



SLEEPING

BEAUTY

RECLAIMED

BY ALESSA

Sleeping Beauty Reclaimed

by Alessa

Chapter 1: The Painter

Clea surveyed the pancake house crowd from the corner of the room, her position on a raised level of coffee tables giving her a clear view of the majority of the shop's occupants. The faces in the crowd were methodically absorbed and compared with the ideal image she held in her head. Each face was then discarded as inferior, and she moved on to contemplate the next one, frustrated with the lack of suitable candidates in this city. She'd been to numerous locations over the past two weeks: posh clubs, trendy restaurants, and the like, all with the same goal in mind. She was searching for beauty. Not the artificial kind found in airbrushed and computer-generated images, but true, living beauty.

Clea Skymore was used to beauty. It surrounded her in her home, at work, at the parties she attended, and with the people she knew. She dealt in it, really, made her living by transferring the essence of the beauty of the human form from flesh to canvas. She was famous for it, revered by thousands because of her art. With their reverence came the demand for higher standards, the need to take what she'd produced previously and go beyond it. She needed to find a beauty, either male or female, who surpassed all her previous models. This was not an easy task. No one Clea saw met the image she had in her head. She wanted someone who was more than just a pretty face. Clea wanted to find a new kind of beauty, one that wasn't already plastered across magazine covers and movie screens. She wanted something new, something fresh, something out of the ordinary. But what she wanted wasn't here.

Sighing, Clea drained the last of her café mocha and tossed the plastic cup in the trash as she started to leave. When she walked past the counter, she spotted a young girl bent over her cell phone at a far table, her hunched form partially obscured by the crowd of people waiting in line to order.

Clea stopped and studied the girl; her interest peaked as she sensed potential. The girl was slender and thin-looking from what Clea could see above the table. Her head was lowered. Hair, which was almost blacker than black, fell down like silk to hide her face. It reached all the way to her lower back, like some obsidian veil cloaking her from preying eyes. As Clea watched, a hand reached up to push a few vagrant strands behind her ear, but they fell back to the same position shortly after the hand was removed. The plaid skirt, white shirt, and tie marked her as a high school student as much as the textbooks sitting next to her, the wear evident on the covers giving her the impression of a studious young schoolgirl. She was in her early teens, from what Clea could tell, though she still retained the look of a child in some aspects. A backpack was sprawled at her feet, and an unidentifiable drink was placed farther back on the table to avoid accidental spillage.

Clea moved forward slowly, casually approaching the girl she'd set as her new target. She twisted a chair around next to the teen and sank into it with a brief greeting.

"Hello."

The young girl started at Clea's sudden appearance, Clea's speech jolting her from her single-minded concentration on the cell phone screen. She looked around hesitantly, as if to verify that Clea wasn't speaking to someone else, and then settled her gaze on Clea's features.

Clea smiled as the girl looked at her. She had a round face with pale skin that seemed as if it would be incredibly smooth to touch. Eyes the colour of melted chocolate stared at her in surprise, and it was then that she noticed the girl's subtle Asian features. Her impossibly straight hair hung to her shoulders, and her dark, slightly tilted eyes were framed and almost covered by bangs so severe they seemed slashed with a razor. She was beautiful. No, she was stunning, and Clea knew she was looking at her new model.

"Can I help you?" The girl's voice was distant and timid; the question asked more out of general politeness than any real interest.

Clea smiled at the girl, her charm in full force as she gazed at the teen. She knew what the girl would see when she looked at her: her golden blonde hair was gathered in a ponytail that fell down to her shoulders, and sparkling blue eyes shined at her target, filled with warmth. She was dressed to kill in a blue silken blouse that highlighted her eyes, worn half-open to reveal a clinging white top underneath. Black pants hugged her thighs, though they were mostly hidden from the girl's view under the table.

"I'd like you to be my model."

"I'm not interested." The schoolgirl instantly dropped her gaze back to the cell phone, completely ignoring Clea's presence.

Clea was not phased; she'd dealt with resistance before. "My name's Clea Skymore. I'm an artist. I can make you famous."

"I'm not interested. Please leave me alone." The girl didn't even look up from her cell phone as she spoke quietly.

Clea smiled. She liked challenges. If the target played hard to get, then that just made Clea's eventual victory all the more sweet. And she would get what she wanted, guaranteed. Clea Skymore could be incredibly patient when she wanted to be. She leaned forward to speak softly in the girl's ear, her breath tickling the hair there.

"I *really* want you to be my new model. I won't take 'no' for an answer."

The teen jerked back quickly and clapped a hand over her ear. A light blush coloured her cheeks, and Clea realised another potential use for the young girl. Her smile turned into a smirk as her scouting instincts rose. The girl before her was quite attractive—a rare beauty, if somewhat on the young side. As Clea took another look at the teenager, she knew she wanted her more than just as a model. She

wanted to see the girl's blush repeated many more times, though preferably in situations that had the younger girl in her arms and her delicate lips pressed against Clea's own.

They stared at each other for several moments before the younger girl burst into action, sweeping her books and cell phone into her bag and standing in one swift motion. The girl practically ran out the door, and Clea let her. She'd seen a flicker of emotion cross the teen's face, and it intrigued her. Perhaps her advances weren't entirely misplaced. Clea's eyes gave the retreating little figure a quick scan and stored the image in her memory so that she'd be able to recognise her wherever she next saw her.

Clea had found what she'd been searching for—a girl of uncommon beauty. She didn't have the type of looks found in glamorous models—all glam and sparkling beauty. Hers was a more subtle Oriental beauty that needed the right kind of attention to bring it to light. It was internalised, shown only in subtle hints on the outside. She would look ravishing when captured by Clea's paintbrush.

Standing, Clea followed after the younger girl, her gaze stuck on the slight form moving along the street farther ahead of her. She was determined to win her over; she must in order to satisfy her own need for beauty. It was just a matter of time before she'd convince the teen to be hers and only hers. Now that she knew what she wanted, she could take her time, invite the girl right where she wanted, and then entice her. And when she did entice her.... She smiled widely at the thought, already planning what to do to her little model. She would learn very quickly that Clea Skymore always got what she wanted.

Chapter 2: The Schoolgirl

Ami Nakagawa looked up when someone called her name, and she mentally winced as she saw a familiar blonde woman waiting for her at the pancake shop ahead of her. She knew turning around wouldn't work. She'd tried that before, and the persistent artist had just followed her. Over the past two weeks, she'd been running into Clea daily, far too frequently to be considered a mere coincidence. At first, she was annoyed. Why did someone like Clea have to involve herself in Ami's life? She didn't want that kind of attention from a complete stranger. As much as the painter proclaimed her beautiful, Ami didn't believe a word of it. Clea was the beautiful one; that was easy enough to see, but the way she behaved scared her. Ami was just a normal person with enough of her own problems to worry about without having a mad painter stalking her. All she wanted was to be left alone, to lose herself in books, and to go back to having the painter ignore her like everyone else did.

"Hey," Clea fell in step with Ami as she walked past, her intention to ignore the blonde woman's existence failing when Clea tried to wind her arm around Ami's hand. Ami sidestepped to avoid the move; her reaction almost automatic, considering how many times Clea had tried that trick. "How was your day?"

The question had surprised her the first time Clea had asked it, as had the sincerity with which the woman had asked it. Normally, only her family members bothered to ask things like that.

"It was alright." Their actions had become routine, replayed countless times in the short time they'd known each other. At some point, Clea learned her name and picked up Ami's daily routine.

Ami hesitated for a second, as she always did with her token resistance, before the manners her mother had instilled in her took over.

"And yours?"

Clea smiled at her blindingly, "*Much* better now that I'm with you."

