voice down; it’s like interference that causes the radio to keep switching from one station to another. I put my hands over my ears; the voltage is unbearable. I can feel Officer Novak watching me. Dizzy and sweaty, I let my hands drop.

“Shall we?” Officer Novak asks, showing me the way towards the living room.

“I can’t...”

“Open your eyes Ms Lavigne,” he says.

“No...”

“Please, look.”

Blinking my eyes open, my brow furrows. “How can that be?” I ask turning to him.

“You tell me, Ms Lavigne.”

“I don’t understand!” I shout searching the room. “I’m not crazy!” I continue possessed.

It looks as though a tornado has brought the living room to the ground; a shattered glass table, artefacts strewn all over the place, and blood. So much blood.

“Did the paramedics take them?” I falter.

“What are you talking about, Ms Lavigne?”

“The bodies.” In my mind’s eye I see Zander, his handsome lifeless body, lying next to a woman on the carpet like two macabre mannequins in a slaughterhouse. My husband. His lover. The thought of their bodies, frozen in time, prostrate on the floor makes me flinch. “Impossible...,” I mumble to myself unable to reconcile the reality with my recollection of events. I scan the room once more.

Rothko's abstract red painting Untitled hanging on the wall no longer looks out of place; in fact, it blends in perfectly.

BEFORE

Issy

Life is beautiful.

How many people in this world can say those words without choking? *But I am happy*; it pains me to say it out loud, too afraid that it may extinguish the ray of hope that lives precariously inside me in union with the baby's heartbeat on the scan.

Twelve weeks. It's such a milestone in a woman's life. Twelve weeks means the risk of miscarriage is considerably reduced. Twelve weeks means the pregnancy is no longer a secret that needs to be protected by an invisible cloak, an in-between status between conceptuality and reality. Twelve weeks finally means a glimpse of the tiny life growing inside me.

I welcome the cold ultrasound gel on my tummy. As I watch the computer screen, I hear the whoosh of a strong heartbeat. The rhythmic sound dampens my desperate need to wee from drinking too much water before the scan. For a second, I imagine what the baby will look like. With my Afro-Brazilian heritage and Zander's fairer Anglo complexion, our genes could be passed on randomly to the child. Will it inherit my honey blond hair and bluish-green eyes, or will it take on Zander's darker hair and steel blue eyes?

"Based on the baby's measurement, your due date should be on or around the eighteenth of June," the sonographer says. I frown, surprised by the estimated date, which according to my calculations has now been pushed back by three weeks. I must have got my dates mixed up, or been too impatient perhaps, but either way I don't care; this time around, I've got a due date and I don't want to think that there might still be a risk in the coming weeks. Right now, there's no 'I'm sorry, there's no heartbeat' or 'your pregnancy is non-viable'. So many years of pain, trying to build a home, a family. A sudden wave a relief enters my body. My breathing slows, and my pulse no longer throbs in my temples. I cherish the silence.

Zander squeezes my hand, fixated by the two-inch foetus. Our shared blissful smiles say everything. Once again, my head buzzes with possibilities, a future full of joy.

Hope makes me look at him; my love, my companion, my everything. Despite all the hurdles, he always rises to the challenge, never giving up, no matter what. From the day we met to where we are now, he still exceeds my expectations, fulfilling my wants and needs. Bringing out my inner self, Zander exposes the part of me that is hidden to others without judgment or expectation. I had never dared believe that such a man does exist.

“I love you, Issy,” Zander says as he opens the door to our home. Simple and gentle words, yet the softness in his voice awakes a more primal need in me. I put the house keys on the hallway table and slowly turn around reaching for him.

He picks me up, I wrap my legs around his waist. I can feel his growing need against me; I crave him too. With my body incapacitated by his embrace, my imagination runs wild. I want him to undress me slowly, roughly. Against the table, I feel the softness of his lips nuzzling against every inch of my body, making me gasp at each stroke of his tongue.

As the teasing continues, I cannot help thinking that this is so unlike me. But I’m loving this side effect of pregnancy! This time around has been different, unlike the pregnancies before. Our conventional sex life has evolved from intimacy and emotion to more *perverted* urges, a change that Zander has fully embraced. From time to time, I surprise myself daydreaming of erotic foreplay full of BDSM extra curriculums, girls even. The idea of it only intensifies my recent sexual awaking; fantasizing about what new erotic intercourse we could experiment with to spice things up a notch.

