

THE HALL OF LIES

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PROLOUGE

Maplewood High was the last place anyone wanted to be. The tall, red-brick buildings loomed over the campus like a fortress, casting long shadows that stretched across the concrete walkways. Students whispered that the windows were too small for escape and that the security cameras watched them with unblinking eyes. But it hadn't always been this way.

In the past, when Principal Andrews led the school, Maplewood was a place of freedom and camaraderie. Boys and girls were allowed to work and play together. Group projects were lively affairs where ideas sparked like fireworks, and students stayed after class to share stories and study late into the night. The library was a vibrant hub of activity, filled with whispered conversations and bursts of laughter. Principal Andrews believed in the power of unity. He encouraged collaboration, creativity, and even healthy competition. Under his guidance, Maplewood High was more than just a school—it was a community.

Late-night study groups became traditions. Students would gather in the library, surrounded by stacks of books, to prepare for exams or work on projects. The “Study Nights,” as they were called, often stretched into the early hours of the morning, filled with caffeine,

determination, and the quiet buzz of laptops. The internet was freely available, fostering connection to the outside world and broadening their horizons.

Principal Andrews also encouraged co-ed activities: sports tournaments, debate clubs, and even the much-loved annual school dance where students dressed up and danced under glittering lights. There were rules, of course, but they were reasonable, created with the students' best interests in mind.

Then everything changed.

One spring, Principal Andrews announced his retirement. A new principal was brought in— Principal Grieves. From the moment he arrived, a heavy silence fell over the school. His speeches were cold and formal, his smile never quite reaching his eyes. Rumors spread like wildfire: he had a military background, believed in strict discipline, and considered the old ways “soft” and “corrupt.”

Within weeks, the new rules were implemented. Boys and girls were to be kept apart— separate classrooms, separate lunch tables, separate dormitories. Joint projects were canceled, and teachers were instructed to monitor interactions closely. Even casual greetings in the hallway were forbidden. The beloved Study Nights were outlawed with the introduction of the “No Study After 11 PM” rule. Principal Grieves declared that studying too late was “detrimental to students’ mental

health,” though everyone suspected it was merely another method of control.

Internet access was shut down completely. Devices were confiscated, and even the school’s computer labs were locked, the machines gathering dust behind barred doors. The library, once a symbol of knowledge and freedom, became a ghost town, patrolled by watchful staff. Students who had grown used to sharing information online found themselves isolated and frustrated.

At first, the students tried to resist. They remembered the days under Principal Andrews when boys and girls stood together, working as equals and supporting each other. Secret meetings were attempted, messages were smuggled between dormitories, and late-night study sessions were organized in hidden corners. But Principal Grieves was relentless. He installed new surveillance systems, enlisted strict monitors, and threatened expulsion for those who disobeyed. Slowly but surely, the students’ unity began to crack.

The final blow came with the introduction of a rule that stunned everyone: no communication between the boys’ and girls’ dormitories, under any circumstances. Even letters were banned. To enforce this, Principal Grieves instituted “Harmony Prefects,” students selected to spy on their peers in exchange for privileges. They spread rumors that it was the boys who had

betrayed the girls by leaking the secret meetings. Others whispered that the girls had reported the boys to save themselves. Trust began to erode.

The once lively halls turned silent, filled with suspicious glances and hurried footsteps. Where once there had been laughter and whispered plans, now there was only fear. Study Nights were replaced by lonely hours in cramped dorm rooms, forbidden from seeking help or companionship. The annual school dance was canceled “until further notice,” and co-ed sports and clubs were disbanded.

Worse still, Principal Grieves staged public confessions. He called students into assemblies to “admit” their wrongdoings, often under duress. These confessions painted the students as traitors who had endangered the school’s order. Those who resisted were expelled or silenced, and their absences left holes in the classrooms.

Under Grieves’s iron rule, the school introduced the most bizarre and cruel rules: random searches of lockers, the banning of certain books, and even a regulation against gathering in groups of more than three. Students were encouraged to report each other for breaking these rules, creating a climate of paranoia and mistrust.

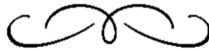
The divide between boys and girls grew deeper. Accusations flew, friendships dissolved, and students who once shared secrets now treated each other as

enemies. The administration's propaganda machine churned out stories of how "boys were undermining the girls' education" and "girls were distracting boys from their studies," further fueling the divide.

Maplewood High transformed into a battlefield—not of open rebellion, but of silent, bitter war. Each gender blamed the other for the school's descent into authoritarianism. Unity, once the students' greatest strength, was shattered. The lessons of solidarity taught under Principal Andrews were erased from memory, replaced by suspicion and fear.

Yet, in the hidden corners of the school, a few students still remembered the old days. They whispered stories of Study Nights, of shared laughter, of a time when they stood together. These quiet rebels vowed to find a way to bring unity back to Maplewood High. They knew that even in the darkest times, the seeds of solidarity could survive, waiting for the right moment to grow once more.

CHAPTER 1



Nyx lounged at the back of the math classroom, her cheek propped against her palm. Numbers swirled in front of her in the monotone voice of Mr. Reid, the instructor, but her attention wandered. The afternoon sun filtering through the narrow windows made her even sleepier, and she fought back a yawn. As always, math class felt like a tranquilizer dart straight to the brain.

Suddenly, the door burst open. Everyone jumped as Ms. Carter, the school coordinator, strode in with a flushed face and windblown hair.

"Everyone! Attention!" she called out, slightly breathless. "It's time for the stargazing trip! The buses are waiting! Line up outside, quickly."

The classroom, which had been half asleep, suddenly buzzed with energy. Students hurriedly stuffed their books into bags, chairs scraped against the floor, and excited chatter erupted.

Nyx sat still for a moment, an impish grin forming on her face. She knew this was coming— it happened every spring, and though most students loved the break from routine, Nyx had other plans.

As her classmates rushed out, she slung her bag over one shoulder and pretended to follow. But as they streamed into the hallway, she slipped to the side, blending into the shadows like a wisp of smoke. The perfect opportunity had arrived. With the teachers distracted, and almost every student outside for the stargazing trip, the school would be nearly deserted.

Nyx's target: the principal's office.

Principal Grieves's office was a fortress of rules, restrictions, and cold surveillance. But Nyx had always loved a challenge, especially when it involved bending the rules just enough to leave her mark. She had discovered during a routine exploration a few months ago that the principal's office housed the school's main database. The thought of tampering with it had been brewing in her mind for weeks.

Today was the day.

Moving silently through the empty halls, she avoided the scattered staff members hurriedly organizing the trip. Her sneakers barely made a sound against the tiled floors as she climbed the stairs to the administration wing. The security cameras, usually blinking red, had been left idle—likely redirected to the areas where students gathered for the trip. Perfect.

Nyx reached the principal's office, her heart pounding with the thrill of mischief. She produced a stolen staff keycard from her pocket, swiped it against the lock, and heard a soft click. The heavy door creaked open.

Inside, the room smelled faintly of leather and ink. Trophies glinted on the shelves, and a row of filing cabinets lined one wall. But Nyx's eyes were fixed on the prize: the principal's desk, where a sleek computer sat humming quietly. She slid into the chair, cracked her knuckles, and powered it on.

Grieves, in his paranoia, always thought he was untouchable behind his layers of security. But Nyx, the queen of cunning and pranks, had done her homework. She knew his password—a combination of his birthday and his cat's name—which she had gleaned from eavesdropping during an assembly. She typed it in with a grin.

The screen unlocked.

Lines of data scrolled down as she navigated through folders. Finally, she found the database labeled "Mock Test Results." This was it—the records of every student's mock test performance. Grieves used these scores to justify his harsh rules, to pit students against each other, to encourage the bitter rivalries that kept them divided. If these records vanished, the system he relied on would collapse, at least temporarily.

Nyx hesitated for a second. She wasn't just pulling a prank. This would throw the entire school's system into chaos. Would they blame her? Probably. But the thought of wiping Grieves's smug face clean of his precious rankings was too tempting to resist.

She selected the files, hovered over the delete button, and grinned. "Say goodbye to your numbers, Grieves," she whispered.

With a single click, the files disappeared into digital oblivion. The mock test results were gone—wiped from the database.

She stood up, the rush of adrenaline coursing through her veins. As she turned to leave, she paused for a moment and grabbed a sticky note from the principal's desk. With a quick flourish, she scribbled a message:

"Better luck next time, Grieves. -N"

She stuck it neatly on his computer screen and slipped out of the office as quietly as she had come.

CHAPTER 2



Nyx crept out of the principal's office, her heart still racing from the thrill of erasing the student mock test database. The halls were silent, heavy with the absence of students. She felt victorious, but she knew she had to leave quickly before anyone noticed.

But as she turned the corner near the administration wing, she froze.

Standing right in her path, arms crossed, was **Felix**. Tall, sharp-eyed, and as always, looking infuriatingly smug. His dark hair flopped over one eye, and he tilted his head in a slow, mocking manner.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" Felix's voice was quiet, but it sliced through the silence like a blade. "The prankster strikes again?"

Nyx's stomach twisted. Of all people to bump into, it had to be Felix—her sworn rival since their early years at Maplewood High. It wasn't like they had chosen to be enemies; the school's strict division between boys and girls had forced them into opposing sides, constantly battling for favor, privileges, and recognition. But even so, his smugness always irritated her.

"Get lost, Felix," she snapped, trying to push past him.

"Or what? You'll delete my grades too?" he taunted, stepping into her path.

Nyx bristled, her hands clenching into fists. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, but I think I do," Felix said, his voice low and dangerous. "You think you're so clever, but you're just going to get caught and—"

Before he could finish, the unmistakable sound of the principal's office door clicking open echoed down the hall.

Felix's eyes widened. Nyx's pulse spiked. They both turned their heads as Principal Grieves's heavy footsteps approached.

Without thinking, Felix grabbed Nyx's wrist and yanked her into a nearby supply closet, just in time for the principal to step into the hall. They pressed

themselves against the dusty brooms and shelves, breathing hard.

“Shut up,” Nyx whispered, trying to twist away from Felix’s grasp, but he held her arm firmly.

“Are you trying to get us both expelled?” he hissed, his voice trembling—not with anger, but with something else. Worry?

They both went silent as Principal Grieves’s voice boomed into the hallway. “...Yes, it’s done,” he said into his phone, his tone low and conspiratorial.

Felix and Nyx exchanged a glance. The words were sharp and clear.

Grieves continued, pacing back and forth just outside the closet. “No, the files were wiped. I don’t care about the mock test scores. Let the students think it’s an accident. It’ll make them turn on each other even more. Divide and conquer—it’s always worked.”

Nyx’s mouth fell open. She turned to Felix, her expression mirroring his shock. The mock test data? It wasn’t just an innocent prank on her part—it had been part of a bigger plan.

Grieves kept speaking, his voice dripping with contempt. “Keep the boys and girls at each other’s throats. The more they fight, the easier it is to control them. That last principal was too soft, letting them

work together. Unity breeds rebellion. We can't have that."

Felix's jaw tightened. He instinctively pulled Nyx a little closer, his usual arrogance replaced by a protective instinct he himself didn't fully understand.

"I don't care if the students figure it out," Grieves growled. "By the time they realize what's happening, it'll be too late. We'll isolate the troublemakers—like that Nyx girl and the ones who think they're clever. Make examples of them. And if the students start to question things, we'll make them fear each other more. They'll be too busy pointing fingers to unite."

Nyx's breath caught in her throat. Her heart was pounding so loudly she was afraid it would give them away. She glanced at Felix, expecting him to look smug or ready to blame her, but instead, he was pale, his brows furrowed in disbelief.

He was... scared.

"Don't move," he whispered urgently, his hand tightening around hers. "Don't even breathe too loudly."

Nyx's usual sharp retort died on her lips. For the first time, she saw Felix not as her enemy, but as someone who was just as trapped as she was.

Grieves's footsteps moved away, but they waited, motionless, until the sound faded into silence. Only

then did Felix release her wrist, but he stayed close, his face unusually serious.

“Did you hear that?” Nyx whispered, her voice trembling.

Felix nodded, his jaw clenched. “They’ve been manipulating us this whole time. Making us hate each other. The mock tests, the punishments—it’s all a game to keep us divided.”

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. The realization hung heavy between them. Their rivalry, their endless arguments, had been orchestrated.

Nyx swallowed hard. “I thought you hated me.”

Felix gave a short, bitter laugh. “I thought I was supposed to. But... now I’m just glad we’re not caught. If you got expelled...” He trailed off, shaking his head.

“You were worried about me?” she asked, half-surprised.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he muttered, avoiding her gaze. “You’re still annoying as hell. But... I didn’t want you to get caught. Not like this.”

Nyx felt a strange warmth bloom in her chest. Maybe Felix wasn’t the arrogant jerk she’d always thought he was. Maybe, just maybe, they could work together.

“Now what?” she whispered, glancing toward the door.