Ami would have been flattered if she hadn't already heard the same line every day for the past two weeks. Besides, she'd known the comment was empty the first time she'd heard it. Clea didn't care about her, she was probably just some pervert her parents had warned her about, trying to get into Ami's panties. Why anyone would go to so much trouble just for a quick tumble with a kid like herself confused her. Clea didn't seem like a professional artist to her.

A tug on her sleeve caught her attention, and Ami gave Clea a questioning look. Clea pointed to a small coffee shop ahead of them on the other side of the street.

"Let's go have a drink. My treat."

"If you wanted coffee, why didn't you get some earlier?"

Clea's smile looked like it belonged on a child's face, full of innocence that Ami couldn't believe was real.

"Because this store has some really delicious cake."

Ami sighed. "You make it sound like I actually have a choice in the matter."

Clea smirked at her playfully and grabbed Ami's wrist lightly. "Of course you don't."

Ami let herself be pulled along. It wasn't worth trying to argue over the matter with Clea. Ami knew she'd lose anyway. She always did.

The line at the coffee shop was a little long. As they waited to order, Ami's thoughts took on a serious tone.

"Why won't you leave me alone?" Her voice was lowered to avoid those near them in line catching the conversation, her tone devoid of emotion.

Clea's gaze was fixed on the menu ahead of them when she spoke, and she looked like she was giving her full attention to considering what to order. Her tone matched Ami's in seriousness: "Because I want you to be my model."

"My parents won't let me."

"I bet you haven't even asked them."

Ami snorted and looked away towards the scattered tables inside the shop, not really seeing them. "And I'm sure once you got me inside your '*studio*' you'd just try to molest me."

Clea's tone changed to one of outrage, and Ami could see the hurt look on the painter's face from the corner of her eye.

"Of course not. I'd never do such a thing."

"I'll believe that when you get your hand off my ass." Ami belatedly realised her voice had risen back to a normal speaking level when the old lady in front of them half-turned to give them a startled look. Ami looked at the floor with a slight blush.

Clea stuck her hands in her pockets. "Would it be so bad to step into my studio *just once*?"

Ami's answer was automatic. "Yes!"

For once, Clea looked directly at her without a smile on her face. "What are you so afraid of?"

The words were low, heard only by the two of them, but they made Ami freeze in place. What did the painter know about her? Nothing. She had no right to assume.... Realising she'd unconsciously clenched her fists, Ami forced herself to relax.

"I'm leaving."

Ami stepped out of line quickly before Clea could react. As soon as she was out the door, she fled.



Ami was out of breath by the time she arrived home. She let herself in with a key from her pocket, the lack of cars in the driveway telling her she was the first one home. Her mom would still be at the hospital, just getting off the morning shift. Her stepfather would get out of work in two hours. She took her school bag directly to her bedroom after neatly placing her shoes in a corner of the entranceway.

Her room was sparse, hardly decorated, and mostly devoid of furnishings. The furniture she had was all made of wood, a light oak that went well with the creamy pink walls and their white trim. Her bed was piled with blankets that formed a layer about half as thick as she was tall. A small bedside table held a sturdy blue lamp made of plastic so that it wouldn't break if it accidentally got knocked over. Ami tended to have a lot of accidents.

A large closet took up most of the wall opposite the bed, though it was barely half-full of clothing. Everything in it was long-sleeved. Ami had stopped wearing shorts and T-shirts a long time ago. She preferred clothing that covered her from head to toe, much to her mother's disappointment. She always said she should show off her body more, that she was going to overheat in such heavy clothing, even though Ami never did. The majority of the space in the closet was taken up by boxes filled with items she didn't need out in the open for daily use.

The only decorations in the room were two pictures hung on the walls—one of Mount Fuji, its peak covered with snow, and another of a sakura tree in full bloom. The pictures were special to her; they'd

been two of the last things her father had bought for her before he died four years ago, when she was ten. She liked them because they relaxed her and reminded her of the country her father came from. Something about them always seemed to calm her. The sakura tree one had shattered once when it fell off the wall, but Ami had it reframed the next day.

Ami removed her cell phone from its slot in her backpack, returning it to its normal spot on her desk. Her textbooks were piled next to it, with subjects she had homework on at the top of the stack to be completed before the night was over. She pulled open the first book, a math textbook, and flipped to the pages her homework problems were from. She stared at the first question without seeing it for several moments, her mind refusing to focus on the text in front of her and instead concentrating on a certain infuriating blonde woman.

Giving up with a sigh, she let her head fall to rest on her open math text. It wasn't that she didn't like the woman. Despite her annoying tendencies, she didn't seem like a bad person. She was self-centred, arrogant, and determined to have her own way, but that didn't make her bad. Just selfish. Ami smiled to herself. It was kind of endearing, the way Clea followed her around all the time like a puppy. Even if the woman's attention was shallow, it was still nice to have someone paying so much attention to her. It made her feel... special. Like she wasn't just some insignificant little person lost in a crowd.

Ami sighed. If circumstances had been different, she might have considered giving in to Clea's requests. But she was scared; she had a good reason to be. Her stepfather did not like homosexuality in any form. He'd nearly broken up with Ami's mother when he found out her daughter liked girls instead of boys, but they'd managed to work things out. Ami didn't want to do anything to jeopardise her mother's happiness, so she stopped talking about her feelings after her mother got remarried, telling her she simply didn't have anyone she liked at the moment. Her mother kept encouraging her to find a nice girl she could be friends with, regardless. But if her stepfather caught her being friends with another girl... the consequences would not be good. So she had no choice but to remain alone and friendless. Things were easier for her that way, for many reasons.

Chapter 3: A Challenge

"What's a cute kid like you doing all alone?"

Ami ignored the tall, blonde painter as she sat next to her on the park bench. She had an English text open in her lap, but she doubted she'd be able to concentrate on it now that Clea had shown up. An arm snaked its way around her shoulders and rested on the back of the park bench. Ami ignored it. Clea was just trying to get her to react. The best way she'd found to get rid of annoyances was to ignore them, but for some reason, her usual tactics weren't working on Clea. Probably because she wasn't really trying.

"Don't you have any friends?"

Ami looked up in surprise at the comment and then quickly looked away. "That's none of your business."

Ami felt Clea's arm twitch slightly behind her back as the woman shrugged. "I'm sorry, it was rude of me. But you're always walking alone or studying by yourself every time I see you. Must be lonely living like that."

Ami stared absently at the text and shrugged, "Not really. You get used to it."

Ami's personality didn't make it easy for others to get near her. In school, she'd always been described as cold and boring. But not only did she act differently, with her coal-black hair and Asian eyes, she also looked different from everyone else. No one had ever bothered to get close to her, and Ami's own poor social skills didn't help the matter. She didn't know how to handle people, so even if she did try to make friends, she'd just mess everything up. After all her failed relationships in middle and high school, she'd given up. She was better off alone anyway.

Clea frowned a little. "What if I was your friend?"

Ami blushed and glared at the woman sitting beside her, slightly hurt. "Don't make fun of me." She closed her textbook with a snap and shoved it into her book bag.

Standing, Ami tried to stalk off, but a hand on her wrist stopped her. She whirled to glare at Clea. The serious expression on the artist's face muted her anger.

"I'm not making fun of you, Ami."

Clea's tone was low, sincere. Ami stared at the ground. She wanted to believe the woman holding her hand, but she seemed so flippant all the time. It was hard to be certain that she was serious. She didn't resist when Clea bent forward so that their faces were only centimetres apart. She studied Ami's face, her eyes hard.

"You are always so serious. What are you so afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of anything." It was an empty protest; they both knew it.