“Are you okay, baby?” he asks, leading me upstairs with a wicked smile.

“I’m great. Better than great. I’m happy.” But as the words leave my mouth, an invisible weight takes position on my shoulders, followed by a cold sweat. Damn. I said it out loud. I recognise the signs. It has been a part of me as long as I can remember, but these days,

it is kept in check by Dr Seligman and my meds. *Dread. Anxiety.* It has so many names, facets, praying on the weak without any second thought.

“Stop it, Issy, please. Not today. Everything will be fine. It has to be,” Zander says.

“I know. I’m just being silly. Now, where were we?” I say burying the fear as I run away from him, giggling like a schoolgirl. The chase is on.

My friends are right, I hit the jackpot with Zander. Flirty, smart and considerate, no wonder he was the reluctant recipient of the sexiest man alive title at university three years in a row.

So, for now I vow to just enjoy today. As if there is no tomorrow.

Lu

“Feel good underwear, check. Sexy, but not trashy outfit, check. Stilettos, check,” Lu mutters as she walks to her blind date on the promise of a brainless evening, hopefully full of fun. Teetering on her tip-toes to the cadence of *Dance Monkey*, a series of text notifications lessens the music coming from her headphones. Eyes glued on the screen, she can’t help but smile:

Freddy: Leather leggings with the red plunge top?

Ann: Absofuckinglutely!

Dee: What else!

Lu: Yes, I am wearing the set.

Freddy: Excellent. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do

Dee: I’m so jealous

Lu: Thanks, guys. I’ve arrived. Wish me luck!

Ann: No need

Freddy: Go and get him tiger x

Dee: Make us proud girl ☺

Ann: But call us if you need anything

Lu: Yes, Mum x

Still smiling, Lu enters *Melancholy*. The unexpected atmosphere assails her senses; the exquisite smell of the dishes, the noisy chatter of flamboyant guests, and sight of the colourful artwork. She’d read about the place a few weeks ago and had decided to finally check it out. The reviews didn’t do justice to the magical feel of the lounge restaurant; the old manufacturing plant was now a gigantic art gallery, with artwork hanging everywhere being used as screen dividers. Unable to hold back her excitement, Lu walks around like Alice in Wonderland.

Not a single modern contemporary art movement and style have been left out. Everyone can find their perfect corner: Contemporary Expressionist, Cubism, Art Nouveau,

Suprematism, Conceptual Art, Impressionism, Pointillism and Pop Art. The chosen pieces strategically placed around the bar provide a subtle sense of direction for each space. Every month, the layout changes, with each wall divider reconfigured to create a new look and feel. Astonishing.

Lu sits down in the Contemporary Expressionist corner. There is a leaflet about the place and its gastronomy. The kitchen uses only top-quality organic ingredients, and caters for all palates: Vegetarian, Vegan, Atkins, Paleo and Dukan, the list is endless. Watching the plates circulating around, they all have one thing in common; they are beautifully presented with innovative and stylish twists. The statement is simple; food as an art in itself. The tapas-style dishes from around the world are complemented by a list of organic fine wines. Going through the menu of delicious culinary options, Lu's stomach growls happily.

“What would you like to drink, Madam?” the bartender asks.

Lu giggles. “Madam? Do I look that old?” she retorts, checking the menu again. “A mango and chilli Martini please.”

“My apologies, Mademoiselle.”

Tipping her head down slightly, Lu gives him a flirtatious smile.

“Are you waiting for someone?”

“Yes. A blind date.”

“Ouch. That's tough.”

“We've never met, and I don't know what he's like, other than what I've read on the website and emails, but it seems like we're a perfect match.” Lu pauses. “Imagine, two hapless romantics hoping to find love in a seductive location that plays tricks on all your senses.”

“That's quite a statement Mademoiselle. Why hapless?”

Lu pauses. She needs a moment to think about it. Her love life has been a series of non-committal relationships in which she has always felt like a stranger in a role play. She

can't explain it without sounding completely insane. The conversation always flowed until her state of mind deteriorated.