Felix’s eyes gleamed with a new determination. “Now we stop fighting each other and figure out how to fight them. Together.”

CHAPTER 3



Nyx sat back against the wall, her head spinning with what they had just overheard. Grievess's words echoed in her mind: **"Divide and conquer—it's always worked."** She clenched her fists, feeling a spark of fury, but then—just as quickly—it was extinguished by cold reality.

Felix was still close, watching her. His breath was shallow, his hands trembling slightly from the shock of hearing the truth.

For a long moment, Nyx said nothing. Then, in a soft, bitter voice, she spoke. "I can't do this."

Felix blinked, startled. "What do you mean?"

Nyx looked away, her voice almost breaking. "We can't talk, Felix. Remember the rules? We're not even

allowed to look at each other, let alone plan anything. Every hallway has cameras, every room has ears. They'll catch us the second we try. And you—" she faltered, her voice dropping—"you shouldn't worry about me. If they catch me... if they decide I'm a problem... they won't just expel me."

Felix frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"They'll sell me," she whispered, her voice hollow. "To one of those organizations. You've heard the rumors, haven't you? About the students who disappear? The ones who never come back? Everyone thinks they ran away or got transferred, but we know the truth. I'm not dumb, Felix. If they think I'm too much trouble, I'll just... vanish."

For the first time, Felix's usual guarded expression shattered. His eyes shimmered with something dangerously close to tears. He swallowed hard, his jaw tightening as if he were trying to keep his composure.

"You think I'd let that happen to you?" he said, his voice low, strained. "Nyx, I—"

But Nyx shook her head, cutting him off. "You shouldn't care. I'm just the prankster, right? The troublemaker. The one who always ruins things. It's easier if you don't care."

She stood, brushing off her hands, trying to keep her legs steady. Her knees wobbled a little, her mind

still foggy from adrenaline and fear. “I’ll handle this on my own. I should go back to the trip before anyone notices I’m missing.”

Felix stood too, his mouth opening to protest. But before he could say a word, Nyx stepped forward—and her foot twisted awkwardly on the uneven floor.

With a sharp gasp, she stumbled sideways, her ankle buckling beneath her weight. She tried to catch herself on a nearby shelf, but her hand slipped. A crash echoed through the silent hallway as she fell, her body thudding against the wall.

The noise was loud—loud enough to catch attention.

From around the corner, the sharp click of high heels echoed: the principal’s PA, returning from wherever she’d been, drawn by the noise.

Nyx’s heart froze. She scrambled to get up, but her ankle gave out, sending a fresh bolt of pain through her leg. Panic twisted in her chest.

Before she could cry out, Felix lunged forward, dropping into a crouch beside her. His hands moved quickly but carefully—one around her waist, the other bracing her injured ankle. His grip was firm but not rough, steadying her without causing more pain.

“Shhh,” he hissed. His voice was low, urgent. “I’ve got you.”

He gently but swiftly pulled her closer, tucking her against his chest as he shifted her weight into a safer position behind a row of dusty shelves. His body pressed against hers, shielding her completely from view.

“Don’t move,” he whispered against her hair, his breath warm and quick.

Nyx’s heart hammered against her ribs, not just from fear but from the sudden realization that Felix was risking everything to protect her. She could feel the tension in his muscles, the way he held her so she wouldn’t be seen.

They both held their breath as the principal’s PA’s heels clicked closer. Felix’s body was tense, ready to move if needed, but he didn’t let go.

The PA paused, peering into the hallway. “Is someone there?” she called, her voice sharp.

Felix pressed his forehead against Nyx’s, so close she could feel his eyelashes brush hers. His whisper was so soft she barely heard it: “Please... don’t let her find you.”

For a terrifying second, Nyx thought the PA would walk right in, but then a distant shout from outside the building echoed—a call from one of the teachers coordinating the trip. The PA hesitated, glanced toward the noise, and sighed.

“Must be nothing,” she muttered, turning away. Her heels clicked down the hall as she left.

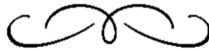
The second the footsteps faded, Felix finally let out a shaky breath, his grip loosening just enough for Nyx to shift. His arms were still around her, but now his hands trembled faintly.

Nyx’s throat felt tight. “Felix...” she whispered.

His face was pale, his jaw clenched in a mix of fear and relief. “Don’t ever say you’re alone again,” he said hoarsely. “I’ll never let them take you.”

For the first time, Nyx didn’t pull away. She let herself lean into his steady, protective warmth, her breath finally coming back.

CHAPTER 4



Felix slowly loosened his grip as the echo of the PA's heels faded into silence. His heart was still pounding, but his arms were steady. He glanced down at Nyx, who was breathing heavily but otherwise silent. Her ankle was still twisted, and he could see the stubborn set of her jaw, her attempt to hide her pain.

"Okay," he said softly. "Let's get you off this floor."

Before she could protest, he helped her settle against the wall, his hands gentle as he guided her to sit comfortably. He crouched beside her, checking her ankle with a careful, almost apologetic touch.

"You should stay off that," he muttered. "I think you just twisted it, but you're lucky you didn't break anything."

Nyx scowled, frustrated by her own weakness. “I can handle it.”

Felix gave her a wry smile, one eyebrow quirking up. “Oh yeah? Because the way you face-planted just now really says ‘total badass.’”

Nyx’s cheeks flushed, half from embarrassment, half from annoyance. But the sharpness in her expression faded as Felix sat back on his heels, considering their situation.

“We need a place to talk,” he said quietly. “Somewhere safe. Somewhere they won’t find us, where we can plan... whatever it is we’re going to do next.”

Nyx hesitated. The old fear twisted inside her, the one that had always warned her to keep her distance, to stay on the sidelines. But then she met Felix’s eyes—those deep, determined eyes, shining with a stubborn light she hadn’t noticed before—and she knew he wasn’t going to back down. Not now. Not when the truth was staring them both in the face.

“There’s the old observatory,” she murmured, her voice low. “It’s been abandoned since the last principal was here. No cameras, no microphones. No one ever goes there.”

Felix’s eyes lit up. “Perfect. That’s where we’ll meet.”

Nyx hesitated again, glancing down at her hands. “But you can’t—” She bit her lip. “You can’t think this is anything more than... you know. Just working together. Friends. Nothing else.”

Her words felt clumsy, awkward, but she had to say them. The idea of Felix seeing her as more than the reckless troublemaker she was made her stomach knot up in ways she didn’t understand. She wasn’t used to anyone looking out for her, much less someone like him.

Felix blinked, surprised by her sudden declaration. Then a slow, mischievous smile spread across his face—the first genuine smile she’d seen from him in a long time.

“Relax, Nyx,” he said, voice low and teasing. “I mean, if I was falling for you, wouldn’t I be swooning right now over how gracefully you fell on your face?”

Nyx’s jaw dropped. “Excuse me?!”

Felix grinned wider, leaning back against the shelves like he was the king of the world. “I’m just saying, if anyone’s going to impress me, it’s gotta be with style. And your trip-and-fall act? Definitely not swoon-worthy.”

Nyx stared at him for a beat—and then, against her will, a laugh burst from her lips. A real laugh, loud and

clear, echoing softly in the dim hallway. It startled even her, but once it started, she couldn't stop.

Felix's grin softened, his expression shifting to something gentler. "There," he said quietly. "That's better."

Nyx's laughter died down, but a lingering smile remained. For the first time in what felt like forever, the weight of rules and secrets felt a little lighter.

"Fine," she said, wiping at her eyes, her voice catching with amusement. "But you still owe me a plan."

Felix stood and offered her his hand. "Deal. Let's get you back to the trip."

Nyx hesitated only a second longer before taking his hand, letting him pull her to her feet. Their next move would be risky, dangerous even. But for the first time, she wasn't facing it alone.

CHAPTER 5



The night pressed down heavy over the school campus, quiet and cold, like a breath held too long. The path that twisted around the east field was dimly lit – a few reluctant lanterns flickering above in yellow halos. Beyond them, trees stood motionless, their branches etched like claw marks against the navy sky.

Nyx was hunched slightly against the cold, wincing as she dragged her foot. She and Felix had made a plan. A quick, believable lie: she'd pretend the injury had happened while walking near the west path, where people could “accidentally” find her. No one would question that. The location was monitored, and safe enough. It would seem real.

Now, limping with determination, Nyx reached the spot and sat down carefully, grimacing as her weight shifted. The pain was raw, but she had to look composed.

Not far off, behind the low wall near the field's edge, Felix waited. Distant, as the rules demanded. Boys on one side of campus, girls on the other. Talking was discouraged.

Proximity was punishable. But Felix watched from the shadows, hands stuffed in his jacket pockets, muscles taut. He wouldn't let her go unseen.

He could only hope someone else found her first. And someone did.

A group of girls, heading back from evening prayer, spotted her silhouette slouched at the path's bend.

"Nyx?" one of them called, half-startled.

Nyx raised her head weakly, giving a strained smile. "I tripped on a rock or something. My ankle... I think it's sprained."

"Oh God," another murmured, rushing to her side. "We'll take you to the dispensary. Can you walk?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

As the girls surrounded her, offering support and murmuring reassurances, Felix stepped farther into the dark, unseen. His part was done.

But something was wrong.

Even as the others fussed over Nyx, lifting her carefully, Felix felt a sudden shift in the air. Like the silence had sharpened. Like the night itself was listening.

He turned slightly, eyes scanning the trees. Nothing moved. But a heaviness settled at the base of his spine, an old instinct screaming quietly in the back of his mind.

He'd felt this before. Once.

Long ago, when his instincts had saved him from something he still didn't dare name. Now, it pulsed in him again. Subtle. Sinister. Real.

Nyx, now partially carried, was being led toward the dispensary at the far end of campus. Her arm draped across another girl's shoulders, her face pale but calm. She glanced once over her shoulder — toward the trees. Not toward Felix. She couldn't risk it.

But Felix saw the flicker in her eyes. She felt it too.

Somewhere far — or perhaps very, very near — the shadows deepened. The room was dark. No windows. No doors in view. Just a tight square of light cast from a candle, flickering like a heartbeat.

A hand emerged from the darkness. Pale. Gloved. It reached across a smooth, wooden surface and lifted something delicate: a silver locket, shaped like a heart. The chain coiled like a serpent across the table as the figure turned it over, thumb brushing the metal.

Click.

Inside the locket was a photograph, slightly crumpled at the corner. A candid shot – Nyx, in mid-laugh, eyes closed, head tilted. The kind of joy that looked effortless. Eternal.

The figure didn't speak immediately.

He studied her face, every detail burned into his memory long before this moment.

Then, with something that could almost be mistaken for tenderness, he lifted the locket and pressed it to his lips.

“Get well soon, baby...” he whispered.

His voice was soft. Hollow. It echoed slightly in the small space, as if spoken from inside a well. Or a confession box.

The flame of the candle bent sideways for a moment, though there was no wind.

He stood motionless for a time. Then, without warning, he clenched the locket in his fist. Not enough to crush it – just enough for the metal to bite into skin.

Outside the glow, there was nothing but shadow.
No indication of where he stood. No window to peer
through. No view of the outside world.

But he knew.

He knew she'd been hurt.

He knew who had helped her.

And he knew it wasn't supposed to happen this
way.

Back on campus, Felix felt it again.

Like a chill along his ribs, threading through his
bones. The hairs on his arms stood up beneath his
sleeves.

He turned toward the dark trees again, breathing
slowly, forcing calm. But he couldn't shake it.

It wasn't just worry for Nyx. It wasn't guilt for
bending the rules. This was different. The kind of
dread that had nothing to do with logic.

He stared into the shadows, knowing — deep down
— someone was staring back.

CHAPTER 6



The girls' hostel buzzed with the usual nighttime chatter — voices rising and falling like waves against the stone walls, heated opinions passed like secret notes.

"Seriously," one girl muttered from her bunk, braiding her damp hair, "boys are literally incapable of normal conversations. All ego, zero empathy."

Another giggled, sprawling on her bed upside-down. "And they think they're doing us a favor by existing. Did you see Riyan today? He couldn't even spell '*discipline*' on the blackboard!"

"Ugh," said a third, her face buried in a pillow, "they act like they're gods' gift to this school. I'd rather fall for a mosquito."

Laughter erupted around the room. Pillows flew. The conversation was heated but familiar – ritualistic, even. Nighttime bonding forged through mutual complaints and half-truths.

In the far corner, standing with her crutches beneath the dim hostel lamp, Nyx listened silently, a faint smile playing on her lips. She didn't speak, didn't interrupt – just balanced carefully on one foot, her ankle wrapped and tender, watching them through a lens they couldn't see.

She knew the truth.

She knew Felix had stood nearby in the cold, not saying a word, just making sure she was safe. She knew he didn't ask for thanks, didn't look for excuses to talk to her. And yet, he was there. Always there, in the unspoken spaces where real care lived.