Suddenly, she was being spun around and forced down on the park bench. Ami didn't have a chance to react to the movement. She blinked and found herself sitting on the bench with Clea holding both of her hands in her own. Clea's face loomed above her, their gazes locked. The lack of protest on her part surprised Ami as much as her own sudden breathlessness. Her mind went blank, and she simply stared at the woman emotionlessly.

"If you're not afraid, then why won't you model for me?" Clea's voice was like melted honey over cold steel. Ice blue eyes seemed to stare straight through her. "If you're not afraid, then it won't be a problem for you to come to my studio just once."

Ami swallowed hard and tried not to feel so much like a cornered rabbit.

"Just once, and then you'll leave me alone?"

Clea nodded solemnly.

Ami considered her options and thought about them carefully. If all she had to do was show up at Clea's studio once and then she was free again, why was she wavering? Clea was offering her a chance to escape her constant presence, a chance to be all by herself again. She could have the painter gone from her life once more. She could go back to being alone once more. That's what she wanted, right?

"Or are you afraid?"

There wasn't any harm in it. Her stepfather couldn't object to a single painting.

Ami made up her mind. "I'm not afraid. I'll do it once. Only once. Just so I can get you out of my life again."

Clea smirked at her, and Ami got the distinct impression that she'd somehow lost, though she wasn't sure how.

"Good," Clea pulled away, acting nothing like the woman that had pinned Ami to the bench seconds earlier. She dropped a small piece of paper on Ami's lap. "This is my card. Stop by sometime tomorrow after school, whenever you're free."

Ami glanced down at the small white card, seemingly incongruous with Clea's existence in its plain austerity. The address of her residence was listed in bold font in the centre of the card. Ami looked up to make a comment to Clea, but the blonde painter was already gone.

Chapter 4: A Sleeping Beauty

Clea smiled as she heard the doorbell ring. That would be Ami, the reluctant beauty, about to step into her world. She was looking forward to their session. She had to try to convince Ami to come back to her after just one painting. Not only that, but she had to entice the girl enough that she could eventually work her to the point where she wanted her: naked and in bed.

Getting her here had been the easy part, once she'd found which buttons to press to make Ami react. It was like a challenge for her—a contest. Without the challenging element, Clea wasn't sure if she'd be as interested. It added something to the conquest: a sense of triumph and the consent of her model. In some ways, she was more attracted to Ami's defiance than anything else; it was a refreshing change from the normal models that jumped at her every whim. Ami was a beautiful girl, certainly, but Clea had pretty much any beauty she wanted at her disposal.

She wasn't in love with Ami. The sheer idea of being in love with a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl was extraordinarily absurd to her. She just wanted the girl's body; she wanted to study and paint one of the few people who resisted her. And maybe something else on the side, but whatever it was, it certainly wasn't love.

Smiling, Clea pulled open the door and ushered Ami into her lavish apartment. She left the door unlocked so that Ami could remain at ease. No need to scare the girl off. Ami was tense; Clea could tell by the stiff way she held herself. Over the past few weeks, Clea had become an expert at reading Ami's mannerisms, not a hard task considering the schoolgirl's social ineptitude. She didn't seem to know how to mask what she was actually feeling.

Ami was interesting, in a strange way. She was shy and polite outwardly, quiet and timid, but with an unapproachable exterior, as if she held herself away from the rest of the world. And she was never rude, even when provoked. The teen's temper was a source of amusement for Clea, buried as it was under the girl's cold and serious exterior. Her ethnicity shone through in the way she restrained her feelings and hid them from people around her. Clea would often do something that angered Ami, just so she could see the spark of temper hiding inside her, yet never coming out to surface, and for some strange reason, it made her even more captivating in Clea's eyes.

The girl looked around awkwardly, and Clea stepped forward to lead her through her sparse living room and into her spacious bedroom. Ami balked at first, but Clea pointed to the canvas and easel set up to their left.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to molest you. It's just easier for me to paint people in here; there's more space to work with."

The comment was true for the most part; it was easiest for her to work from her bedroom. It also gave her the best chance at seducing Ami. The girl gave her a disbelieving look, but she didn't protest.

"Lie down on the bed, facing me, however you feel comfortable."

Ami complied wordlessly, lying stiffly on the bed with her nervous eyes glued on Clea. The artist was surprised at how docile Ami was being. The girl probably just wanted to get this over with as fast as possible so that she could leave.

"Are you comfortable?"

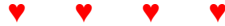
Ami nodded silently.

Walking over to the CD player on her dresser, Clea pressed play. Classical music filled the room, low and soothing. It was designed to help the teenager relax, to calm her enough that Clea could paint a more natural picture.

Ami gave her a quizzical look but said nothing as Clea squirted a bit of creamy blue onto her palette and began recreating the fall of her bedsheets on the canvas before her. Clea concentrated on her work, smiling to herself as she noticed Ami slowly relaxing. She could tell the girl was trying to force herself to stay alert and losing the battle. In the end, the quiet tones of the music had won over Ami's consciousness, and she was asleep before the painting was half finished.

Clea was glad she'd saved the face for last. Ami looked so precious when she was sleeping; the worried lines of her face were washed away to give her a look of innocence and purity. It was easy for anyone to see that she was still a child hidden behind her studious demeanour and mistrusting glances, and

Clea knew some rich lady was just going to adore the painting; it should fetch her a good price. Clea faded out the background of the painting a bit, adding tones of white to give the piece a more surreal, angelic feel. Smiling to herself, she admired her work and then set it aside to begin her next task.



Ami was dreaming. She'd never felt this relaxed when she was awake, though she couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so well either. She was warm, cushioned on a blue cloud with a heavy, warm blanket on top of her. And there were soft lips pressed against her, demanding deeper access. Dreams like this weren't new to her, and she gave in to the other mouth's demands, deciding to make the most of her dream before her alarm clock went off.

Her arms rose to encircle strong shoulders while she melted beneath an insistent mouth. Small sighs of pleasure escaped her dream as another girl's lips explored her mouth. The fact that she was on blue sheets seemed odd to her; her sheets should be dark green, but she knew without looking that she was lying on top of blue ones. She ignored that for a moment; it was probably just another inconsistency of the dreaming world. Her mind went blank as the ever-exploring lips caressed the hollow of her neck, and she shivered. Whoever she was dreaming of was certainly a good kisser.

Hands were trailing over her body now, inside her school shirt and along the sides of her slender legs. Her eyes lazily opened to take in the wispy blonde bangs tickling her face and a long blonde ponytail falling over one shoulder to pool on the bed beside them. Blue eyes filled with lust sparkled down at her smugly as they broke apart, and Ami gasped for air.

Ami's eyes widened as she realised that she wasn't dreaming, and she tried to push the other person off of her. Clea was.... They had been....

Ami reacted blindly, her first instinct being to run out of there before Clea did something else to her.

Her hands were caught before she could struggle free, and Clea pinned her to the bed.

"Get off me." The demand sounded weak, even to her own ears.

"No," Clea leaned over her until their noses nearly touched and their breath mingled.

Ami struggled once more, though she knew it was in vain. No amount of force could move Clea off of her, being half her size and age. She twisted underneath the painter, trying anything to wiggle her way to freedom, but it didn't work.

Panting, she waited to catch her breath before speaking again. "Please, get off me. I'm scared."

"You liked it, Ami."

"No!" That wasn't something Ami wanted to think about at the moment.

Clea leaned down so that their lips brushed against each other briefly. Her eyes were half-closed and distracted. "I'll let you go if you can honestly say you didn't like that."

"I didn't like it." Ami knew the words were hollow even as she said them.

"Say it so that I believe you."

Clea's mouth descended on her before she could respond. Her words were swallowed, and she felt herself reacting almost involuntarily to Clea's kiss. She was giving in, and she knew it. She couldn't help it, not when it had been so long since another girl had touched her like this, particularly one as gorgeous as Clea. She wanted it, too, on some deep level that told her consciousness to take a hike. She reacted; she didn't have a choice not to, as her body rebelled against her.