“Honestly? I just don't know.”

“So, where's your date?”

“Good question. I told you, I'm doomed.”

“Well, whilst you're waiting, how about some tapas from the bar?”

Pear, roquefort, walnut and rocket salad.
Roasted beetroot, pumpkin and pine nut salad
Duck confit with roasted figs and orange syrup (shredded)
Pan-fried foie gras with boudin noir
Chicken satay with coconut rice
Thai green curry with cucumber salad
Aubergine pakora with lime pickle
Prawn shaslik with chappati
Veggie Paella
Chorizo with pan-fried prunes
Roast belly pork with sauce verde
Beef and dumplings with chocolate sauce

“Whoa. All the veggie options sound delicious.”

“I know. And that's just the amuse-bouche. Eating out has become much more than just attending to physical needs these days. It has become a positive pleasure which people indulge in, and they are constantly on the lookout for new places with interesting ideas to tempt them.”

“Gosh, are you a marketing guru posing as a bartender in his spare time or are you simply getting a commission on sales?”

“Something like that...” the bartender smiles.

Lu looks at him inquisitively. His strong-built athletic appearance, piercing blue eyes, Hollywood smile, and mannerisms all seem awfully familiar; he's almost too cosy, but she just can't place him. Even his voice has a comforting feel to it; a sweet melody to her ear, like a soft blanket in which Lu could happily immerse her whole-body in.

“Miss?”

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare at you like this. Have we met before?”

“That’s an original line. Are you hitting on me?” he laughs, pretending to take offense.

“Maybe. I don’t know...”

Her arousal is impossible to ignore. A magnetic, almost addictive neediness seems to have emerged unexpectedly, pulling Lu towards him. She stares at him and bites her lips. A flow of erotic images assaults her mind.

“Are you sure we don’t know each other?”

“Perhaps it’s what people call love at first sight?” the barman teases Lu.

“Now, you’re making fun of me.”

“I wouldn’t dare. I take dopamine and serotonin very seriously.”

Flirtatious grins replace words as the silence lingers, turning the entire place completely still, as if they are the only people there. Even the music in the background is replaced by a steady heartbeat echoing in Lu’s ear. The unexpected magical spell is broken a moment later with the intrusion of another bartender.

“Would you excuse me a moment, Mademoiselle?” the bartender says moving away from Lu.

“That’s the story of my life; they all run away from me, eventually...” Lu mutters whilst taking another sip of her cocktail.

The flashing light of her mobile phone brings her back to reality. There’s a message from Ann.

Ann: How’s it going Beautiful?

Lu: No show 🙄

Ann: That sucks.

Lu: Met a bartender instead.

Ann: Sounds fun.

Lu: If only. I think I scared him off... 🙄 Anyway. I'm going to finish my drink and head off. Speak tomorrow.

Ann: Sure thing. x

As she finishes her drink, Lu checks her emails as much to distract herself as being genuinely interested. Her nose wriggles. The pungent smell of food grabs her attention. There are a number of tapas dishes innovatively dressed up on the counter, all looking too delectable to mess up their makeover. The weirdest thing is each and every dish is one of her favourite foods. And all vegetarian.

“Excuse me?” Lu hails the bartender’s attention. “Sir!”

“Yes, Madame?”

“I haven’t ordered any these.”

“You’re right, Madame. Compliments of the boss.”

“Who is he?” Lu asks

“It’s me,” the sexy bartender’s familiar voice whispers in Lu’s hear.

“You?”

“Yes. And I haven’t stood you up.”

“You’re Lex?”

“In the flesh. Nice to meet you, Lu.”

Issy

“I’m thinking of quitting my job,” I finally say out loud to my friend Joanne as she sits opposite me with her glass of *vino tinto* while I have a non-alcoholic wine. Celebrating my pregnancy in style. After all, this is the furthest I’ve been in any of my previous pregnancies. “I mean, perhaps I should take it easy before D-Day.”

“But you love working, won’t you miss it? You’re still months away from the due date.”

“I know, it’s just a thought really. I’m financially secure...”

“Tell me about it. No offence, but you’ve been a fantastic cash-cow over the years. Managing your estate is a blessing.”