She leaned against the wall, her gaze distant, her smile laced with irony. "Boys are dumb," one girl added loudly. "All of them."

Nyx didn't disagree.

But she didn't agree either.

Meanwhile, in the boys' hostel, the air was equally electric — but laced with a different tone: the smug bravado of boys pretending not to care.

“I’m telling you, girls know exactly what they’re doing,” said a senior, his voice dripping with self-assurance. “They wear those fake smiles and then BAM — you’re in love and failing exams.”

“They don’t even like you back, bro,” another chimed in. “They just want the attention. Power games.”

Felix sat in the corner of the common room, eyes glazed over, a half-finished assignment in front of him. He wasn’t listening. Not really. Just enough to notice the irony.

“They pretend to be sweet,” someone said, “but they’re always plotting.” “I’d rather date my bike,” another boy joked, drawing laughter.

Felix quietly closed his notebook.

He stood, grabbed his water bottle, and left the room without a word.

His dorm was small — a thin bed, metal shelves, and a barred window that barely let in moonlight. The mattress groaned as he flopped back onto it, fingers

digging into his jacket pocket until he found a half-empty strip of bubblegum.

He popped one into his mouth and chewed slowly, staring at the ceiling. The rhythmic chewing was comforting — repetitive, thoughtless, like erasing a chalkboard filled with noise.

But his mind didn't erase. Not tonight.

It drifted back — not to the boys in the common room or their cynical laughter — but to Nyx. To the exact moment, hours ago, when she had looked him in the eye and said softly:

"Felix... I don't want you to be more than my friend."

He did not remember the exact wordings, but she meant so...

No games. No flirtation. Just honesty.

He had just joked then, like a good friend should. Now, lying here in the dark, he repeated her words to himself again. *"I don't want you to be more than my friend."*

He blew a small bubble. It popped quietly against his lip.

Nyx wasn't like the girls the other boys talked about. She wasn't a "pleasure seeker," whatever that even meant. She didn't bat her eyes or flirt just to feel powerful. She didn't lead people on.

She was sharp. Quietly rebellious. She had rules – not for others, but for herself. And maybe, just maybe, that made things worse.

Because in his *mildest, deepest, most uninvited* dreams, Felix had imagined something else. Not love – not really. Just... a closeness. A connection that outlived this school, these rules.

But he knew now: even if he ever did fall – accidentally, silently – he'd never tell her. He'd swallow it whole.

Not to protect himself. To protect *her* trust.

That truth sat heavy on his chest. Not that he wanted her. But that he might *never* get to speak, even if he did.

He pulled the blanket tighter, chewing harder now, as if the gum could soften the knot in his stomach.

A soft knock interrupted the silence. Felix groaned.

Then the door creaked open just slightly. A wide-eyed junior, no more than thirteen, peeked in.

"Felix..." the boy whispered. Felix raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"I can't sleep. Can you read something for me?"

Felix sighed, then smirked. “You’re not a toddler.”

“I’m scared of exams,” the boy mumbled, stepping into the room holding a worn paperback in his hands. “Read this?”

Felix blinked.

The cover read: *Pride and Prejudice* — Kids' Edition. Illustrated. Simplified. Charming in its childish way.

Felix rolled his eyes. “This is a girls' book.” “Please.”

He sighed. “Fine. Come sit.”

The boy settled beside the bed while Felix opened the book and began reading in a flat, mock-dramatic voice:

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife...”

The words flowed without effort. Despite the simplification, something in the story caught him.

As he read about Darcy’s pride and Elizabeth’s sharp tongue, his mind wandered.

He imagined Nyx in Elizabeth’s place — independent, misjudged, quietly defiant. And himself as Darcy — composed, cold, yet seething with something he dared not name.

He flipped pages, but in his head, Nyx walked the halls of Maplewood High, limping slightly, mocking his silence with her usual half-smile.

He smiled to himself, despite everything.

“Felix?” Felix blinked.

The junior had been watching him with a strange, serious expression. “Promise me something?”

Felix raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Promise me you’ll never fall in love with a girl.” He laughed. “Why?”

The boy shrugged, defensive. “Because... if you get a girlfriend, you’ll ignore your friends. That’s what always happens.”

Felix leaned back, staring at the ceiling again.

“I promise,” he said, smirking. “I will *never* fall for anyone.” He meant it like a joke. A half-truth. A vow to a child.

But somewhere in the part of him that still ached from silence and unspoken things, he wasn’t sure if it was a lie.

The boy grinned and darted back to his own room. Felix stayed on his bed, book still in hand.

THE HALL OF LIES

He chewed another piece of gum, stared at the ceiling, and whispered to himself: “Never.”

The word echoed. Soft. Hollow. Unconvincing.

CHAPTER 7



The room was silent, except for the slow, metronomic ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner. The hands pointed to midnight, but no one here was preparing for sleep.

The principal's office was dimly lit — not by accident. A single desk lamp cast a sharp circle of light onto the lacquered surface of a mahogany desk, where a leather-bound ledger sat open. The walls, lined with stiff portraits of past headmasters, seemed to frown down disapprovingly at the men gathered inside.

But Principal Grieves did not frown. He smiled.

It was the kind of smile that never reached the eyes — a thin, brittle curve of the lips, like a blade unsheathing itself slowly.

“So,” he said, breaking the silence with a voice as slick as oil, “let’s discuss the next rotation.”

Across from him sat three men — colleagues, advisors, enablers. Each one wearing the school’s traditional crest pinned to his blazer, each one with bloodless expressions hardened by routine.

Grieves tapped the ledger gently, his long fingers rhythmic and slow. “Ten students. That’s our quota. The sponsor in the Gulf has increased the payout again. Premiums for girls under seventeen. More if they’re bilingual.”

One of the men, older and gray-haired, shifted uncomfortably. “Should we... maybe wait another semester? There’s talk—some students—”

Grieves’ smile widened, and the room went cold.

“Talk’? Let them talk. Let them chase ghost stories and rumors. What matters,” he said, flipping a page of the ledger, “is control. And profit.”

He leaned back in his leather chair, shadows curling around his silhouette like obedient pets.

“Do you know,” he began casually, “how easy it was to remove that rusting old fool from this chair?”

The men remained silent.

Grieves chuckled. “The former principal. What was his name? Ah yes. Dr. Andrew. All honor and

legacy and long-winded speeches. He cared, you see. Thought this school was a sanctuary.”

He laced his fingers together and stared past them, as if revisiting an old memory with fond amusement.

“So, I buried him — professionally, of course. Whispers of health decline, some forged letters, a subtle hint to the Board about misappropriated funds. And just like that...” He snapped his fingers. “Retirement.”

He chuckled again, low and raspy.

“And now...” He slid the ledger toward them. “Now this school is exactly what it was *meant* to be.”

One of the men cleared his throat, trying not to look too closely at the column labeled: *NEXT DRAFT – PRIORITY STUDENTS*.

“Why do you do it, Grieves?” the youngest of them asked, voice almost inaudible. “You already have more money than you can ever spend.”

Grieves turned to him, smiling more openly now — a performance of sincerity. “Because money is not the goal,” he said softly. “It’s the *genesis*. The foundation. With money, we erase the irrelevant — rules, laws, conscience. With money, we build an empire where we answer to no one.” He leaned forward.

“Besides,” he added, voice almost playful, “they’re not children. They’re *inventory*. Raw material the world tosses into classrooms and expects miracles. But I see *value*. Real, untapped, international value.”

He tapped the top name on the list. “Nyx M.”

The room stilled.

Grievus’ eyes glittered under the lamplight.

“She’s rare,” he said slowly. “Good balance of intelligence, beauty, and obedience — when needed. Resilient. Quiet. Independent, yes... but not rebellious. A collector’s dream.”

He paused, letting the room breathe the horror without flinching.

“The Gulf buyer mentioned he was looking for someone *exceptional* this time,” he added. “Nyx fits.”

The older advisor frowned. “She’s already under medical observation. Sprained ankle. Might not—”

“She’ll heal,” Grievus said, waving a hand. “Pain teaches obedience.”

He slid a photo across the table. A printout of her student ID recently updated. Her face stared up from the page — calm, unaware.

“She’s the keystone of this shipment.” The men said nothing.

Grieves stood slowly, walking to the window behind him. Though the blinds were mostly drawn, he peeked through the slats. Beyond the manicured trees and the field cloaked in moonlight, two buildings stood in strict opposition: the boys' and girls' hostels. Lights flickered faintly. Students slept. Dreamed. Trusted.

“Funny, isn’t it,” he mused, “how they cling to their little rebellions — sneaking letters, breaking curfews, stealing glances across the field... They think they’re rebelling against tradition.”

He turned back toward the room.

“But what they *don’t* know,” he said, voice lower now, colder, “is that the rules don’t exist to keep them apart.”

“They exist to keep them *distracted*.”

He closed the blinds, locking the night out.

The room held its breath.

“I don’t care what stories the children whisper,” he said. “Or what games they play. So long as they never see the machine. That’s the brilliance of it all.”

He returned to his seat, resting his palms on the ledger like a priest at an altar. “We are *not* educators,” he said quietly. “We are merchants.”

Then, after a pause:

“Confirm Nyx for shipment. Code her as Item #7.”

“And the rest?” the gray-haired man asked, voice hollow.

“We’ll finalize by Friday. Use subtle discipline cases — make it look like punishment or transfer. Girls are easier. Boys need drug frames or fights to justify relocation. Either way, I want them tagged and ready.”

He checked his watch.

“Security will deliver the shipment manifest to the courier’s van by 2 a.m. next week. All digital traces are clean. All surveillance logs wiped.”

He stood, signaling the meeting’s end.

The advisors filed out slowly, their silence heavier than words. Grieves remained, alone in the dim glow of the lamp.

He turned the page of the ledger again.

Another list.

This one labeled:

POTENTIAL RISKS

- **Nyx M.** — Still under observation. Monitor interactions.

Grieves tapped his finger beside Nyx’s name.

“Loyalty,” he murmured, “is the most dangerous weapon of all.” Then, slowly, he reached into his desk drawer.

Inside lay a second photo of Nyx – not an ID this time, but a surveillance still. She was limping through the hallway, head bowed, crutch under her arm.

Grievous stared at it.

Not with desire.

But with ownership.

CHAPTER 8



The morning sun filtered through the narrow windows of the school corridor like golden blades, slicing through dust motes and shadows. The campus looked the same as it always had — old stone walls, red-bricked corners, neat hedges trimmed to near-unreal symmetry.

But for Nyx, nothing felt the same.

She walked slowly down the hallway, her black shoe tapping a measured rhythm on the tiles. Her ankle, though still stiff, held her weight well enough. She didn't limp, not exactly — just flinched every few steps, a silent wince that flashed across her face like a breeze across glass.

A few passing students threw her polite nods or brief glances of sympathy. Nyx gave nothing back.

She reached her locker, dialed the stiff combination, and opened the metal door with a click. The inside was a neat grid of notebooks, a faded photo of her old cat taped near the top, and a schedule folded into a clear plastic sleeve.

She scanned the list with narrowed eyes.

1st: Math 2nd: English 3rd: Music

Her stomach fluttered. Not with nerves — with anticipation. Music meant Felix.

The only class they shared because boys's teacher was on leave and their coordinator had organized combined lessons. The only time they could exchange anything real without guards or teachers breathing down their necks.

She closed the locker gently and turned toward the staircase.

The first two lessons passed slowly. Math was taught by the ever-droning Mr. Reid, who smelled vaguely of boiled eggs and chalk dust. Nyx solved the problems easily, her hand gliding over the paper in quick, practiced movements. Her mind, however, was

elsewhere – flipping through risks, routines, and escape routes.

In English, she sat near the window and copied down poetry analysis while the teacher recited Blake's *The Tyger* with theatrical intensity. Across the room, she spotted Felix, heading to the music room for the lessons

.

They hadn't spoken yet – not properly – since the ankle incident. It had been too risky. But that would change in Music.

As the bell rang for third period, Nyx joined the stream of students walking down the narrow corridor toward the music room.

She pushed open the door, stepped inside— And felt every pair of eyes lock onto her.

Silence.

Nyx blinked. The usual chatter died instantly. Even the teacher – Miss Karla – was frozen near the piano, arms crossed.

Nyx mouthed *What?* to her friend Ava, who sat near the front. Ava pointed urgently to the chalkboard behind her.

There, written in clear, elegant script:

**TODAY: STUDENT PRESENTATIONS –
Original Rhythms & Beats**

(Individual performance required. Evaluation counts for term grade.) Nyx's heart sank.

Damn. She had completely forgotten.

Her hand flew to her forehead in disbelief. She'd been so wrapped in strategy, caution, and adrenaline the night before, the assignment had vanished from memory.

Ava gave her a sympathetic look and mouthed; *you got this.*

Nyx swallowed hard, gave a small nod, and walked stiffly to the back of the classroom where the drum kits were lined up like a firing squad.