Clea abandoned Ami's mouth to trace wet kisses along her neck. Teeth grazed her earlobe, and Ami turned her head to the side to give Clea better access, shivering with pleasure. Her hands were released so that Clea could run her hands over Ami's small body again, and Ami gasped, awash in so many different and confusing sensations.

Clea leaned back with a smirk, and Ami used that opportunity to quickly push the blonde painter to the side. Ami was out the door before Clea could voice her protest. The door slammed shut as the painter rose in pursuit, but Ami was gone by the time Clea reached the hallway.

Chapter 5: Loneliness

Ami walked down the street, her eyes absently scanning the street ahead of her. Her eyes strayed to the coffee shop ahead of her, but there was no familiar figure waiting for her. As she walked past, she couldn't help looking inside the shop and intently scanning its patrons. True to her word, Clea had left Ami alone after Ami had modelled for her over a week ago. But now that she was alone, she knew she didn't want to be. She kept expecting Clea to pop out and surprise her somehow; she kept hoping she'd turn a corner and find Clea waiting for her.

She should be accustomed to being alone. For the past three years, at least, she'd been by herself. It was something she was familiar with. It's what she'd thought she'd wanted, for her own good. But now that everything was over, she'd changed her mind. She'd gotten a taste of something better than what she had, and she couldn't stop herself from wanting more. She hadn't realised how lonely she had been until Clea was gone.

It was strange, thinking of the painter like that. When Clea had been around, she'd been an annoyance, but at least she'd been there. She was someone who kept Ami company, despite how cold and distant Ami reacted to her. She was someone she could talk to. Ami even missed the way Clea teased her, confused her, angered her. She felt so many mixed emotions when she was near Clea, and she was only now beginning to sort them out. She didn't dislike the painter, but she hated herself for wanting Clea around. It was more than just the woman's presence that she wanted.

Turning down a side lane, Ami found the secluded park bench that she often sat at. Sinking down onto the wood and metal, she let her hand rest lightly against her closed lips. Clea had made her interest in Ami more than obvious. It was clear in the way she constantly touched Ami, frequently in very inappropriate ways. But the kisses—they had been something entirely else. She could still remember the heat of Clea above her, their breath mixing, and Clea's lips in her neck. The memory made her shiver, and she blushed slightly. She'd known she was attracted to the woman from the moment they'd met, that much was obvious. Who wouldn't be attracted to Clea's good looks? But she hadn't realised how attracted she was until Clea kissed her. Ami had enjoyed it. A lot. More than she remembered enjoying kissing anyone in school.

She wanted to be with Clea again. She wanted to go back to having Clea near her, having Clea pay attention to her. But she didn't know if Clea still wanted her. Sure, the painter had said repeatedly how much she wanted Ami as her model, but Ami had always thought that was just a ploy to lure her into bed with her. And she'd gotten Ami in bed, just not the way either of them had thought.

Ami looked down at her hands as they absently toyed with a small white card. Even if Clea still wanted her, there was the problem of her stepfather. If he found out.... But how much longer could Ami keep denying herself a relationship? If not Clea, then she'd eventually find someone else she liked. And her stepfather didn't necessarily have to find out. He worked from nine to five, so as long as Ami was home before five, he'd never know. It was usual for Ami to be out on weekend mornings, normally saying she had a project to work on or that she was studying in the library. She could at least try, right? As long as her stepfather didn't find out, there was no harm in it, and Ami was very good at hiding things if she wanted to. She'd had a lot of practise.



Clea turned the TV off and listened, wondering if she'd imagined the sound. She heard a second knock and stood swiftly to answer the door. She was surprised to find Ami standing on the other side of the door, her eyes bashfully downcast, looking at the floor with blush on her cheeks. Clea smiled widely and stepped to the side to let Ami enter if she so chose.

"Good afternoon."

Ami walked in without looking at Clea, her gaze absent. She was silent for several moments, and Clea let her take her time.

"Do you still want me as a model?"

Clea nodded, though Ami's back was to her. Stepping forward, she entwined her arms around Ami's shoulders. Ami tensed, as Clea had expected her to, but she didn't step away.

"I do."

"Then I'll be your model." The young girl relaxed slightly in her arms, and Clea let herself grin from joy at having her little model back.

"Wonderful!" Clea let her cheer show in her voice. That meant Ami wasn't upset about what Clea had done earlier. Taking the girl's presence in her apartment as an invitation, Clea leaned down to kiss Ami's cheek. She delighted in the shiver and small intake of breath caused by Clea's lips on bare flesh, her warm lips lightly tasting Ami's skin.

She broke away after a second to whisper into Ami's ear, "Does that mean you're interested in being more than just my model?" Clea let her right hand brush across Ami's stomach and felt the skin tighten through the fabric of the schoolgirl's shirt.

"Y- Yes."

Clea's smile widened, and she gently spun the smaller girl to face her. One hand tilted Ami's chin up so that she faced her, downcast eyes now focusing on Clea's own. Clea leaned forward slowly, her own eyes focused on the pink of Ami's lips. She stopped a breath short of her goal and felt the teen's breathing quicken in excitement. Clea's lips traced soft kisses across Ami's cheek, and she placed her hands on Ami's shoulders to hold the girl still, feeling her tremble when she moistened her lips. Both of their eyes drifted shut when, finally, Clea closed in against Ami's mouth, bridging the gap between them with sealed lips. Ami melted against her, and Clea knew she'd won. Ami was hers now, beyond a doubt. Clea was certain she would enjoy her precious prize.

Chapter 6: Her Model

Ami held her body perfectly still while her eyes followed Clea's every movement. Brush in hand, Clea alternated her intense gaze between Ami's form and the canvas in front of her. Ami loved Clea's eyes, particularly when they were focused solely on her. It was intoxicating and overwhelming at the same time. This was the fifth painting she'd posed for, and each time Clea had convinced her to bare more skin. Of course, she'd give a token protest, and then Clea would swoop down and bury her protests under kisses that left Ami wanting so much more. Then Clea would have Ami right where she wanted her, showing more skin than before and without the presence of mind to protest.

She didn't mind; she only protested so that Clea would kiss her like that. Not that Clea needed any provocation to start making out with Ami; they did that frequently enough. It was more of a game for her. A way to pretend that she wasn't softening under Clea's seductive lips and insistent touches. One thing Ami had been adamant about was that Clea not leave any marks. Clea had pouted slightly at first, but Ami had explained that her stepfather didn't know she liked girls and that she didn't want him to find out. Reluctantly, Clea agreed.

Ami had started spending almost the entirety of her free time, after she got done with classes and before she had to be home, with Clea. The painter would meet her after school, and they'd simply be

together. Sometimes they talked, and sometimes they just sat quietly while Ami did her homework and Clea painted. More often than not, they ended up in Clea's apartment, with Ami pressed against some random piece of furniture while Clea explored the limits of the boundaries Ami had set. And then Ami would have to break things off so she could be home by five to eat dinner with her family. Her stepfather insisted on it, and he would be furious if Ami was so much as a minute late.

They were barely two weeks together, and Ami knew she was changing. She was opening up more, for certain; she'd started talking to Clea about her past and her daily life. Ami was also learning about Clea, though the painter rarely talked much about her past. And there were other things Ami had picked up just from observing Clea, like the woman's fondness for making every one of her paintings blatantly erotic and sensual. For instance, Ami was currently draped across the living room floor on her stomach, her white school cotton shirt fully unbuttoned and off one shoulder, exposing her thin rib cage. A small portion of her lower back was uncovered due to the fall of her plaid skirt. She had one sock on, and her legs were partially spread. One arm was bent above her, and the other bare arm stretched out to the side. A large bruise on her back from when she'd collided with the edge of her desk the previous night was strategically covered by her shirt, while the remaining sleeve covered another smaller bruise.