“No offence taken. Cheers!” I say, knowing perfectly that I’m her only source of income. We’ve been friends for a long time, a friendship born over a glass of cocoa when I was ten years old, the day my adoptive parents brought me home. Her mum was the housekeeper in charge of the staff at the house. They were unlike the typical rich families portrayed in TV series like *Dallas* or *Dynasty*; they loved me.

A few years earlier, they had founded a charity in South America, a place dear to my beloved mother. Their mission was simple: bring hope to orphans by providing them with caring and loving homes. Over time, their efforts enabled them to form strong relationships with local governments and state officials. Then it happened. During one of their visits to a local orphanage, our destinies crossed paths. I was already damaged goods, but my story did not deter them from adopting me. It was love at first sight, and a match made in heaven. Cliché. Although still waiting for motherhood to kick in at the age of thirty-five, my life has turned out well, considering how it started.

“Did I tell you what happened during the scan?”

“You cried? He cried? You both held hands and said I love you?”

“Whoa. We’re not that bad...”

“Your love bubbles? It’s sickening!” she laughs. “Moi, jealous? Not at all.”

“Well, I was going to say that I vomited on the mid-wife’s lap.”

“No, you didn’t!”

“Oh yes, I did. But it wasn’t because of the morning sickness. Have you ever heard of vanished twin syndrome?”

“I can’t say I have, but you have twins?” Joanne asks.

Twins. Two weeks after my first scan, I went back to the hospital; there was some heavy vaginal bleeding. Not just brown spots, but bright-red bloody discharge with serious cramping. I was sure I’d had another miscarriage. The joys of motherhood short-lived, again. So, I made an emergency appointment at the clinic, expecting to hear the crucifying words: *there’s no heartbeat*. The mid-wife’s heavy breathing, the unwelcome coldness of the gel on my tummy, and the clack clack clack of the keyboard and the screen turned away. I was just gazing at the ceiling; the conclusion inevitable, there was no point fighting it.

Then I heard it, the sound I’d already written off. It was impossibly fast, twice as fast as mine. Slowly, I dared to turn my head around and I finally heard the mid-wife. She smiled at me, but I could only focus on one thing; the magical sound of my baby’s heartbeat. Eventually I finally tuned in to what she was trying to tell me; the earlier dating scan showed only one embryo; at the time it was too early to reveal the *disappearance* of a twin as I was only nine weeks pregnant. Twins. I had started the pregnancy with twins. The word itself resonated through me to the point where everything spun around me. I tried to remain steady, but nausea clutched steadfastly at my throat.

“I can’t explain what happened, but I lost my balance and when the mid-wife tried to catch me, I vomited all over her lap.”

“Oh my God, poor lady. You’re terrible at puking.”

“Don’t joke. All my breakfast propelled into the air and splattered across her whole outfit, the floor, the sonograph equipment, you name it. Porridge. It was so embarrassing.”

“Alright, alright. I can only imagine, let’s stop there. So, is everything okay with the pregnancy then?”

“Well, I’m here with you celebrating, aren’t I?”

“True. Well, cheers to you and your baby. Congrats.”

As we toast the news and she describes her latest adulterous conquest, my mind reflects on the violent physical reaction that I exhibited at the word *twin*. Even now it provokes a turmoil inside me. Shocked or relieved, or both perhaps? I can’t decide.

I need to control the unease before it takes over and spoils the whole evening. So, I close my eyes for a second, take a gentle breath in through my nose and out through my mouth. Then, I mentally express my appreciation for life; my gratitude for the pregnancy, my loving husband, my health and wealth. Slowly, the tension dissipates. I reopen my eyes. My friend is too caught up in her own drama to realise that I disconnected from reality for a few moments. I can’t fault her or any of my other friends really; my existence has been like a soap opera and they’ve never complained about it. The least I can do is indulge them in theirs too.

“Anyway, I know it’s wrong, but I can’t help it,” Joanne tells me. “I’m not getting what I need from my relationship. I need more. I’m so angry all the time, I need a release and Mike can’t provide it for me.”

“It’s not my place to judge. My relationship is different, but no less complicated. Who can truly say that their life is perfect?”