She sat down slowly, flexing her ankle – not great, but manageable. Miss Karla raised a brow. “Nyx M. Are you ready?”

Nyx glanced up, smiled with quiet confidence. “Yes, ma’am.” And then she began.

Her hands moved with delicate assurance at first – testing the surface. Then rhythm took over. The classroom air seemed to shift with the first set of sharp,

clean beats. Her fingers struck the snare with playful defiance, then danced across the toms with a rhythm that wasn't just technically correct — it was *alive*.

Boom. Tap. Tap-tap. Boom. Tap. A sharp double roll.

Then silence.

And then—

A syncopated rhythm — fast, intricate, light — as if she were playing *thoughts* instead of notes.

The class leaned forward.

Even Miss Karla uncrossed her arms.

Her ankle throbbed slightly with each kick, but she didn't stop. Her eyes closed. She let her shoulders sway. Her head moved with the beat.

It wasn't just performance. It was escape.

It was war. It was *her*.

When she finally stopped, the last beat echoing faintly off the wooden walls, Nyx let her hands rest on the drum skins. Her cheeks were flushed. A tiny breath of air puffed out of her lips.

For a moment, silence. Then—

Clapping.

Loud. Sincere. Scattered at first — then everyone joined in.

Even the students who never paid attention. Even the ones who usually rolled their eyes at performance days.

Ava beamed, giving her a silent thumbs-up.

Felix — seated at the far end of the row near the guitar stand — tapped his desk lightly, the faintest smirk on his face.

CHAPTER 9



The final claps from Nyx's performance still echoed faintly when the music room door creaked open – not gently, not politely, but with the stiff, foreboding groan of rusted hinges pushed by force.

All heads turned.

There, in the doorway, stood Principal Grieves.

His tall frame blocked the hall light like an eclipse. A faint wrinkle twitched near his mouth

– not quite a frown, not quite a smirk. His hands were clasped behind his back, the stiff collar of his coat turned perfectly, not a crease out of place.

He did not step in at first. He *loomed*.

Miss Karla stepped forward, startled. "Sir?"

“Why is there applause echoing down the corridor?” Grieves asked, his voice calm – too calm.

Miss Karla stammered slightly. “Ah – today is student presentation day, Principal. The music elective—”

“I’m aware of the schedule,” he cut her off. His eyes scanned the room, like a hawk looking for weakness.

Then he saw it.

Boys and girls – *clapping together*. Sharing benches. Sharing a *moment*. His jaw tightened. “Disgraceful.”

A nervous ripple ran through the class.

He stepped fully into the room, polished shoes clicking against the tiled floor, and raised his voice:

“Effective immediately,” he said, “boys will attend all future classes in a separate building. There will be no more mixed sessions. This... intermingling ends now.”

A stunned silence dropped across the room.

Ava gasped. One of the boys at the back muttered, “What the hell...” Felix sat frozen, his hand still on the desk.

But Nyx... Nyx stood.

The pain in her ankle screamed against her nerves, but she stood.

“Why?” she said clearly, her voice calm but sharp. “Why are you separating us like this? What law did we break? Applauding a student?”

Principal Grieves turned to her, slowly. His eyes narrowed. “Sit down, Miss M.”

“No.”

A soft, collective breath sucked inward across the room.

Grieves stepped forward, only two feet from her now. “Sit. Down.”

Nyx wavered slightly. Her knee was trembling, her muscles burning. But her eyes — her eyes were steady.

“This isn’t about rules,” she said. “This is about control. And fear. You’re afraid of unity. Of anyone not playing by your script.”

Miss Karla tried to interject. “Sir, perhaps we should—”

“Enough,” Grieves snapped. Then he turned back to Nyx and leaned in, lowering his voice just enough to sound venomous.

“You’re quite bold for a girl who still limps.”

Nyx lifted her chin. “You’re quite scared for a man with all the power.” That’s when it happened.

That smile.

That horrible, curling grin – the one Grieves only wore when he knew the game was rigged and the dice were fake.

“Is that it, Nyx?” he said mockingly. “Do you love these boys so much? Is that what this is? Defiance born of desire?”

Students stared in horror. Even Miss Karla’s face went pale.

Nyx flushed, but didn’t look away.

Grieves turned to the boys now, scanning their faces with clinical detachment. “Let’s test that, shall we?”

He stepped back toward the center of the room and clapped his hands once, sharp.

“You,” he said to all the boys, “have five minutes to leave this room. If you stay, you receive an automatic D-minus in this subject. That means extracurriculars, final ranks – everything you dream of – flushed.”

No one moved.

He smiled again – darker now. “Tick-tock,” he said softly.

Five seconds passed. Ten.

A few boys looked at one another. Whispers stirred. But Felix did not move.

Neither did ten others.

They stayed seated. Still. Silent. Loyal. Grievus's smile faded into something colder.

He walked to their row and leaned forward, speaking low so only they could hear: "If you do not leave this room in the next ten seconds... she gets expelled."

The room tilted.

The words echoed too loud in Felix's ears. *She gets expelled.*

The ten boys looked at each other. One of them stood up.

Then another. And another.

Until only Felix remained.

Nyx stared at him.

Felix didn't look at her — not directly. Just at the ground. His jaw clenched. Then he, too, stood.

His chair scraped back quietly. And he walked out.

No words. No glance.

Just the dull thud of retreating footsteps.

A single tear broke the surface of Nyx's lower lash line — but she didn't let it fall. Not yet.

Grievus turned to her, triumphant.

“There,” he said softly. “Now you’ve learned something real.” She stumbled slightly, her leg giving out beneath her.

And finally, she dropped to her knees.

The pain in her body was nothing compared to the silence. No one dared move.

Her head lowered. Her shoulders trembled.

And for the first time — not in secret, not hidden behind courage or sarcasm or strategy — Nyx cried.

Not because she had lost.

But because the cost of staying human in this place was far greater than she'd ever admitted. Miss Karla reached for her instinctively.

Grieves stopped her with one hand.

“No one helps her,” he said coldly. “Let her understand what disobedience brings.” And with that, he turned and walked out, leaving the music room hollow and echoing.

CHAPTER 10



The hallway outside the music room was quiet now.

Felix stood in it, his back against the cold stone wall, the overhead lights buzzing faintly above him. He stared at the floor — at nothing, really — eyes glazed, thoughts chaotic. His jaw ached from clenching too long. His hands were fists in his pockets, tight enough to make his fingers numb.

You left her.

The words echoed in his mind like a chorus he couldn't silence. Over and over.

You left her.

He replayed it all: the moment Grieves whispered the threat, the suffocating pressure pressing in from

every angle, the dread crawling up his spine as the boys stood and walked, and finally—his own feet moving.

Voluntarily. Abandoning her. Nyx.

The one person who had trusted him. The one person who *understood*.

A few more students brushed past him in the corridor. He didn't look at them. Couldn't. His heart was screaming. His mind was on fire.

I had to, he told himself for the hundredth time. If I stayed, she would've been expelled. That's what he said. I was protecting her.

But the voice in his head — the one that still belonged to the boy who once believed in courage and loyalty — whispered: *Then why does it feel like you betrayed her?*

He turned, not even knowing why. And that's when he saw her.

Through the small rectangular window in the music room door, just above eye level — he caught a glimpse.

Nyx.

On the floor. Still kneeling.

Her body trembling slightly, her arms folded into herself like she was trying to hold her soul together. Her long hair had fallen over her face, but he could see

it — her shoulders shaking. Quiet sobs that no one could hear but that shattered the silence of his chest.

Ava was crouched beside her now, gently trying to lift her. But Nyx wasn't moving. Felix's breath caught.

He backed up, as if he'd been punched. He had never seen her cry.

Not Nyx.

Nyx was fire. Clever remarks and reckless eyes. She was the only one who challenged the world instead of folding under it. The girl who once told him not to fall in love with her — because trust was heavier than affection.

And now she was on the floor, broken because of *him*.

He pressed his back to the wall again and slid down until he was sitting, arms resting on his knees. His head dropped.

He didn't care that his vision was blurring now. He didn't care if someone saw.

He had done what they all did. What the system *expected* of them. He followed the rules, bent under pressure, saved his own image — by letting someone else bleed for it.

And Nyx...

She was probably thinking exactly that. That he chose his grades.

His reputation. His future.

Over *her*.

Inside the music room, Nyx stared at the cold floor tiles, wet with tears that had long since burned through her armor.

How could he?

How could Felix leave?

He wasn't like the others. Or so she thought. He was quiet, yes — confusing and frustrating sometimes — but he *listened*. He *cared*.

He was the only one she had dared to let see past her defenses. The only one she thought might *actually* stay.

But when the moment came... He left.

Just like the rest.

Grieves had won. Again. Not with shackles or guards this time — but with fear. With silence. With impossible choices.

Nyx closed her eyes.

And all she could see was Felix's back, walking away. That sight would haunt her longer than any pain in her leg.

And still, through the glass, two hearts beat in fractured rhythm. Neither spoke.

Neither moved.

But somewhere, in the broken space between guilt and grief — they both felt the thread pull taut.

Too tight to break. Too fragile to hold.

And the war was far from over. But tonight?

Tonight, they cried. Together.

Alone.

CHAPTER 11



The corridor near the dispensary was quiet, bathed in the faint, medicinal scent of antiseptic and iodine. Sunlight leaked in from a narrow window, spilling stripes of pale gold across the tiled floor. Nyx limped slightly as she walked, her ankle freshly bandaged under her sock, every step still a reminder of yesterday – and everything it cost her.

She turned the corner slowly. And froze.

There he was. Felix.

Leaning against the wall with his usual slouched posture, arms crossed, one foot propped behind him. His friends – a small circle of boys who usually hovered around like loose satellites – were nearby, laughing

softly about something unimportant. They didn't notice her at first.

But Felix did.

His head lifted slightly. Their eyes locked.

A quiet pause dropped between them like a pebble in water — small, but deep. Nyx swallowed and looked away.

She walked past them, headed toward the floor's exit door, but— “Nyx,” came Felix's voice, low and uncertain.

She didn't turn.

He stepped away from the group, ignoring the curious looks. “Nyx,” he said again — not commanding, not pleading. Just *asking*. She paused. Her shoulder tense. Her jaw set.

She didn't know what made her nod. Maybe the way his voice cracked slightly. Maybe the exhaustion. Maybe the ache of needing to know *why*.

Felix reached out — not grabbing her, just guiding — and led her quietly down a narrow side path, where the walls of two old buildings met at a sharp right angle. A tiny alley — too tight for more than two people. Hidden from both the dorms and the dispensary.

She stopped at the end, where the wall curved slightly, her arms folded across her chest. He stood a few feet away, unsure where to begin.

For a moment, all they heard was the faint hum of the campus beyond — and their own breathing.

Finally, Nyx spoke.

“I trusted you,” she said.

The words weren’t sharp. They weren’t angry. They were... tired. Cracked around the edges. Felix looked down at his shoes, then back up at her.

“I know.”

“You walked away.”

“I know,” he said again, voice soft.

She let the silence stretch again. Not to punish him — just because she didn’t know what else to say.

“I thought...” Her voice caught. “I thought you were different.” “I wanted to be.”

Nyx blinked.

That, she hadn’t expected.

Felix ran a hand through his hair, breathing out hard. “I wanted to stay. I *did* stay. At first. But then—he said you’d get expelled. And I panicked. I thought if I left, maybe... maybe it would save you.”

Nyx stared at him.

He wasn't making excuses. He wasn't defending himself. He was just being *honest*. "You still left."

"I know," he whispered. "I regret it more than anything." She looked away. "You should."

He nodded.

A moment passed. His voice came again — quieter this time. "I saw you cry."

She tensed.

"I saw you, through the glass." He swallowed. "And it broke me. I wanted to run in. I wanted to drag him back and scream at him for doing that to you. But I knew... I didn't have the right."

Now *she* looked at *him*.

His face was raw. Unfiltered. No masks. No sarcastic smirks. Just the version of him she rarely saw — and always wondered if it was real.

She stepped closer, still wincing slightly from her leg.

"I would've stayed," she said. "If it had been you on the floor, I would've stayed." "I know."

She exhaled, slow and uneven. The air between them buzzed — not with tension now, but with something gentler. Sadder.

“Why are we even doing this?” she asked, voice barely above a whisper. “Hiding. Fighting. Pretending we don’t care when we do.”

Felix blinked slowly.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. “Because it’s easier than admitting I care more than I’m supposed to?”

A pause.

“And because if I fall for you, I’m scared I’ll ruin everything.” Nyx’s eyes welled slightly, but she didn’t let the tears fall this time.

“I’m already ruined,” she said. “But I think you might be the only person I’d trust to break me again.”

Felix stepped closer.

One hand moved into his pocket. He fished something out, looking at it as if considering whether it was too silly.

Then, silently, he held it out to her.