Clea had asked her about the bruises several days ago, after she'd worked up a corner of Ami's shirt while they were making out and found a large, fading mark on Ami's side. She questioned her every time a new bruise appeared, but Ami's demeanour switched instantly from the cheerful schoolgirl she often acted like to an intensely serious gaze at even the slightest mention of black and blue on her skin. As she'd told Clea, being a klutz with pale skin, accidents came looking for her. And every time Clea tried to question her further, she'd kiss Clea and let their mouths take away the painter's worries. If Clea could distract her with kisses, then she could do the same to Clea.

Memories of their first kiss still echoed in her head, to be replayed at night when she was stuck alone in her bedroom. For the moment, kissing was all Ami would let Clea do. Not that Clea listened to her much. The painter's experienced hands had mapped out the shape of Ami's body long ago, but Ami refused to let her school uniform come off, and Clea had accepted that for now. But she could tell Clea was getting impatient, and Ami's own resolve was rapidly crumbling. She wanted it as much as Clea did—to let Clea completely inside her heart. It'd been so long since her last relationship with a girl in sixth grade. She knew Clea would make her feel good; she already drove Ami's head into the clouds with her kisses.

But she was afraid. What if Clea was just after sex? There were the paintings, yes, but from the start, Clea had also been trying to get into Ami's pants at the same time as she was convincing her to be a model. Ami was afraid that if it ever came to that, Clea wouldn't want her anymore. She hated the fact that she was only fourteen and probably a burden to Clea. She didn't want to go back to being alone again. She'd already been through that once, and she knew how horrible it would be a second time, how lonely it would be. More than anything, she didn't want to go back to being friendless, lonely, and ignored. Everyone she ever cared about always left her. Her father had died when she was only ten. She had no friends, and her only girlfriend in sixth grade had broken up with her after less than a month. For the longest time, it had just been Clea and her mother, but her mother was usually working odd

hours, so she didn't see her for very long each day. It was inevitable that Clea would leave her too, eventually, because what could she possibly see in a kid like her? She was convinced this was only a short romantic fling for Clea, a forbidden pleasure she found in the strange and lonely schoolgirl. She knew it was only a matter of time before she cut her out of her existence and moved on with her life. Clea was already risking so much to be in this relationship, but Ami couldn't give it up now. She just couldn't.

Familiar, comforting hands creeping under the fabric of her shirt interrupted her thoughts, signalling that Clea had finished the painting. She let herself be rolled onto her back, with her hands pinned above her head by Clea's own. Her mouth was claimed, invaded by an adventurous tongue, as she immersed herself in the feeling of a warm body pressing her into the floor and hungry lips possessing her own. Thoughts faded, and she let herself drift away in pleasure.

Chapter 7: Her Lover

Clea watched as Ami settled herself on the bed for another painting. She loved painting Ami in bed; it always brought to mind such... interesting... thoughts. Like right now, when she was getting images flashing through her head of her small, naked body tangled in the sheets and pillows. She smiled to herself and resolved to eventually make something like that into a painting. But before she could do that, she needed to get Ami satisfactorily posed for her current painting. Clea had always preferred a hands-on approach when dealing with her models.

Ami smiled at her as Clea approached the bed, a beautifully rare smile on an otherwise serious little face, that seemed to be for Clea alone. Tracing a hand along the girl's jawline, she leaned down to capture her already parted lips. Ami melted into her, relaxing under Clea's hands as she repositioned Ami's limbs to fit the picture that had already formed in her mind. Judging from the lack of protest, Ami was getting used to Clea's touches. Which meant that it was time for Clea to test where the new boundaries in their relationship lay.

Deft hands unbuttoned Ami's shirt, and Clea's mouth moved down the newly exposed skin. Ami's hands twisted in the sheets from where Clea had placed them above the girl's head. Clea let her hands wander to the front of Ami's school skirt, swiftly undoing the buttons on its side. She pulled her hands away before Ami had a chance to voice the protest that was growing on her lips. Clea let her hands slide between Ami's thighs, parting them easily and arranging Ami's legs to her liking. Clea swirled her tongue in the soft dimple of Ami's belly button, producing an infectious chuckle from the young girl beneath her that made Clea's heart flutter. She didn't want to wait; she couldn't wait. She wanted to pull off Ami's skirt right now and ravish the child senseless. But it was too early; Ami was still thinking coherently.

Clea pulled away, knowing she wouldn't be able to control herself for much longer. As it was, she was barely able to leave the sweet and tasty skin bared to her. She surveyed her work with a professional

eye and found the flushed, panting, slender girl on the bed to be much to her liking. With a self-satisfied smirk in place, Clea picked up a brush and started to capture the youthful form of her latest beauty onto canvas.



Ami absently wondered off when Clea started kissing her, the painter's weight a gentle force above her. She must have fallen asleep again; she always did when Clea painted her on the bed. She couldn't help it. Clea's bed was so much softer than her bed at home, and the comfy sheets felt wonderful underneath her skin. Clea's scent was all around her—a heady mix of cinnamon and musk that was ingrained in the blankets and pillows. It was so easy to relax here and let herself drift. She could forget the worries that plagued her in the waking world and be at ease.

Ami shivered as Clea's hands ran across her bare shoulder, and she tried to bring her hands up to encircle Clea's neck as she licked a trail from Ami's ear to her collarbone. The hands finishing undoing her skirt brought her mind to full alert, and she tried to twist her hips away from Clea's hands. The movement only helped Clea pull the fabric away from Ami's skin and partway off her hips.

"Clea, stop!"

Ami's protest seemed to have some effect on Clea because the woman paused in her movements to look at Ami. Clea's gaze was gentle and caring. She ran a hand along Ami's chin and then lightly kissed Ami's closed lips. Blonde bangs tickled her nose while Clea nuzzled the side of her little face before whispering in her ear.

"Please, let me get closer, Ami. You're a beautiful girl. I want you."

The words made Ami shiver, and she couldn't deny wanting the same. It was going to happen tonight; she was certain of that. She couldn't do anything to physically stop Clea. She didn't want to stop Clea. A hand caressing her face drove her thoughts away, and she surrendered to the sensations flooding her young body. Ami's school skirt was finally drawn fully off, and she helped kick it away. She gasped and tilted her head to the side when Clea touched her bare leg. Her hips bucked at the painter's caressing fingers, which traced like brush strokes along her thin limbs and sent more gasps spilling from Ami's lips.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Clea's voice near her ear made Ami turn her head to face the artist. She blushed when she caught a glimpse of Clea's naked body hovering over her own. She felt so small, and her heartbeat sped up as Clea smiled at her protectively, her eyes promising many good things. Ami's only answer was a strangled moan as Clea closed her mouth on Ami's lips, her eyes half-closed in pleasure. Clea watched her with emerald eyes filled with desire, her gaze fixed on Ami's face in a way that made her blush increase. How adorable! Clea smiled. She looks just like a little red tomato. Her free hand parted the schoolgirl's thighs so that she could settle between them.

The painter leaned down until their noses touched. "Let me make you feel even better than you do now."