“But yours is.”

As she says the words, I think to myself: *yes, right now, my life is perfect.*

Lu

“I’m telling you, online dating is fab,” Lu says to Ann. “So many relationships start online these days.”

“Easy to say Miss Universe, not everyone is as physically and mentally gifted as you,” Freddy replies.

“Look, all I’m saying is that it’s an easier way to find people with similar values or specific interests...”

“I’m so-sorry, b-b-but y-ou’re completely d-disillusioned Lu. P-people just lie on their p-profile, or s-simply omit cru-crucial i-information, like ‘I’m a s-serial killer or a lu-lu-lunatic.’ Ha-have you ever watched the TV s-series *You*?” Dee interrupts flushed. “I mean, d-don’t you remember what h-happened to me last year? The w-world is a s-s-scary p-place if you ask me.”

“Poor little lamb,” Freddy says, blowing a kiss to Dee across the table. “She’s so right, and talking about fibbing, you’ve made a few omissions yourself on your profile... Aye. That hurts.”

“Come on Freddy. You promised you’d leave it alone tonight!” Ann whispers.

“You can be such a bore.”

“You’re welcome,” Ann responds smirking. “Anyway. Lu, I’m sure everybody here will agree that even though we’re all insatiable carnivores, your vegan menu was delish. And I love what you’ve done with the place. It’s so different. Edgy, yet peacefully decorated.”

“No doubt something to do with her new Nordic prowess in the bedroom,” Freddy teases.

“At least someone is getting some...,” Dee sighs with despair.

“And now your stammer is gone. Halleluiaah,” Freddy counters back.

As she listens to her three friends, Lu can't help but reflect on her worsening panic attacks. The last one was a close call. For the past few months, in addition to the recurrent nightmares, she's experienced more and more flashbacks. Dr Seligman explained that they might be the result of a past trauma that her mind buried years ago and which is now trying to exorcise itself out of her system. *Involuntarily memories* she called them. She thinks something might have happened to her when she was younger, and that it may be linked to a fire. When they spoke a few days ago, Dr Seligman told her that her anxiety, the nightmares, and the blackouts are all probably somehow connected. The question is, connected to what? The frequency of the attacks means that she's now on a higher dosage of Lithium to stabilise her mania and keep her depression at bay; something she had apparently struggled with since her teenage years.

The thought of it, mixed with their teasing laughter brings her closer to the cliff edge she's been heading towards, waiting for her downfall. It's almost as if something inside tries to push her out of the way. Her anxiety is no longer contained; she can't stop the impending feeling of a deep, physical detachment from the room and the conversation.

She looks at her hands, trying to ground herself; they appear almost translucent, passing through reality, unable to hold on to anything nearby. At that instant, the movie and its actors of which Lu is a part, appear dreamily abstract. The disconnect gives way to a surge of a panic, and she desperately clings to the edge of her sanity.

"Lu, what's wrong?" a distant voice asks.

"Do you think we should call an ambulance?"

"It's just so weird. I hate it when she zones out."

Although their aura appears to be nearby, the sound of their voices echo into an eerie nothingness. The thick veil around Lu's psyche prevents her from reaching out and resurfacing in reality.

"Lu!" they all shout in unison.

“Stop shaking me!”

“Do you feel okay?” Ann asks.

“What? Hum, yes. My mind is just a bit fuzzy. What happened?”

“Here we go again. The usual darl...too much booze,” Freddy scoffs.

“Stop it,” Ann snaps. “How are you doing Lu?”

“Josie?” Puzzled, Lu looks around. She is in a split-level flat, with three huge arched windows, each surrounded by large wooden frames. The clean, straight lines of the concrete slabs on the walls contrast with the richness of the parquet floor and red brick walls. On the right-hand side, there is a half-turn floating staircase made of glass at the back of an elegant U-shaped sofa and coffee table, both mounted on wheels. Bright colours contrast against the industrial cement and white stone of the open plan kitchen. *My city pad. But something looks different though.*

“Oh n-n-no, this isn't g-good,” Dee gasps.

“Guys, she called me Josie!” Ann cries out.

“It's all changed” Lu says. Dread takes over; her dizziness amplified, Lu's muscles tighten as a series of thoughts overwhelm her.