A bar of chocolate — slightly crushed, a little warm. Nyx looked at it, then up at him.

“Peace offering?” he said. “Or guilt snack. Your choice.” She took it slowly, lips twitching at the corners.

“Both,” she said. He smiled.

And this time, it *reached his eyes*.

For the first time in days, maybe weeks, Nyx let herself breathe. Really breathe. Not in survival mode. Not calculating exits. Just—*breathe*.

She broke off a square and handed it back to him. He shook his head.

“No,” he said. “That one’s for you.” She arched an eyebrow. “You sure?” He nodded. “I’ll earn mine. Later.” Then, after a beat:

“For now, I just wanted to say... I’m still here.” And for the first time since the nightmare began— She believed him.

CHAPTER 12



They stood side by side in the narrow space between the two walls, the quiet wrapping around them like a blanket they didn't ask for but desperately needed.

As she finished the last bite, Nyx glanced at him.

"So..." she began, licking a smudge of chocolate off her thumb, "how are we going to meet now?"

Felix looked at her, brows raised.

"With the boys moved to that crumbling side building, and all our classes split by gender," she continued, her voice thoughtful but tinged with frustration, "Grievus made sure we barely breathe the same air."

Felix shrugged. "We'll figure something out. Secret passageways, hidden laundry routes, maybe I'll disguise myself as a janitor."

Nyx cracked a small smile. "You'd make a terrible janitor. Too clean." "I'd wear a fake mustache."

Nyx chuckled. "You'd look like a poorly disguised cartoon villain." "I'd still be better than Grieves."

She laughed — not the careful, soft laugh she usually gave — but a real one. Then, all at once, the laughter faded. Her lips parted like she was about to say something else, something important.

But she didn't.

She closed her mouth. Looked away.

Felix tilted his head. "What was that?" Nyx avoided his gaze. "What was what?"

"That whole... open mouth, then 'nope never mind' thing," he said, grinning. "You just did the classic *I have something earth-shattering to say but I won't say it because it'll hurt us both* face."

She sighed, softly. Then glanced up at him.

"I just... I hope you're this happy next month too."

The smile faltered on Felix's lips, though a ghost of it lingered. "What do you mean?" he asked, his voice dropping.

Nyx's gaze dropped to her hands. She rubbed her fingers together nervously, the chocolate still lingering faintly on her fingertips.

"I'm leaving next month." Felix blinked. "What?"

She continued, quieter now.

"I overheard two staff members talking. They thought no one was around." She hesitated. "They said I'm one of the next students... to be sold."

It hit him like a slap. The smile faded.

Entirely.

His lips parted but no words came. He knew that she was the next target, but he did not think that Grieves would do it too soon. His hands hung uselessly at his sides. And his eyes — those quiet, unreadable eyes — welled with sudden tears.

She looked at him sideways and gave a soft, fragile laugh. "Why do you always cry when it comes to me?"

Felix shook his head slowly, as if trying to stop everything from crumbling in his chest. Nyx turned to him more fully now, watching him, her voice quieter, more unsure.

"I also heard something else," she said.

He looked up, barely able to meet her gaze.

“I heard you’ve written my name... behind every one of your notebooks.” He looked away, a hand quickly brushing under his eye.

“Is it true?” she asked. Silence.

Then her voice broke it, smaller now. “Felix... do you love me?”

The question lingered in the air, suspended like mist. And neither of them breathed.

CHAPTER 13



The question hung between them – fragile, unfinished, delicate.

“Felix... do you love me?”

He didn’t look away this time.

But he didn’t rush his answer either. Finally, he spoke.

“No.”

His voice was quiet. Even. Almost too calm.

Nyx blinked, her lips parting slightly. A flicker of something passed through her eyes – disappointment? Relief? She couldn’t even tell.

Felix gave a small, crooked smile. "I don't love you. I just... get a bit watery because if you go, I'll lose a very cool enemy."

Nyx stared at him, then burst out laughing. The kind of laugh that made her lean against the wall, her bad leg almost giving out.

"A *cool enemy*?" she echoed between laughs.

He grinned, more relaxed now. "I mean, yeah. You insult me with vocabulary I don't understand. You blackmail me with food. And you almost broke my nose once during dodgeball."

Nyx wiped her eyes. "Best enemies ever." "The best," Felix agreed with mock solemnity.

They stood in silence for a few seconds more, the air lighter now, easier to breathe. The moment that had once threatened to fracture everything now simply settled into a strange, new kind of closeness — one where neither had to define what they were, only that they were in it together.

"So," Nyx said, pulling her hair behind her ears, "how are we gonna manage now? The segregation's strict. The boys are practically in a different time zone."

Felix straightened a little. "Terrace."

"Huh?"

“We can meet on the terrace. Late night, no patrols. One corner of the east wing roof connects close enough to both buildings. I know a way up.”

Nyx smirked. “Of course you do.”

He shrugged. “Also... letters. We can pass letters. Through Ava or one of the others.” Nyx nodded slowly. “I’ll talk to the girls. Get a few on board. You...?”

“I’ll handle the boys,” he said. “Even the dramatic ones.” Just then, a voice came from the end of the narrow alley.

“I *knew* it. You two are planning your romantic little night rendezvous.”

It was Ryan — Felix’s friend, who’d been standing guard at the corner. His arms were crossed, a smug grin on his face.

Nyx snorted. “Wow. He even used the word ‘rendezvous.’ I’m impressed.” “Shut up, Ryan,” Felix groaned, shoving a hand through his hair.

Ryan winked. “Hey, no shame, man. Just remember, if you two elope, I get credit for guarding your love story.”

“Get lost,” Felix muttered, but the corners of his mouth twitched. Ryan disappeared back around the corner, still chuckling.

Nyx leaned back against the wall, smiling faintly. “You boys really don’t know how to mind your own business, do you?”

“Nope,” Felix said. “That’s why I don’t trust them with snacks, secrets, or surveillance.” She laughed again.

For a few seconds, the world felt simple. Manageable. Like maybe — just maybe — the impossible could be handled with careful coordination, bad jokes, and chocolate-fueled courage.

Then Felix, still looking at her, tilted his head slightly. “Can I ask you something?”

Nyx raised an eyebrow. “If it’s about my blood type or number of crushes, I’m walking out.” “No,” he said, smiling slightly. “Just... something personal.”

She hesitated. “Depends on how personal.”

Felix shifted, leaning a bit closer. His voice softened. “Why don’t you ever talk about your family?”

The smile dropped from Nyx’s face in an instant. Her jaw tensed.

Felix noticed immediately, but it was too late to pull the words back. Nyx stood up straighter. Her eyes no longer playful.

“That’s none of your business,” she said sharply. “I just—”

“Don’t.”

She took a breath, short and tight.

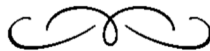
“I get that we’re planning something together,” she said. “But that doesn’t give you the right to dig into parts of me I haven’t offered.”

Felix’s expression sobered. “You’re right.” But Nyx had already turned.

She started walking away, limping slightly, the fire back in her posture. She didn’t look back.

Felix stayed in the alley, the question still burning between the walls like smoke from a fire that shouldn’t have been lit.

CHAPTER 14



The rest of the day passed like a fog for Felix — heavy, dull, and directionless.

The new classrooms were colder somehow. The chalk scratched louder. The walls echoed differently without the chaos of mixed chatter. No girls in class meant no smart-mouth remarks from Nyx from the back bench, no quick glances across the aisle, no silent games with raised eyebrows and smirks mid-lecture.

It felt hollow.

Every time a teacher asked a question, he reflexively turned to look for her, thinking that she might walk somewhere in the new corridor. She wasn't there.

Now it was P.E.

The sun beat down on the old sports field, drying the grass to brittle yellow and making sweat cling to every shirt. Boys stood around in restless groups, tossing footballs and smacking each other on the arms like overcharged toddlers.

Felix stood off to the side, his hands resting on his hips, eyes unfocused.

She was really angry.

He thought back to the look on Nyx's face when he asked that question. The way her walls slammed back into place, the way she walked away without looking back. He hadn't meant to hit a nerve — he just wanted to *know* her. But maybe he had crossed a line.

Still, she had trusted him enough to tell him about being sold.

And I repaid that by digging through her scars.

He sighed and looked down at his shoes.

Maybe... tonight I can make it better.

The thought offered a strange sense of hope. They were supposed to meet on the terrace later, after lights-out. Maybe he'd bring her something small. A peace offering.

Not a red rose, he thought immediately. She'd kill me.

No, something light-hearted. A yellow one, maybe. Friendly. Honest. Nothing that says “romance” but still says “I see you.”

He smiled faintly at the thought.

That’s when James’s voice cut through the field like a whip.

“Felix!” he called out. “You still think you’re the best player here, huh?” Felix looked up, blinking.

James — tall, arrogant, and grinning like a wolf — was spinning a soccer ball on his index finger, the other boys already gathering around.

“Let’s settle it then. You and me. Right now.” Felix felt something tighten in his chest.

He didn’t particularly care about being the best — but James had a way of poking at him like no one else. And today... Felix needed an outlet.

Without answering, he nodded once and walked toward the field.

As he did, he reached into his pocket for his bandana — the one he always tied around his wrist for matches. But when his fingers dug inside, they brushed against something else.

Paper.

He pulled it out, his brows furrowing. A small, folded note.

His heart stuttered. He opened it.

Look Felix,

I couldn't tell you directly.

But I'm leaving next week. Not next month.
Sorry.

—Nyx

His legs went still. His mind froze.

Next week.

She's leaving next week.

The rest of the world fell away. The field. The noise. James's taunts. The sweat on his skin. The sun overhead.

All he could see was that single sentence repeating in his head like a siren. He thought he had time.

He thought there were days, maybe weeks left to figure things out — to plan, to stop it, to hold onto whatever fragile thread of hope they had.

But next week?

That was barely days.

Suddenly, the idea of the rose in his hand felt stupid. Childish. Useless.

How was he supposed to fix what was broken, stop what was happening, *and* make things right with her in seven days?

A wave of nausea rolled through his stomach.

He folded the note carefully and pressed it to his chest for just a second — then tucked it back inside his pocket like it was a lifeline.

She told me.

She chose to tell me.

Even now, with her leaving, with pain between them, she still wanted him to know.

CHAPTER 15



The bandana was tied tight around Felix's wrist, a symbol of focus. Of grounding. Of control. He'd just finished looping the final knot when a sharp whistle cut through the air.

Everyone turned toward the gate.

The P.E. teacher, Mr. Rathi, was holding a clipboard, looking unusually uneasy.

"I need your attention," he said, voice louder than usual. "There's been a... new directive from Principal Grieves."

Felix's stomach clenched.

Anything involving Grieves was never good.

Then — as if summoned by the very breath of dread — Principal Grieves himself stepped onto the field.

Flanked by two guards and wearing that snake-smooth smile, he stood in his black coat as if the sun didn't dare touch him. His eyes scanned the field of boys, then flicked toward the approaching group of girls being escorted from the other side of the compound.

Gasps echoed.

Murmurs stirred the field like dry leaves.

Girls on the boys' field?

Unthinkable.

Felix spotted Nyx instantly.

She was walking stiffly, her eyes scanning the boys like she was ready for an ambush. Then she saw Felix.

Their eyes locked.

No smiles. No sarcasm. Just a silent tether, stretched across the grass and uncertainty. Grieves stepped forward, his boots too loud against the silence.

"I was feeling... merciful today," he said, voice oily with false charm. "I realized we've been so harsh lately. Segregated buildings. Tighter rules. And really, is that fair?"

No one answered.

He didn't expect them to.

“So, I thought,” Grieves continued, spreading his arms like a preacher, “why not give you something you truly want?”

He turned slowly, eyes grazing the boys like a blade.

“Love. Romance. That delicious thrill of first affection. You’re at the age for it, aren’t you?” Felix narrowed his eyes.

Grieves smirked, then gestured toward the field.

“One game. Two teams. All your favorites – goals, sweat, and glory.” Then he said it.

“And the team that *wins* may take the girl they love out of the compound gates for one hour. Unsupervised.”

A collective gasp. Some boys laughed awkwardly. Others exchanged excited glances. But Felix didn’t move.

He stared.

Because Grieves wasn’t done.

“And the team that *loses*,” Grieves continued, “will never see the one they love again.” The silence was now suffocating.

“You will be permanently separated. Assigned to different campuses. No letters. No meetings. Nothing.”

His eyes found Felix. And he smiled wider. "You may play now." Then he turned and left. The guards remained.

Nyx looked thunderstruck. Her hands were clenched at her sides.

Felix knew instantly — this wasn't kindness. It wasn't even a challenge. It was a trap.

Make them fight each other.

Make them desperate. Jealous. Reckless. Make them tear each other apart.

But it was also... a sliver of opportunity.

If I win, Felix thought, heart racing, I'll get one hour with her. Enough time to explain everything. The note. The terrace plan. The truth. Everything.