Clea's mouth covered Ami's own, and she closed her eyes. Clea's hand left her briefly, then returned to stroke her again when her open palm cupped one small breast. Ami's eyes shot open, the girl's mouth swallowing her embarrassment at the audacity. She twisted her slim torso wildly under Clea, not sure whether she was trying to get closer to or further away from the woman's touch. But soft fingers only found their way further down her chest as Ami hooked her legs behind Clea's naked back. It embarrassed her intensely, this gentle invasion of Clea's fingers. Just when she thought she was getting used to it, they would explore even more of her body, or they'd start moving in a way that made her breath hitch. Light kisses rained across her forehead and face to distract her and keep her mind off the burning excitement rising inside of her. Ami's hands grasped tightly onto Clea's neck like a shipwrecked castaway clutching to the life raft, a slowly fading point of rescue amidst the heat of their entwined bodies.

And then, all of a sudden, Clea pulled away.

Ami blinked in surprise as the touches stopped, and her mind was shocked back into a semblance of coherency, like dumping a pail of cold water over a person who'd just stepped out of a hot tub.

"Clea?"

A finger over her lips silenced her. That and her legs around Clea's hips were the only remaining points of contact between them. Clea's eyes were serious as she spoke, her tone flat.

"Tell me to stop, Ami. If you don't want this, just say one word, and we'll quit. I'd hate to force anything on you, sweetheart."

Ami could tell how much Clea was fighting with herself to say those words. The woman's pain and worry were written in the lines of her face, and the conflicting emotions matched Ami's own. She was surprised that Clea would offer this; she'd thought Clea had always been aiming to take what she wanted, but once again, Ami found herself in the wrong.

With her outstretched arms, Ami pulled Clea closer to herself. She smiled at Clea, relaxing her body beneath the woman and wondering why she'd never noticed how Clea seemed to fit so perfectly next to her.

"I need this, Clea. Please. I *want* you too."

Clea nodded in response and positioned herself beside the small girl, her eyes holding onto Ami's own. Clea was kissing her urgently, her mouth moving all over Ami's face, neck, and shoulders as she strained to get closer to her. One of Clea's hands worked between their bodies to stroke Ami; the other one tangled in Ami's hair. Their love was soft and gentle. They moved together, trying to bring their bodies as close as possible to each other. Ami arched her back to meet Clea's hands on her chest, her head thrown back against the pillows, her small frame writhing. She couldn't keep track of the sounds

that fell from her mouth; she only knew that they seemed to coincide with the increasing urgency in Clea's own movements.

And then it was all over as she eased herself into Clea's protective embrace with a soft moan. The world around them stilled, the perfect silence broken only by their hurried breathing as the young girl and her lover struggled to catch their breath. Ami had trouble keeping her eyes open when Clea pulled the covers out from under her. Her entire body felt warm and relaxed as Clea easily rolled Ami into her arms, repositioning the covers over them. Ami entwined her arms around Clea's neck before letting her eyes drift shut, her head cushioned against her lover's chest. She fell asleep almost immediately.



Clea absently ran a hand through Ami's hair as she watched the girl sleep, her movements light enough not to wake Ami. She loved doing this to her. Passing fingers through the inky blackness of her silky hair felt like holding midnight in her hands. The girl was a beautiful angel with so much to learn about herself. Clea pulled a few strands of hair away from Ami's forehead and placed a kiss on the skin there. Ami stirred slightly at the touch, chocolate eyes blinking at her as if unwilling to give up slumber. The almond-shaped eyes focused on Clea's face, and she smiled. Clea found herself smiling in response. She leaned down to kiss Ami on the lips.

"What time is it?" Ami asked absently after they broke away.

Clea peered over Ami's bare shoulder at the digital clock next to her bed. "8:45."

Ami froze in Clea's arms for a brief second as her mind processed the information. She cursed and shot out of bed, startling Clea with her haste as she rapidly dressed.

"*Oh my God!* My stepdad's going to kill me for being late!" Ami only glanced at Clea briefly as she gathered her things, but even that fraction of a second was enough for Clea to notice the panic and fear in Ami's eyes.

"I'm sure it'll be alright, sweetheart. Just tell him you lost track of time studying in the library or something."

"No! He still won't like the fact that I'm late, no matter the reason."

Clea rose from the bed, not caring about her nakedness, and grabbed Ami's arm lightly before the girl could completely walk out the door.

"I'll see you tomorrow?"

Her words seemed to surprise Ami partially out of her panic, and she stopped, nodding silently. Stretching up on her tiptoes, Ami kissed Clea quickly before running out the door.

Clea couldn't help but feel a little uneasy when Ami left. Her earlier words hadn't sounded like the normal worries of a teenager. There was a note of strain in them, and maybe even real fear.

Clea shut the door as soon as Ami disappeared into the elevator and returned to the bedroom. Her new painting caught her eye, and she absently ran her fingers over the dry paint, tracing out the pattern of one of the bruises she remembered seeing on Ami earlier that had been left out of the painting. Why couldn't she believe Ami's excuses about where the bruises had come from? Why did the mark on Ami's right arm give her the impression of a large hand? Ami had said she was clumsy, but never once had she tripped or accidentally bumped into anything while in Clea's presence.

Pulling on her pants, Clea stalked over to the window seat of her bedroom, the large glass panes displaying the city lights stretching out below her. She wondered if any of the figures bustling on the street far below her were Ami. The young girl was probably halfway home by now. Clea cracked the window open, the cool evening air swirling her hair around her face. She inhaled the fresh air, letting the breeze play with her hair in an attempt to ease her troubled thoughts. Clea only felt distraught like this when she had a lot on her mind, and right now, her mind seemed particularly stuck on a certain young girl.

She let her head loll back against the glass, her eyes staring vacantly at the street eight stories below her. In her mind, she pictured the bruises on Ami's small body. She remembered sitting here a few days ago with Ami straddling her lap as they kissed. Then Clea's fingers brushed a bruise on the girl's side, making Ami wince and break away. There were too many bruises to be a coincidence. There was something going on that Ami refused to talk about.

Sighing, Clea let her hair hang out the window, the strands of it flying in the cold stream of air while she fought hard to stop her eyes from tearing up. She had no choice but to wait until Ami wanted to talk about it. She couldn't do anything to help Ami until she had a better idea of what was going on.



An angry voice assaulted Ami, her head spinning, her cheek burning from where she'd been hit. A fist connected with her stomach, knocking her backwards from the force. Air rushed past her as she fell, her eyes widening in shock just before her head smacked into one of the steps. She blinked and found herself staring at the carpet at the foot of the stairs she'd just tumbled down. So many places on her body hurt that it was hard to determine exactly where she'd been injured. She could hear feet descending the stairs, and she tried to rise to get away. Her right arm refused to respond from where it was twisted under her; she could barely feel it. The feet reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped on her back on their way out the door. Ami cried out in pain as the pressure made her arm flare with pain. The front door slammed shut on her cries. Ami could hear a car engine rev and then pull out of the driveway before her vision faded into darkness.

Chapter 8: Secrets

Clea was worried. Or, she had been worried five days ago when Ami hadn't stopped by her apartment like usual. Now her worrying was taking on a more frantic edge as she prowled past all the areas she and Ami had visited in the two months they'd known each other. Ami hadn't been to school for at least the past three days. She wasn't anywhere Clea could think to check. Even if Ami were avoiding her, she wouldn't have skipped school. Something bad must have happened.

Clea walked out of the elevator in her apartment complex when it reached the eighth floor, her floor, and she pulled out the keys to her apartment. She stepped into the short hall and blinked at the sight of a small figure sitting on the floor beside her door, her head between her knees and hair spilling forward to cover eyes Clea knew were fixed on the carpet. The cast on her right arm sharpened Clea's worry, and she stepped forward quickly to pull Ami into a hug, careful of the girl's injured arm.

Ami jumped slightly, but her left hand grabbed the front of Clea's shirt. Ami's eyes were closed, and Clea could tell the girl was trying to avoid looking into her eyes.