Nobody says anything. They all look at her warily.

“Lu?”

She turns around and looks at Ann. “What?”

“D-desserts anyone? They're s-still on the kitchen c-counter...,” Dee says.

“I zoned out again, didn't I? I'm so sorry guys. I obviously can't hold my drink...,”

Lu gets up to clear the dishes from the dining table. “Being diabetic is a bitch,” she continues, taking a sip of wine.

“Don't worry about it, Lu, but are you sure drinking is wise? You almost fainted...”

Ann says.

“Nonsense. I feel fine. It’s nothing new guys, so why the faces?” Lu asks, defiant, catching a shared look between the friends.

“It’s getting more and more frequent Lu, and we’re just worried. That’s all,” Ann adds, holding Lu’s hand on the table.

“I know and I’ve told you, Dr Seligman is helping me. Please don’t worry about it. Okay?”

“If you’re sure. Well, I don’t know about you guys, but I could do with something sweet. Let’s get on with these lovelies,” Freddy says holding up the mouth-watering tarts.

“Anyway Lu. Have you told everyone about your hook up last week?” Ann asks as they take a patisserie each.

“Sounds intriguing, you little minx. Details,” Freddy teases.

As she serves the food, Lu tells them about the latest exchange with the guy she met on the dating site *Sure thing*. How they had connected, like they already knew each other. As if they were soulmates. It’s a peculiar emotion considering that she searches only for non-committal hook-ups; one-night stands that will fulfil her sexual needs. Although *Shitty Shades of Beige* paints a very idealist view of BDSM, Lu’s never managed to maintain stable and healthy relationships. That’s always been her issue; *vanilla* men don’t seem to be comfortable fulfilling her *exotic* sexual repertoire. But not Lex.

“I don’t know. I’m so tired all the time; it’s hard to focus on love.”

“Why is that? Are you still having nightmares?” Ann asks.

“Yes, and they’re getting more and more frequent. Anyhow. Enough of me. What I want to know is what is going on in your sagas. Dee?”

“What’s to say? I’ve got th-three kids at home, the t-twins are a n-nightmare, and D-Derek keeps gambling our s-savings away on f-fucking horses. I don’t think any of you c-can beat my shit.”

“Well. I’m in my mid-thirties and heading into bloody perimenopause,” Ann interjects in the middle of the conversation.

“What? Have you b-been tested? Dee asks.

“Yes, a blood test. I’m waiting for the results, but all the signs are there. Irritability, sweating at night, irregular periods, vaginal dryness, you name it! I often wake up soaking wet in the middle of the night. And not in a nice place!”

“Look on the bright side; you can cancel your Hot Yoga membership now,” Lu jokes, remembering their first encounter. They met during her first session, detoxifying through a waterfall of sweat in a forty-degree room. After ninety minutes of looking like two dehydrated wet dogs, they burst into exhausted laughter and sealed their friendship over a calorific hot chocolate topped with whipped cream and marshmallows.

“All right ladies. I’m all for girly nights in, but that’s slightly outside my comfort zone,” Freddy blurts.

“And you think that telling us all the gory details of a sex change is any better?” Ann laughs. “How is it going by the way?”

“Well, since the last of my mental health evaluations a couple of months ago, I’ve been referred to a hormone specialist.”

“So, you’ve started the hormone therapy then?” Dee asks.

“Oh yes. Can’t you see the difference yet?”

“Apart from your delightful mood’s swings, you mean,” Ann says.

“You’re so funny, Missy. Let’s see who the greatest bitch is going to be now!” Freddy replies, sniffing the air. “Hey, is it just me, or is something burning?”

At that moment, the sound of the smoke alarm blasts away, whining in a deafening crescendo. They rush to the cooker to extinguish the fire and open the windows to dissipate the smoke.

Lu is the only one who remains seated. Petrified, she moves back and forth, hands covering her ears, murmuring gibberish.

Get out. Stay put. I can't breathe. It's dark. Drop her. Jump!

Still babbling away, Lu gets up to find shelter. The drum of thunder outside added to the smoky smell, and the shouting from her friends rattles her. She wants to hide away from the series of vivid images in her mind; they are the same as her nightmares, but this time she's awake.