But if he lost...

He wouldn't even be allowed to see her again.

This is war.

James stepped beside him, spinning the ball on his finger again.

"Looks like the stakes just got real," he muttered, eyes gleaming. "Hope you brought your game, lover boy."

Felix didn't even look at him. His eyes were on Nyx.

She wasn't watching him now. She was staring down at the grass, thinking, processing, burning.

But somehow, she knew he was watching.

Because slowly, she lifted her chin and met his eyes again. There was no smile.

No tear.

Just one small nod. A promise:

Don't lose.

Felix looked down at the bandana on his wrist. Then up at the goalposts.

He took a slow breath, rolled his shoulders, and stepped onto the center of the field. Let Grieves play his game.

Felix had just found his reason to win.

CHAPTER 16



The heat on the field was no longer just from the sun. It was thick with adrenaline. Tension. The haunting awareness that every move could win or lose a life.

The game began fast.

James' team struck first — their striker curved the ball clean past the keeper within five minutes. Felix barely had time to register the point before his teammate, Rehan, shoved the ball back into play with the fury of a wildfire.

Felix wasn't just playing now — he was *possessed*. Every pass, every block, every chase had a weight tied to it.

If I lose, she's gone.

By the fifteenth minute, he'd weaved through three defenders and scored a sharp, ruthless goal that even James couldn't block. The score was tied.

The students on the sidelines were screaming. Even the girls, though uncertain, watched breathlessly, knowing their futures hung by invisible threads tied to a cruel game.

Twenty minutes. James scored again — a powerful kick that hit the top corner with precision. Felix growled under his breath. No celebrating. No frustration.

Just focus.

He dropped into midfield and reworked the entire strategy in a flash. He called to his teammates, repositioned them, took hits and slid hard, bruising his hip on the grass. No time to feel it. No space for pain.

When the whistle blew for halftime, it was 2-1.

Everyone huddled, panting, drenched in sweat. Felix stood apart, breathing hard, one hand on his knee, the other gripping his bandana like a lifeline.

Nyx was sitting on the sidelines now, her arms crossed — not in defiance, but in silent worry. She hadn't cheered. Not once.

But her eyes never left him.

And that was enough. Second half began.

Fifteen minutes left.

Felix pulled a fake that sent James sliding in the wrong direction and struck — this time with everything behind it. The ball soared, bent, and landed.

2-2.

The field was chaos. Shouts rang out, students yelling orders, insults, desperation. They weren't just playing a match anymore.

They were surviving one.

Then — five minutes left on the clock.

The referee raised his whistle but didn't blow.

Instead, the shrill *screach* of the school's broadcast mic pierced the sky. Grieves' voice followed, cold and crackling from the tower speaker. "Stop the game."

All players froze.

Grieves stepped onto the field, clapping slowly. "Well done. Impressive show."

Felix's fists clenched.

Grieves strolled forward, hands behind his back.

"But I have a problem. It seems... you're tying. That's no fun, is it?" Silence.

He turned, pointing directly at the sidelines. At Nyx.

“She fails her final exams if this tie remains.”
Everyone looked at her.

Felix’s chest tightened.

A boy from James’ team called out, “What does *she* have to do with *us*?” Grieves smiled darkly. “Not with you. But with your captains.”

Felix’s blood ran cold. Captains?

James.

And me.

He looked toward James — who looked equally stunned.

For a moment, something strange passed between them. Recognition. Confusion. Maybe even anger.

James liked her?

Felix looked back at Nyx — who was standing now, her brows furrowed, lips parted, clearly hearing everything.

She should know, Felix thought. *She should know I can do anything for her.*

The whistle blew again.

Game on.

Now it wasn’t just about winning. It was about *saving* her.

James came hard this time. No smirks. No smug swagger. Just raw speed. His team surged forward, but Felix didn't fall back. He intercepted, shoved through defenders, passed with laser focus.

The air felt heavier. The ball moved faster.

The tackles were harder.

Every limb ached, every breath burned, but Felix didn't care. His mind burned with one truth:

If I lose, she fails. If I win, she hears everything.

Last minute. James had the ball.

Felix was the last man standing in his way.

They met in the center — boots colliding, the ball snapping away. James tried to spin — Felix lunged.

They crashed.

The crowd gasped. The ball rolled free.

Felix scrambled up first. Forty seconds.

He didn't look for anyone else. Didn't pass.

He ran.

Past midfield. Past the last defender.

His lungs screamed. His leg throbbed. But he kept going. Nyx was standing now, clutching her chest.

Ten seconds.

He pulled back his leg.

This is it.

He struck. The ball flew. Time slowed. Then—
GOAL.

The whistle blew. The match was over.

Felix dropped to his knees, breath ragged, sweat pouring down his face.

The field erupted.

Cheers, screams, disbelief. He didn't hear any of it.

He only heard the silence that came when he looked up — and saw Nyx. She didn't smile.

She didn't run to him.

She just mouthed two words.

Thank you.

And for now... that was enough.

CHAPTER 17



The match had ended, but Felix's pulse hadn't slowed. Not because of the victory.

But because of *her*.

He walked straight toward Nyx, cutting through the noise, the cheers, the confused glances from others.

She stood still, arms crossed, her expression unreadable as always — but her eyes were softer now, the way they always were when no one else was looking.

He stopped just a foot from her, brushing sweaty hair off his forehead, breathing a little uneven.

"Hey," he said, voice low. "Hey," she replied.

“I... I’m sorry for earlier. The thing I said this morning. About your family. I didn’t mean to step over a line.”

Nyx blinked, a flicker of guilt passing her face. “It’s fine. I get it. Everyone gets curious.”

He scratched the back of his neck awkwardly, then gave a half-grin. “Do I look scary to you?”

She raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Just. Right now. After that game. Do I look... intimidating or something?”

She tilted her head, then suddenly burst out laughing – short, sharp, the kind that made his ears burn.

“You look like a sweet kitten who just got his fish saved from a dog.”

Felix groaned, his head dropping in exasperation. “You *seriously* have no respect for post-match intensity.”

She kept giggling, and it was the best sound he’d heard all day. But then – just as quick – the humor faded from his face.

He looked at her, serious now.

“But why, Nyx?” he asked. “Why didn’t you *tell* me earlier? About next week. About... leaving. You just dropped it in a note.”

Nyx's brows pulled together. "What are you talking about? I *did* tell you. I told you what I heard."

He frowned. "No. I mean this."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the small, folded paper. Her eyes narrowed as he handed it to her.

Nyx took it, read the words, then looked up sharply. "I didn't write this."

Felix's heart skipped. "What?"

"I *didn't* write this," she repeated, her voice firm now. "I never left a note in your pocket. I swear it, Felix."

They both stood there, staring at each other, the paper trembling slightly in her fingers. Before she could say anything more, a cold shadow fell over them.

Gravel crunched beneath polished black shoes.

A familiar voice followed, thick with forced composure — and quiet menace. "Your reward," Grieves said, lips pulled tight across his teeth. "Take her." Both of them turned.

The principal stood just behind them, jaw clenched, his glare trained not on Nyx — but on

Felix.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then, very slowly, Grievess leaned in closer, speaking through gritted teeth.

“You won. One hour. That’s the deal. After that... she’s not your concern anymore.” Felix didn’t answer.

Nyx was stone-still beside him.

Grievess stepped back, eyes lingering on them both like poison in the air, and turned to leave. The second he was out of earshot, Nyx exhaled hard, her shoulders tensing.

“That note,” Felix said quietly. “If you didn’t write it, someone wanted me to think you were leaving sooner than you said. Someone wanted to mess with me.”

“Or with *us*,” Nyx said, her jaw tight. “Someone wants to see us shaken.” Felix glanced at the note again.

The handwriting wasn’t off. It was *close* enough to pass.

Whoever wrote it knew enough about her... about *them*... to make it believable. They were being watched.

Manipulated.

But for the next hour — they had time. Alone. Off-campus. Together. One hour to figure out what came next.

One hour to decide what to do with the truth.

Felix folded the note back, tucked it away, and met her eyes. “You ready to go?” he asked softly.

Nyx nodded once. “Let’s make it count.”

CHAPTER 18



The gates had never looked so strange from the outside.

For years, they'd stood like an iron promise — no freedom, no warmth, only orders. Now, Felix and his team, along with the girls they'd won the match for, stood just beyond them, under the grey stretch of cloudy sky.

It didn't feel like freedom. It felt like a test.

The group sat in the field near the back wall, where no teachers or cameras would see them. A crooked wooden bench, some dry grass, and shared panic were all they had. Felix leaned against the bench while the others huddled around. Nyx stood nearby, arms crossed, her back slightly stiff from her healing ankle.

There was no laughter. No flirting.

Just silence. Waiting. Until Felix finally broke it.

“You all know why we’re here, right?” he said, eyes scanning the boys who’d stayed on the field with him — his team. Loyal, sharp-eyed, brave enough to risk everything for one hour of truth.

Rehan, the midfielder, nodded slowly. “We played for more than girls, didn’t we?”

“We did,” Nyx answered, stepping forward. “This place — the rules, the punishments, the way we’re forced to think it’s normal — none of this is right. It’s not a school. It’s a cage.”

Some of the girls nodded silently.

Felix continued. “We’ve both been digging around for a while. Me and Nyx. Separately. Until recently.”

Nyx added, “We found something. Or rather — *someone* found us. Someone told me that there’s a list.”

“What kind of list?” asked Zoya, one of the girls.

“A *selling list*,” Nyx said. Her voice was calm, but the weight of her words made several people sit up straighter. “Students are being sold. That’s why so many disappear. They don’t transfer. They don’t move cities. They’re *taken*.”

Rehan’s eyes widened. “You’re serious.”

“We wouldn’t joke about this,” Felix said. “The one at the top of the list... is Nyx.” A hush settled.

“She’s supposed to be taken next week,” he added, looking away. “Or... that’s what I thought. I found a note in my pocket saying she was leaving early. Turns out she didn’t write it.”

“Someone else planted it,” Nyx muttered. “To confuse us. Or separate us. Or make Felix act irrationally. We don’t know who – yet.”

“Principal Grieves is playing a different game,” Felix continued. “He’s not just strict. He’s *calculating*. He wants us broken, fighting each other, scared of emotion and loyalty. That soccer match wasn’t a reward – it was a trap to pit us against each other.”

“To see who cracks,” Nyx added.

A junior girl with wide eyes raised her hand like it was a classroom. “Why us, though? Why this school?”

“Because it’s perfect,” Felix replied. “Isolated. No parents allowed. No online presence. Full control. You remove phones, you remove outside help. You break rules, and you vanish.”

Everyone sat quietly, processing it all. Their freedom felt smaller now – fragile. Then Rehan leaned in.

“So, what do we *do*?”

“We fight back,” Felix said simply. “Smartly. Silently. Together.”

“We use what they’ve underestimated in us,” Nyx said, smirking slightly. “They think emotions are weaknesses. Love. Loyalty. Connection. Let’s make those our weapons.”

A small ripple of energy passed through the group. A mix of fear and resolve.

Felix nodded. “Pass letters. Exchange info. Girls in the art department, boys in science. We’ll coordinate from both ends. If we stay united across buildings, they can’t isolate us.”

“What if they catch us?” someone whispered. “They won’t,” Nyx said, firm. “We’ll be smarter.”

The hour passed faster than anyone wanted. The grey sky didn’t turn bluer, but the air somehow felt clearer — like someone had cracked open a secret window and let truth drift in.

The gates opened again. A guard called them in.

Felix and Nyx walked at the end of the group, steps slow, voices hushed beneath the wind. Nyx glanced at him.

“Felix,” she said, pausing near the path that split boys and girls into separate directions.

“Yeah?”

She looked down, then back up.

“Please clear my name when you go back to the boys' hostel.” “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” she exhaled, adjusting her bag on her shoulder, “just make sure people don't think you took me out here because you... *love* me or something.”

Her voice was light, but her eyes weren't. Felix blinked, mouth opening – then closing.

She gave a small, practiced smile and turned away. “I just don't want to be misunderstood,” she added. She began to walk toward her building.

And he just stood there, watching her go, jaw clenched. Then, as her figure disappeared behind the wall—

He whispered under his breath:

“I don't know about *them*, Nyx...” He touched the bandana on his wrist.

“...but I'll definitely make you trust me.” He took a deep breath.

“And someday – love me.”

CHAPTER 19



The room was lit only by the dull flicker of a candle – not out of necessity, but for effect.

Darkness swallowed the space, but even in that suffocating black, the outline of a figure could be seen – broad shoulders hunched in the corner, long fingers toying with a small object that shimmered faintly in the dim light.

A lighter.

Click. *Flame*. Click. *Off*.

Click. *Flame*.

The figure held something in his hand – a crumpled photograph. The edges were torn, like it had been folded and unfolded many times. The image, now

gripped tightly between gloved fingers, was unmistakable.