Unlocking the door quickly, she pulled Ami's weak body inside and settled her onto the couch. Ami moved mechanically, her eyes trained to the floor, while she was pulled onto Clea's lap. Her head fell onto Clea's shoulder, and Clea ran her hand lightly down Ami's back to relieve the tension she felt there. She stopped when Ami winced and mewled in pain, her hand tightening its hold on Clea's shirt.

"What happened, sweetheart?"

Ami spoke into Clea's shoulder, her body trembling slightly. "I fell down the stairs. My Mom didn't want me to leave the house for a while, but I talked her out of it." She paused for a moment before releasing a shaky breath, "I'm sorry I didn't call or anything."

"It's okay; don't worry about it." Clea knew that wasn't the whole truth, but she didn't press Ami about it. She tightened her arms around the little girl as much as she could without hurting her and kissed Ami's hair. After a few minutes of silence, Ami hesitantly looked up. Clea kept her eyes gentle, trying hard not to show how much it hurt her to see the pain in Ami's expression. She kissed her again, determined to remove the hurt from the schoolgirl's beautiful face.



"You're having lunch with me tomorrow."

Ami looked up from where she was curled against Clea's side, their naked bodies entwined under the covers of Clea's bed. Her broken arm was settled gently across Clea's chest, still in a cast after two weeks.

"Okay. Don't I usually?" Ami loved the weekends. She normally came over around 10 a.m. and spent the majority of the day with Clea.

Clea ruffled her hair playfully. "Yes, but tomorrow's a *special* lunch. I'm taking you out on a date."

"Really?" Ami half sat up in excitement.

Clea laughed and pulled Ami up to straddle her hips. "Yes, really. Unless you don't want to."

Ami mock-pouted as Clea teased her. "Of course I want to, silly!"

"Good. Then it's settled." Clea's hands traced a path from Ami's hips down the outside of her legs, pausing to trace the fading outline of a bruise on Ami's right thigh. "Oh, and make sure you wear something dressy, something other than your school uniform."

Ami was instantly curious. "Where are you taking me?"

Clea sat up then and lifted her thighs so that Ami was cradled against Clea's chest. "You'll find out tomorrow."

Before Ami could protest, Clea captured Ami's mouth with her own and started moving her hips in a way that instantly distracted Ami from other thoughts.



They arrived at the restaurant early; it was either that or be late because Clea couldn't keep her hands off her date. Clea had been the one to suggest they leave the apartment and save the bedroom romp until after their meal. A valet came to take Clea's car as soon as she pulled up to the ritzy Japanese restaurant she'd chosen to impress Ami. And her little girlfriend certainly was impressed, her eyes going wide as she noticed the restaurant and some well-known and well-dressed people inside it. What Ami didn't notice was that they also turned a few heads.

They made a striking pair—the famous painter Clea Skymore and her latest vision of beauty. Ami was dressed in a white dress and a blue long-sleeved blouse that went well with Clea's own tight black pants and white print shirt with long sleeves. Her arm was firmly attached to Ami's slim waist as they followed a waiter to their reserved table. Clea caught a photographer taking a picture of them out of the corner of her eye. By tomorrow morning, the fashion magazines would probably already have picked apart Ami's appearance, trying to figure out what about the little teenager had caught the painter's eye.

They were seated at a small table near the back of the restaurant, Clea's usual spot, and Clea let her eyes concentrate only on the vision of loveliness seated across from her. She'd been here enough times to know the menu by heart, and a quick glance confirmed that the wine list hadn't changed since her last visit. Her eyes caught on a particular white wine that was a favourite of hers, and she idly wondered how Ami's mouth would taste after the girl had drank some. Smiling to herself, Clea ordered

a bottle before the waiter left. Ami's eyes bulged, and Clea knew she'd looked at the price for a single bottle of that vintage.

"Don't even think about the prices; get whatever you'd like."

Ami looked up at her in surprise. "But everything's so expensive, I feel bad..."

Clea smiled gently at her and waved away the young girl's concerns. She laid her closed menu across her plate. "You're forgetting who I am," she gave Ami a mischievous smile. "Or did you think I was bluffing when I said I was a famous painter?" Ami blushed, and Clea continued, "Besides, I like spending money on my hard-working models, so don't worry about it."

"Japanese or not, I've never been to a restaurant like this, so I don't know what half of these things are." Ami blushed and averted her gaze to the tablecloth. "Do you want to order for me?"

Clea reached across the table to cover Ami's hand with her own as she took Ami's menu and set it on her own. "Do you like seafood?"

Ami nodded, and Clea made up her mind about what to order for the girl. The waiter returned shortly and poured a glass of wine for each of them. He looked at Clea questioningly, waiting for their order.

Clea handed him the menus. "I'll have the teriyaki chicken and the seafood tempura for the young lady."

Ami gave her a surprised look as the waiter walked away, probably remembering how expensive those two dishes were. Clea spoke before Ami could protest, "Your family doesn't eat out often?"

Ami blinked and then shook her head slightly. "Not since I was a little kid, at least. My stepfather doesn't like eating out."

"Stepfather? Your parents are divorced?"

Another slight shake, "No. My father died in a car accident when I was ten."

Clea could tell that the man was well missed. Ami had never mentioned her family much before, and she was curious what kind of people they were.

"What was he like?"

There was warmth and sadness in Ami's voice as she spoke. "He was very kind and nice. He was a pilot, Kazuki Nakagawa. My mom is a shift nurse at the county hospital. Her maiden name was Madison Caldwell, but she goes by Maddie. They met in Ireland, back when Mom was in college and Dad was on holiday. My father was staying there at the time; he'd just finished flight school, and they met when my mom was over there visiting her grandparents. Dad always said that he fell in love with my Mom when she walked through the door of the caffè he was at, sunlight streaming in behind her like she was an angel just stepping down from Heaven. He showed up on her doorstep the next day and asked her to marry her on the spot." Ami seemed very happy when she talked about her parents, her smile lighting up her face. She paused for a moment, and a shadow flickered across her face.

"My mom remarried two years after my father's death. My stepfather has a son from a previous marriage. He now lives in his own place and works at a computing firm in town. My stepfather's an accountant over at Tyrell Corporation."

"Do you like your stepfather?"

Ami shrugged with a neutral look on her face. "He's very religious, but he's alright."

"So it's just you and your parents at home in the evenings?" Clea's questions had an alternative motive. Of course, she wanted to know as much as possible about Ami. But ever since Ami had broken her arm, Clea had resolved to find out what had caused the injury and put an end to it. She forced her face to remain smiling, remembering the mass of bruises that had covered Ami's body after the incident. The most vivid image was of the horizontal bruises that had covered Ami's back, turning all the skin there a deep purple overlaid with darker lines. The only time Ami could receive the injuries was during the evening. The girl was either at school or with Clea until late in the afternoon every day, and she'd mentioned her stepfather not liking Ami going out at night.

Ami nodded in response to Clea's question. "It varies who's there from day-to-day, though." Ami looked a little uncomfortable with Clea's line of questioning. "What about your parents? You've never mentioned them at all."

"They're dead."

Ami looked at Clea for a moment, speechless. She looked away quickly as she realised she was staring and mumbled an apology. Clea smiled gently and steered the conversation back to Ami's life. What she'd told Ami wasn't exactly the truth, but it was what Clea liked to consider the truth. Forcing her mind to focus on the future, she left the past buried.

Chapter 9: Broken

Ami hummed quietly while she emptied the dishwasher, piling the plates she'd removed from there onto the counter before transporting them to the cupboard. She'd gotten back from Clea's place only a few hours ago, and her head was still swimming with pleasure. Their date yesterday was fun. They'd actually spent more time simply talking than Ami could recall them ever doing before. Probably because being in public forced Clea to behave more than she did when they were alone. Not that she wanted Clea to behave when they were alone. She quite enjoyed it when Clea didn't.