A woman calls her name. There are thick clouds of smoke everywhere. The fire crackles and sparks, whilst the flames entwine cosily, snarling and consuming everything that they come into contact with.

Crouched down, Lu hyperventilates; it is as if she is in the middle of a theatrical performance, the shining star caught in the hands of a fiery antagonist. Fire. Lu can hear her friends calling out, but the invisible dread continues to ossify her. The rocking, repetitive back and forth movement intensifies, and finally gives her the strength to call out: "Help me!"

"Shush. Listen!" Ann shouts.

"Help me!"

"C-can y-you hear? It's f-from over th-there," Dee blurts.

"Help me...please..." Lu's voice continues whimpering.

A light of hope strikes Lu. Her eyes blink at the intensity of the light that flows into her hiding place.

"She's here. In the cupboard," Freddy sighs in relief.

Issy

“Zander, can I have a word please?” Matt asks showing us to our table. “There’s a problem with the accounts.”

“Not now, Matt,” Zander says cutting him off. I look up in surprise.

“But...” Matt says, flustered.

“Later,” Zander says firmly.

“Understood,” Matt says backing away, “I’m sorry for the interruption, Issy. Enjoy your evening.”

“Is everything okay with the restaurant?” I ask.

“Don’t worry, hon,” Zander replies flashing me a broad smile. “It’s probably just a silly reconciliation issue. Nothing for you to worry about. Now, where were we?”

“Melancholy is my business investment, too. Are you sure?”

“I am, Issy. Now, you were saying something about your hormones,” he says pulling me into his black-shirted chest.

“Ah yes,” I say breathing in his musky scent. “I was just telling you that many women experience increased libido during their pregnancy.”

“I have noticed... not that I’m complaining,” he replies, squeezing my thigh under the table. “You’re so hypersensitive,” he continues, gently sliding his hand.

At the contact, my mind immerses itself into the atmospheric ambience of the music playing in the background. Since we’ve left home, there’s been a certain disconnect between my mind and body, a brain fog that is preventing me from being completely present. I speak, but he doesn’t hear me. Yet, we’re having a conversation. Inside my head, my senses are dulled as if I’m underwater. I must be drowning; I need to resurface. With effort, I extract myself from the background noise, and can finally hear my own voice. The music in the bar somehow seems louder, more upbeat.

Then I hear myself say:

“Bunk.”

“Top or bottom?” he replies without flinching.

After a few more minutes of banter, I suddenly take his hand and drag him towards the corridor at the back of the restaurant. Having organised many work events there over the years, I know the place well. I look for one of the cloak rooms, grab his collar by surprise and thrust him against the wall.

“What the fuck, Issy?” he squares up. “What’s going on?”

My blood is racing from the adrenaline. “I want to play. Fuck or fight?”

“What the fuck?” he repeats.

“You can’t keep saying that,” I say, moving closer. I stare into his eyes, then dart forward to land a kiss on his open mouth. I pull away, smile, “Are you going to take charge now, or let me have my own way?”

“I see. You’re in that mood again.”

“My way then...,” I say pulling him towards the fire door. We stumble outside. The breeze takes me by surprise, the silk of my shirt cold against my skin. Nipples hard, he looks down. His eyes say it all; his mind is made up.

“Let’s fuck, but later,” he kisses me vigorously in return. “First, take off your panties and give them to me.”

I do what he says, sliding them down my legs and feeding them over my heels. As I hand them over, he places them to his face and breathes in once, before placing them into his inside jacket pocket. “Right then, let’s go back inside. I’m famished,” he teases.

A subdued silence follows as we walk back to our table. Our uncharacteristic behaviour baffles me. Role plays have never formed part of our routine, yet he was completely at ease.

“Have you done this before?” I ask as we take our seats again.

“Yes.”

“With me? I mean, it doesn’t really feel like me... and I don’t remember any other times.”

“Shall we have a take-two to refresh your memory?”