Felix.

Smiling. Half-focused. Maybe even laughing at something off-frame. The flame from the lighter hovered just beneath it.

“You think you’re winning, don’t you?” the figure whispered, voice low, serpentine. “You think she trusts you. That you’ve made her believe you’re different. That somehow, *you* can protect her.”

A bitter laugh slipped out.

“I’ll get her away from you, Felix.”

The lighter sparked again, catching the photo at the edge. The flames began to crawl up slowly, curling the paper inward like claws of smoke pulling it into hell.

“I’ll take her so far out of your reach, you’ll *ache* for her. Every hour. Every minute.”

The fire reached Felix’s face, and the photo began to curl inwards, blackening at the center. “She’ll be *mine*.”

He glanced toward another photo on the table, half-shrouded beneath a folded cloth. Just the edge of it showed – not enough to identify the face.

But it was clear.

There were two targets.

And only one knew the other existed.

The smoke curled upward into the air as the fire hissed out, the photo reduced to ash.

The corridor outside the dispensary was unusually quiet.

Even for a late afternoon, the air felt still — too still. The usual bustle of prefects, whispering girls, and the distant echoes of teachers' footsteps was missing. As if the school itself was holding its breath.

Nyx walked slowly, her arm still a little sore from the dressing she'd just gotten for the minor scrape on her elbow. Her ankle was better now — she didn't limp anymore, but her steps were still cautious.

She held her slip in one hand, eyes briefly scanning the ceiling as she turned the corner near the music wing.

And that's when it happened. A hand. Cold, gloved, and fast. It slammed over her mouth.

Another arm looped around her waist, yanking her back into the darkness between the old janitor's closets.

Nyx's slip dropped from her hand and fluttered silently to the floor. Her scream never made it past his palm.

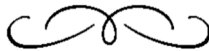
Just the widening of her eyes. The shadows
swallowed her.

The corridor was quiet once again.

The only sign she had ever been there...

...was a thin trail of gauze left unspooled behind
her.

CHAPTER 20



The corridor was silent again, save for the soft hum of the ceiling lights. Nyx's breath had just started to settle after that terrifying grip around her mouth – the one that dragged her into the shadows near the supply room. She spun around, heart pounding, ready to fight whoever had dared.

Then her eyes landed on the face in front of her.

James.

He wasn't smirking. Not taunting. Just... staring at her. His jaw was tight. His shoulders tense.

"You?!" Nyx hissed. "Are you insane? What was that?!"

“Shut up and listen,” James said sharply, voice low but urgent. “I don’t have time to explain everything. I just needed to stop you — away from anyone else. Away from *him*.”

She blinked. “Him?” He stepped closer. “Felix.”

Nyx narrowed her eyes. “You’ve got ten seconds before I walk away.”

James looked around the corner, making sure no one was watching. Then he leaned in slightly and dropped his voice to a whisper.

“You think he’s some hero, don’t you? You think he’s leading this whole rebellion thing? Planning and protecting you like some knight?”

She stared, silent.

“He’s just another pawn, Nyx. But worse — he’s a stupid one.” Nyx bristled. “Watch your mouth.”

“No, *you* watch your trust.” James’s eyes burned now. “Do you know what kind of damage he’s doing? He thinks he’s invincible. Sneaking around. Planning in the open. Gathering people in the field like he’s playing some war game. And now he’s made you the centerpiece of it.”

“What’s your point?” Nyx snapped. “You jealous he’s smarter than you?” James let that slide. Barely.

“My point,” he said slowly, “is that because of him, *you’re not the one being sold anymore.*” Nyx’s blood went cold.

James continued, his words deliberate. “Grieves isn’t selling you next month. Not anymore. Plans changed. Your little hero made himself too visible.”

She froze, all sound disappearing from her ears except James’s voice. “They’re selling *Felix.*”

A rush of breath escaped her lips. “No...”

“Oh, yes.” James folded his arms, eyes dark. “I overheard it. Don’t ask how. I stay quiet when others don’t. That day – when everyone clapped for you in music – I stayed after. Heard Grieves on the phone.”

Her fingers clenched at her side.

James leaned in. “They’re calling it an *example.* A message. To anyone who stands too tall or speaks too much.”

Nyx swallowed, hard. “Why are you telling me this?”

James exhaled, glancing toward the hallway. “Because maybe I don’t want to see another idiot get crushed under Grieves’s boot. And maybe...” he looked at her meaningfully, “I care about your smile even if you are not into me.”

She stepped back slightly. “If you care so much about me, why do you insult him every time you open your mouth which kindda hurts me?”

James gave a bitter laugh. “Because I *know* him. I know the version of him you don’t. The one who used to talk big and abandon people when things got real. The one who plays strong but doesn’t think about the fallout. Trust me — I’ve seen him *fail* before.”

Nyx’s eyes didn’t flinch. “You’re wrong about him.”

“I hope I am,” James muttered. “But if I’m right — you’ve got three days, maybe less. Grieves already made the call. They’ll say he transferred or had a family emergency. But he won’t be coming back.”

Silence settled between them. The air was thick, suffocating.

Nyx’s heart thundered inside her chest. Her stomach churned. Felix — *sold*? Because of her? Because of this?

James stepped away, letting the shadows slide back over his features.

“One more thing,” he added. “Clear your head about him. Don’t make the mistake of thinking he’s your savior. He’s just a boy with a target on his back.”

Then, with a short nod, James disappeared down the corridor. Nyx stood frozen in place, jaw clenched, her mind racing.

This wasn't just about her anymore. Felix was the next name on the list. And this time... she had to save *him*.

CHAPTER 21



The common room buzzed as usual — boys in half-hearted conversation, music humming through someone's old speaker, the smell of burnt instant noodles lingering in the air.

Felix sat on his bed, staring at the letter in his hand again. Nyx's handwriting. Or so he thought.

He hadn't seen her since the match, aside from that weird moment with Grieves earlier. She hadn't said much then. Hadn't even smiled properly.

Then James showed up. Out of nowhere.

"You're wanted," he said, arms folded, tone irritatingly casual. Felix blinked. "By whom? The heavens?"

“Close. By your goddess of chaos,” James smirked. Felix frowned.

“She said meet her on the terrace. Now.”

Felix snorted. “And I should believe you because...?”

“You shouldn’t,” James shrugged, already walking off. “But if you don’t go, you’ll regret it.”

Felix stayed frozen for a few seconds. The idea of James playing some elaborate prank wasn't off the table.

But still... it was Nyx.

And something in James’s face had been off – not sarcastic. Just... grim. Felix stood up, muttering, “If this is a setup, I’m throwing him off the railing.”

The Terrace – Ten Minutes Later

The night air was cool, brushing against Felix’s skin as he stepped onto the rooftop. Crickets whispered below, and a low breeze whistled past the corners of the school building.

She was already there – Nyx – sitting on the edge of the concrete barrier, arms wrapped around her knees.

He stood a few feet behind her, hands in his pockets.

"You called?" he said lightly. "I was in the middle of not trusting James." Nyx didn't turn.

"I know," she said quietly. "I wouldn't trust him either." Felix frowned and stepped closer.

Something was off. Really off.

He sat beside her without a word. The silence stretched between them like a fragile thread. Then she finally spoke.

"Felix they are selling you and that is because of me". Felix did not say anything, he sought if knew that this will happen. So, he gestured her to continue "You asked once why I don't talk about my family." Felix didn't answer. He just looked at her.

She continued, her voice dry and slow. "Why I always dodged questions. Laughed them off. Lied, even."

Felix leaned forward, arms resting on his knees. "I figured there was pain. Or trauma. Something personal."

She smiled faintly. "It's not personal. It's *dangerous*." A pause.

Then she turned and looked directly at him. "My last name isn't what I told you."

His chest tightened.

"My real name is Nyx Grieves." Felix blinked once.

Then again.

She kept going before he could speak.

“Yeah. *That* Grieves. The monster who runs this place. Who sells students. Who sets traps. Who made you the next target That’s my father.”

The terrace was quiet.

Not the usual kind of night silence. This was *hollow* – the kind that rang in the ears and gnawed at the chest.

Felix leaned against the railing, arms crossed, trying to steady the storm inside him. His mind still reeled from what she had said.

Nyx Grieves.

He kept repeating it in his head like a puzzle with missing pieces. This felt a lot more important than his selling

She sat near the ledge, her legs pulled to her chest, staring into the vast ink of the sky. The wind caught her hair, tossing it across her face, but she didn’t brush it away.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said softly, not looking at him. Felix didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure he even could.

“That I should’ve told you earlier. Or that I lied. Or that I’m just like him.”

Her voice didn't shake. Not yet. But it had lost all its usual edge — no sarcasm, no clever bite. Just quiet honesty.

"I didn't tell anyone," She said. "Not even myself, for a long time. I made up stories in my head — that my family left me here, that I was just a smart scholarship kid, that the Grieves on the records was just coincidence."

She drew in a deep breath.

"But it's not a coincidence. He's, my stepfather. He married my mother when I was ten." Felix finally turned to look at her.

Her eyes were on the sky still, but they were distant — **somewhere else**, in another time.

"My mom... she was a schoolteacher. Kind, soft-spoken, but tough. She didn't like talking back to people, but she never let anyone walk over her either. I used to think she was unbreakable."

A breath. Then another.

"She married him because he pretended to be good. He wasn't rich back then. Just... ambitious. Charming, in a fake way. But she thought maybe we'd have stability again. After dad died, we needed that."

Her voice broke for a moment, then returned — quieter.

“He changed after they married. Started getting cruel. Started controlling everything. My mom tried to leave him — more than once. But something always stopped her.”

She blinked hard.

“And then one day... she didn’t come back from work. They said it was a car crash. Brake failure.”

Felix’s breath caught.

“I didn’t believe it,” Nyx whispered. “Not then. Not now.”

She paused, then added, “My older brother — he was seventeen. Strong. Brave. He *knew* something wasn’t right. Started digging into Grieves’ files, trying to prove it.”

Her throat tightened.

“They found him two weeks later in the lake. Said it was suicide.” She finally looked at Felix now.

“But it wasn’t.”

He stared at her, stunned into stillness.

“You were never supposed to know this,” Nyx said, her voice trembling now. “No one was. I thought I’d carry it until I died. That if I ever said it out loud, it would make it all too real.”

She wiped her cheek, just once, then quickly tucked her hand into her jacket like it never happened.

Felix took a step closer, slow.

“And I know,” she added, eyes locking onto his, “that now you’ll always see me as *his*. As a Grieves.”

“I don’t,” Felix said softly.

Her lip quivered, but she laughed once. “You don’t have to lie—” “I’m not.”

He walked toward her, slow, careful — as if approaching a wounded bird. “Nyx, you’re not him. You never were.”

She opened her mouth, closed it again. Then she looked away.

“I’ve hated hugs since my mom died,” she said quietly. “I always thought if I let someone that close again, they’d disappear too.”

Felix didn’t speak. He didn’t need to.

Because in that moment, **she stood**, took one small step forward, and wrapped her arms around him — tight, fast, and trembling.

A single second. Not more.

Just enough to feel real.

Her head against his chest, his breath caught in shock. The hug he’d longed for.

Then she pulled back just as fast, brushing a sleeve across her cheek. “Don’t get used to that,” she mumbled.

Felix smiled — not wide, not smug. Just soft. “I won’t.”

But inside him, something unspoken bloomed. She had finally let him in.

And it changed everything.

CHAPTER 22



After the brief, fragile hug, Nyx stepped back, her eyes shadowed but clear. The night air was thick with unspoken words.

Felix's voice broke the silence, gentle but curious. "What was your brother's name?"

Nyx's lips pressed together before she spoke, her voice steady but heavy with memory. "Elias."

She looked away for a moment, gathering herself. Then, as if painting a picture from her mind, she began,

"He was tall—almost too tall for his age—with dark hair that never stayed tidy and eyes that looked like they carried a storm inside them. Always restless, always moving, like he couldn't stand to be still for a second."

She paused, a faint smile flickering through the pain.

“He laughed too loud and made stupid jokes to hide how much he cared. People thought he was reckless, but he was loyal to a fault. The kind of person who would throw himself in front of danger just to protect the people he loved.”

Nyx’s voice softened, almost a whisper now.

“But after Grieves showed up, everything changed. Elias stopped being the same. He became quieter, harder to reach. The fire in his eyes dimmed. And then... he disappeared.”

Her eyes filled with shadowed grief.

“They said he was dead. But I don’t believe it. I never have.”

Felix’s face shifted—confusion, shock, something deeper—as he absorbed her words.

He finally spoke, voice low but charged. “I know him.”

Nyx blinked, startled. “What?”

Felix looked at her intently. “Elias is my sister’s boyfriend.”

Her heart skipped, her mouth opening in surprise.

Felix continued, voice dropping to a whisper. “And he’s not dead.”