Flashbacks from the earlier scene weigh on my mind, intermittently switching on and off. I read the menu, twice, but the pulsating interferences stop me from concentrating. When I’m finally able to focus, my favourite meat dishes appear to be a dietary violation. I’ve read that pregnancy hormones can impact taste buds, but this is more than my senses acting up, it’s a total repudiation of flesh. Well, not all flesh it seems, I giggle, visualising my lacy lingerie in his jacket pocket. I turn my head away from the menu and watch him. I nip my lower lip and say, “Let’s go home.”

His brows arch. My lips twist. A flicker enters his eyes. A warmth seeps into me, topped by a gentle throb of my exposed nakedness. *In and Out, Fast and Furious, I want it all.*

Lu

“Kinky,” Lu says entering Lex’s place through a side entrance.

“My latest mid-life crisis,” he replies taking off her coat. “Mmm, your outfit’s...”

“Who said you could talk?”

“I...”

“Do you need a muzzle? That’s what I thought. Good boy. And it’s Mistress Lu.

Now, sit over there whilst I explore.”

Wearing a sexy two-piece made of a scandalous see-through mesh and PVC, she moves playfully towards the bondage arsenal on display. The outfit has her submissive’s undivided attention even though she knows, deep down, that the man behind the façade is nothing but docile. His demeanour screams power whilst the quiet certainty of his stare means business. Everything he says and does is controlled, making his silent thoughts deadly attractive. For a moment, she loses herself, drifting away as she imagines his manly hands on her, slowly unzipping her tight pair of wet-PVC shorts. Aroused to the core after hours of flirting over too many cocktails, she bites her lip to regain control.

Clad in thigh-length leather boots, Lu walks back to him holding a riding crop. The twinkle in his eyes invites her to act on it. Pushed by the sudden adrenaline rush, she spansks it on the palm of her hand with a flick of the wrist. The desired effect is immediate, his virility even more apparent. After months of dead ends, it’s nice to finally find a man who is not afraid of a bit of pain and enjoys playing both dom and sub. But tonight, she’s in charge and it’s time to baptise the silky bed sheets.

“Get up,” she says wiping the crop against her boots. “And put some music on while you’re at it. Something with a heavy beat. I’m not in a gentle mood today.”

“Your wish is my desire, Mistress Lu.”

“Stop talking and tend to my needs. But first, take off your clothes. Every piece.”

“I aim to please, Mistress Lu,” he says complying.

“We shall see.”

But as she turns around to check the sex toys, he lifts her up gently but firmly and throws her onto the bed.

“What...” but he’s already on top of Lu, his finger covering her mouth. As if Lex read her mind earlier, his hand slides down to her navel and unzips her pants. His lips are cold against her caramel skin, leaving behind a cool trail down her bare body. An ice cube! Cliché, yet still effective. Her inner goddess, Mistress Lu, is too busy anticipating his next move to care about dominating her sub. Despite the chill from the cube, her skin heats up making the erogenous parts of her being eager for more foreplay. The guy behaves as if he knows what makes her purr.

A beep brings Lu back to earth.

“Do you mind?” Lex says looking towards a floating shelf. She looks over. For a fraction of a second, she hesitates. Then Lu sees it. There’s a perfectly disguised Go Pro, a perfect match to her narcissism. Her own pornography on tap.

“Only if I get a copy.”

“Well, of course, Mistress Lu,” he says before continuing his descent.

To her delight, everything is streamed live above her head through the giant mirror on the ceiling. The contrast between the warmth of his breath and the chilliness of the ice cube heats up the room by a few degrees. It’s like masturbating with a mirror without having to do the work, but better.

The temperature play provokes a rush of sensations that makes Lu squeal in delight. Each flick of his tongue is followed by a droplet of ice more teasing than the previous one. Mixed with the occasional cold dabbing, her body’s neuroreceptors run wild, making the arousal wonderfully excruciating. She’s near the edge, riding the waves of pleasure that will ultimately lead to rapture.

As the climax rises, her body tenses. Caught in the moment, she holds her breath, absorbing the growing pressure within. There's no time to waste; Lu needs to exhale and let go of her inhibitions. Totally immersed in lust, her moaning becomes louder at each throb. The last touch does it, the release blissfully shattering.

Slowly, the seismic effect dissipates but the fire inside Lu still burns for more. The sight of his lengthy erection is enough to set her off again. Her ride awaits.

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