CHAPTER 23



Nyx froze, the name *Elias* still echoing in her mind like a bell that refused to stop ringing. She stared at Felix, unsure if she'd heard him right.

"What did you just say?" Her voice came out barely audible, a crack of disbelief.

Felix took a slow breath, steadying himself.

"I said... Elias isn't dead. He's alive. And he's living in my house." Silence.

Nyx didn't blink. Didn't move. Like her entire body had gone cold.

Felix continued carefully, watching every twitch of her expression.

“He’s been dating my sister for about a year now. He finished his studies last winter and works part-time at a café near our old apartment. I didn’t know he was your brother. I swear I didn’t.”

Nyx stepped back, hand reaching instinctively to her chest like trying to hold something broken inside her.

“You’re lying.” The words came out too fast. Too sharp.

“I’m not.” Felix’s voice was calm. “I didn’t connect the dots until now. I just knew him as Elias — charming, quiet, protective as hell over my sister. He never talked about his past. Just said he left it all behind.”

“But—” she whispered, blinking fast, “I went to his funeral. I saw the—”

“There was no body, was there?” Felix said softly. “A closed casket. A rushed investigation. A lot of mystery.”

Nyx’s knees felt weak. She sat on the edge of the low terrace ledge, clutching the stone, her world flipping inside out.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered. “Why wouldn’t he come back? Why wouldn’t he tell me? I thought I lost him forever.”

Felix crouched in front of her. “Maybe he thought he was protecting you. Maybe Grieves forced him out. I don’t know. But what I do know is—he’s real. He’s alive. And I can make you talk to him.”

She looked up, eyes wide. “Now?”

Felix nodded, pulling out his phone slowly.

“I can call my sister. Tell her to hand Elias the phone. You don’t even have to speak. Just hear his voice. Just know it’s true.”

Nyx didn’t answer.

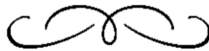
Tears shimmered in her eyes, but this time it wasn’t grief — it was something closer to hope. Fragile, trembling, terrifying.

“Are you ready?” Felix asked gently.

Nyx took a shaky breath, her fingers slowly uncurling from the stone edge. Then she nodded.

Felix’s thumb hovered over the call button. And the phone began to ring.

CHAPTER 24



Felix held the phone in his hand as it rang, the screen glowing faintly in the darkness of the rooftop.

Nyx watched it like it might explode.

Before the call connected, her eyes narrowed, voice a whisper on the edge of disbelief. “Where did you even get that phone? Phones aren’t allowed.”

Felix gave her a slight grin. “I just... snuck it in.”

Nyx blinked, stunned for a second – then let out the smallest, startled laugh. “Of course you did.”

The sound of the ringing stopped. A faint *click*. Then: “Hello?” a voice answered – muffled but unmistakably male.

Felix stepped closer, held the phone up to her. “It’s him.”

Nyx stared at it.

Her fingers didn’t move. Her breath shortened.

She reached for it, slowly, as if afraid it might vanish. Her hand brushed Felix’s for a moment

— then she took the phone and brought it to her ear. “...Elias?” she breathed.

There was silence on the other end.

Then, that voice — familiar, grown, worn with time. “Nyx?”

She gasped — like someone coming up for air after being underwater for years. Her knees buckled, and she dropped to the ground, phone clutched tight, lips trembling.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “Oh my God. It’s really you.”

“Nyx... I’m sorry,” Elias said gently, voice thick with emotion. “I wanted to tell you. I wanted to come back so many times, but I couldn’t. I—Grieves—he—”

“I thought you were dead!” she cried, the dam breaking. “I thought you died trying to protect us. I—I mourned you! I buried you! I thought I was alone!”

“I know,” Elias said. “I know, Nyx. And it kills me every day.”

She sobbed, not with fragility this time — but with fury, love, loss, all tangled in one. Felix silently stepped back, giving her space — letting her have this.

“I miss you,” she whispered into the phone. “I needed you. I needed you so much, and you were gone.”

“I never stopped watching over you,” Elias said softly. “Every month I checked with people I trusted, made sure you were safe. I had no idea Grieves got you into that school... I would have dragged you out of there myself.”

They spoke like that for nearly an hour.

Her tears faded into laughter, then back to tears again. She asked about his life — his job, his apartment, his books, his girlfriend (Felix’s sister — that made her laugh again). He asked about everything — her survival, her strength, her music, her ankle.

Their broken lives, separated by grief and fear, stitched slowly back together word by word. As the call finally ended, Nyx held the phone in her lap, eyes red but shining.

Felix sat cross-legged a few feet away, pretending not to listen, but every sigh, every choked laugh had carved something new into his chest.

She finally looked at him.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “For this. For giving me a piece of myself back.” Felix shrugged, not trusting his voice.

But deep inside, he knew:

This moment — this one — was worth everything.

CHAPTER 25



By the end of the week, everything had changed.

The dorms weren't the same. Not because the rules were suddenly lifted — but because the students had changed. Something fierce and fearless had sparked in them. It was no longer just about surviving Grieves. It was about ending him.

Felix stood at the edge of the field, looking out at the school that once felt like a prison. Behind him, Nyx leaned against the railing, her crutch forgotten nearby. She was healing — in more ways than one.

“I can't believe it,” she said softly. “I actually spoke to Elias.”

Felix gave her a small smile. “And I still can’t believe I lived long enough to see you cry twice.” She nudged him. “Shut up.”

But there was a warmth between them now. Unspoken. Unforced. And they had a plan.

The students — boys and girls — met in secret. Under stairwells. In abandoned classrooms. In coded notes passed through textbooks and music sheets. The staff didn’t notice the laughter under the surface, the barely contained smirks.

Because the students were plotting.

Grieves had gone too far. His scheme to separate boys and girls was the final straw — and thanks to Elias, who had already alerted a journalist and a local lawyer, they had enough proof to dig into his past. But that wasn’t enough.

They wanted *payback*.

“We’ll give him what he’s afraid of,” Felix said during one of their hidden meetings. “Exposure,” Nyx added. “And chaos.”

So, they staged it.

One morning, the school awoke to absolute madness. The loudspeakers began blasting romantic music on repeat — pre-recorded by the music class and

hooked up to the intercom by the coding club. “Boys vs. Girls” posters were graffitied into *Boys + Girls United*.

Grievess' office had been turned upside down: pink glitter under the desk, his keyboard missing every vowel, and his chair rigged to make a farting sound every time he sat down.

But that wasn't the real hit.

The real hit was the *leaked video*.

Nyx and Felix had hacked into the old security archives with the help of two junior tech prodigies. They found clips — muffled but clear enough — of Grievess discussing the “student selling list.” Names. Prices. His own voice talking about how easily he'd faked the retirement of the old principal. How he picked students who were “unnoticed” or “quiet.”

And Nyx's name was right at the top.

They uploaded it to the school server at 11:00 a.m. sharp. Every screen on campus lit up with the video.

The entire school froze.

Teachers stood shocked. Students dropped their pens. Even Grievess — mid-scream at a cleaner — turned to see his own face on the projector in the courtyard.

“What the—”

But it was too late.

Within an hour, police sirens were heard outside the school. The journalist Elias had contacted arrived with camera crews. The lawyer came with an arrest warrant and printed testimonies from former students who had mysteriously vanished from the school – only to later be “rescued” from illegal child labor and trafficking networks.

Grieves tried to deny everything. But even the school board had come.

And Nyx stood at the front of the courtyard as they dragged him out in handcuffs. He looked at her, spitting with hatred.

“You think you’ve won?”

Nyx’s eyes were clear and calm. “I didn’t win. We did.”

Grieves thrashed in rage, screaming curses, but the students only watched in silence – not out of fear, but in collective satisfaction.

Felix stood beside her, hands in his pockets.

“You know,” he said quietly, “for someone who looks like a kitten, you’re a lion when you want to be.”

Nyx laughed, brushing a tear from her eye.

“I learned from the best stray in the building.”

Two days later, a celebration was underway.

Officially, it was a “school-wide wellness event” to restore morale. Unofficially, it was a freedom party.

The courtyard was strung with lights, food laid out in every direction. Students wore whatever they wanted. Music blasted from speakers that weren’t stolen but actually approved this time.

At the center of it all, Nyx stood in a pale blue dress, her ankle almost healed, watching as laughter and music replaced the silence that once ruled the school.

And then she saw him. Elias.

He stepped out of the car with Felix’s sister beside him, holding a gift box and a look that said he’d never stop blaming himself — but that he wasn’t going anywhere again.

Nyx ran.

No hesitation.

She wrapped her arms around him and clung to him like the memory of grief might pull her away if she let go.

“I missed you, Eli,” she whispered. “I missed you so much.”

“I know,” he said, burying his face in her hair. “I’m here now. For real.”

The crowd of students clapped as they hugged, some knowing the story, others simply knowing that this reunion meant something big had been made right.

As the party slowed, Felix sat on the rooftop again, chewing a stick of gum and staring up at the stars. He wasn't the kind of guy to cry. Or at least, he liked to believe that.

But something about seeing Nyx finally *happy* made his chest feel like it was too full.

The music pounded through the crowded hall of the school's grand party room, lights swirling and laughter echoing off the walls. It was the kind of celebration that felt electric, a release after all the dark days — the victory over Principal Grieves, the reclaiming of their school, and a promise of new beginnings.

Felix stood near the edge, watching his friends dancing and cheering, a soft smile tugging at his lips. But just as he was about to retreat into the background, a pair of hands grabbed him firmly by the arms.

"Felix! No way you're sitting this one out," shouted James with a teasing grin. "Come on, man, the party's just started!"

Before Felix could respond, another friend caught his other arm. "You're officially dragged into the madness. No backing out now!"

With playful protests muffled by laughter, Felix was pulled into the heart of the crowd. The vibrant chaos swallowed him — swirling colors, faces glowing with excitement, voices ringing out with joy.

Suddenly, amid the swirl of movement, Felix caught sight of Nyx. She was standing near the decorated stage, her eyes scanning the room until they locked with his. A soft smile broke across her face, and she began making her way toward him, weaving through the crowd with effortless grace.

Felix's breath hitched. The noise around them seemed to dim, fading into a soft hum beneath the pounding rhythm of his heartbeat.

Nyx stopped in front of him, reaching out and taking his hand in hers — warm, steady, grounding.

"Felix," she said quietly, "I'm so glad you're here."

His heart pounded harder. This was it — the moment he'd imagined during the endless nights of worry and hope.

Drawing in a steadying breath, "Nyx," he began, voice low but clear, "We've been through so much — pain, secrets, fights, and victories. But through it all, you've been the one thing I can always count on."

Nyx squeezed his hand, her eyes glistening faintly in the party lights.

Felix swallowed the lump in his throat. “I don’t know what tomorrow will bring. Maybe we’ll face more battles, or maybe the path will be smooth. But I do know this – I want to face it all with you. Will you be my girlfriend? Will you be my partner in this crazy, beautiful life?”

For a moment, Nyx said nothing, her eyes searching his face, filled with a mixture of surprise, warmth, and something softer – hope. Then, a slow, genuine smile spread across her lips.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice steady and sure, “I will.” Then she took out a chocolate from her purse “You earned this.” Felix smiled slowly taking the chocolate from her.

At once, the music seemed to swell around them, the crowd erupting into cheers and applause. Friends rushed forward, lifting Felix onto their shoulders, chanting his name. Laughter and joyful shouts filled the air, the celebration now fueled by their newfound bond.

Felix glanced down at Nyx, who was laughing and wiping a tear from her cheek, radiant in the glow of the party lights.

The noise and revelry were still there – but all Felix felt was the warmth of Nyx’s hand in his, and the quiet promise that they had each other.

As the crowd moved around them, Felix leaned closer, whispering, "Thank you for trusting me."

Nyx smiled, her eyes shining. "Thank you for never giving up on me."

And beneath the flashing lights, with the music carrying their laughter, they danced — not just as friends or classmates, but as something more.

Together, they had reclaimed their freedom. Together, they had found hope. And together, they would face whatever came next.

As the laughter and music from the celebration faded into the night, a shadow slipped silently away from the glowing party lights. Hidden in the darkened corridor outside the school, the figure waited — cloaked in shadows, fingers tightening around the heart-shaped locket that gleamed faintly in the dim light.

A slow, chilling smile curved his lips as he whispered, voice low and filled with menace:

"The time has come. It's time to pay, Felix."

His eyes burned with cold intent as he crushed the photo of Felix between his fingers. Flames flickered to life with the flick of a lighter, devouring the image in a tiny blaze. The dark figure's gaze shifted, lingering on

the other photo tucked away in his coat — the one of Nyx, hidden but never forgotten.

He turned away into the darkness, his footsteps echoing like a threat down the empty hall.

Back inside, Felix and Nyx still danced among their friends, unaware that danger was lurking just beyond the walls — a reckoning waiting to unfold.