The choice of restaurant had impressed her, not because it was such a high-class restaurant but because Clea wanted to make it something special and familiar to Ami. She was touched that Clea had taken her to such a special place. The staff had all known Clea by name, seeming familiar with her presence. She'd overheard some of them talking when she'd gone to the restroom, and apparently Ami was the first date Clea had ever brought there. After she'd heard that, she'd started viewing Clea differently. It seemed like Clea was serious about dating Ami. That thought alone brought a smile to her face, but it

also scared her. She was only fourteen and still in high school. But she also liked Clea, maybe even loved her, though it'd been a long time since Ami had had feelings that deep for another person. Knowing that Clea treated her better than other models brought her closer to falling in love with the artist.

The sound of a large vehicle pulling into the driveway disturbed Ami's thoughts, and she hastily went back to putting away the dishes with one hand. She heard the door open and close and footsteps in the hallway, signalling that her stepfather had returned from the bar or wherever he had disappeared off to shortly after Ami's mother had left the house. Ami fervently hoped her stepfather would ignore her and go to bed. Footsteps on the tiled kitchen floor crushed her hopes, and Ami tried to appear engrossed in her task on the chance that her stepfather would ignore her if she was doing something helpful.

"Care to explain this?" The demanding tone in her stepfather's voice made her head snap up, and chills race down her spine. The narrow set of her stepfather's eyes and his grim frown were enough to warn Ami that she was in trouble. He held up the cover of one of the local tabloids, a picture of Clea kissing Ami in the lower left corner with the title '*Clea Skymore's Mysterious Schoolgirl Lover*' in large bold letters right below it. Well, that proved that Clea really was famous if the tabloids were so concerned with her love life.

Ami felt the blood drain from her face, and she instinctively took a step backward. She barely had time to stammer the beginnings of a sentence when her stepfather threw the magazine at her; a quick sidestep the only thing that kept her from being hit in the face with it. Wincing, she realised that was not a good move, as it only served to make her stepfather angrier when she evaded things. Before she had time to react, the man grabbed her by the neck, his large fingers digging into Ami's skin painfully. A quick, powerful blow to the stomach silenced her attempts at speech as much as the hand around her throat, driving out any air left in her lungs and preventing her from taking in more. She was lifted off her feet so that she was at eye level with him.

"You're with her, aren't you? Playing the fuck-toy for some rich dyke, when you know I don't approve of that kind of abomination!" The words were shouted from mere centimetres away from her face, punctuated by a tightening of the grip around her throat and a rough shake. Ami struggled to breathe, the overpowering stench of alcohol and her stepfather's blazing eyes telling her it would be a long while before he left her alone.

Black and white chequered tiles sped up to meet her just before her head rapped against them, her broken arm blossoming in pain as it was caught between her and the floor. A booted foot connecting with her side sent fireworks exploding in front of her eyes, quickly followed by another kick. Ami whimpered pitifully, curling into a ball around her broken arm, her uninjured arm covering her head as blows rained down on her back and sides. Her stepfather was incoherent with rage, his spluttered curses falling as heavily as the large man's fists and feet. The neighbours surely could hear him yelling and Ami's own cries of pain, but they didn't do anything about it. They probably just turned their TVs up and pretended that nothing was happening. Not their business if a man beats his deviant stepdaughter. Better to stay out of the affair and avoid the police reports. None of them would even look at Ami when they passed her on the street; she wasn't worth their concern.

The torrent of blows stopped almost as abruptly as it started, her stepfather's presence suddenly gone from looming over her. Ami stayed where she was, huddled on the floor, trembling in fear as she waited for it to start again. Several minutes passed in silence before Ami warily lifted her head from the floor. Seeing that she was alone in the room, she started to pull herself off the floor, using the kitchen counter for support. She wanted to stay curled on the floor until the pain went away, but she knew from experience that she should at least put something on her bruises, or she wouldn't be able to move tomorrow. She never made it that far, though.

Before she could take a step, her stepfather was back in the door frame. There was something new in his eyes—not the burning anger that spent itself out after a few solid hits, but something deeper. Cold ice bore into Ami from his eyes, and she instantly felt her body go numb in terror. Her reaction was pitifully slow as he lifted her from her feet by the neck, freshly washed dishes crashing to the floor with a sweep of his arm. Ami didn't realise she was in the air until she collided with the opposite wall, her body crumbling to the floor like a broken toy. She felt sluggish, as if the surrounding air had turned to water. A crashing sound above her was her only warning before shards of broken pottery rained down on her. She looked up in time to see the man unfastening the belt around his pants, his eyes glinting cruelly.

"If you won't listen to me, then I'll have to fix you." Ami hastily forced herself into a standing position as he took a step forward. "I'll make you stop misbehaving, make you stop being another of those abominations."

Ami took one look at the pants falling down around her stepfather's legs and the lust-filled glint in his eyes before bolting out the door. Heavy footsteps chased her into the yard, grasping hands brushing against her back, spurring her into a sudden burst of speed, and she didn't dare look back to see if she'd gained any distance on her pursuer. Her body protested the movement, but she refused to stop running. She couldn't stop running until she reached the only place that meant safety to her.



Clea looked up from the book she was reading as someone started frantically pounding on her door. She was out of her chair in an instant, the peephole in her door giving her a somewhat skewed view of a highly dishevelled Ami. Her arms were filled with the trembling little girl the instant she opened the door—the one that clung to her as if she never wanted to let go again. Clea's eyes darkened when she saw red handprints on Ami's bare neck, but she forced her anger behind a calm mask so that she didn't frighten Ami. The young girl slumped suddenly in Clea's arms, and she had to move quickly to catch Ami before she fell.

Clea lifted Ami into her arms, her guts twisting as she saw the streaks of blood that covered Ami's face and arms. Locking the door behind her, Clea carried her to the couch. Ami's wide brown eyes never left Clea's face, her breath coming in laboured pants.

Leaving Ami on the couch, Clea went to get a bottle of ointment and a wet washcloth from the bathroom. When she returned, Ami was curled up in a ball on the couch with her head on her knees. She was still shaking as Clea sat next to her and gently ran her hand through Ami's hair. A small shard fell out of Ami's hair, and Clea examined it, her eyebrows rising when she noted it was a shard of pottery. Seeing other glints in her hair, Clea gently picked out the sharp fragments and set them on the coffee table while she waited for Ami to calm down.

Her little girlfriend slowly uncurled to look at Clea with dead eyes. Clea's expression was carefully constructed to convey only her concern and none of the anger that boiled inside of her as she carefully cleaned off the blood on Ami's face.

"Want to tell me what happened, darling?" She wasn't forcing the question. Instead, she was gently asking in the hopes that Ami wanted to talk about it.

Ami opened her mouth and then closed it, her gaze shifting to the floor next to Clea's feet. "M—My stepfather tried... to rape me."

Clea's hands stilled as she took in the words. Her anger blazed, and she pulled Ami into her arms, gently holding her trembling body.

"He's the one who broke your arm?"

A nod against Clea's shoulder.

"And the one who gave you all those bruises?"

Another nod as Ami's hand grasped the front of Clea's shirt tightly.

"Why?"

"B—because... I... I like girls."

Clea pulled away suddenly and stood, pacing the room to help curb her growing anger. Right now, she wanted to go hunt down the bastard that had hurt this little girl that meant so much to her and beat him senseless. She was beyond mad; she'd passed that stage when she'd seen the blood. Outraged was gone after Ami mentioned the attempted rape. She was absolutely furious, and now that she had a name to go with, she could.... A pitiful, scared whimper from the couch froze her in her tracks, and she realised how angry she must look to Ami at the moment.

Clea's features smoothed back into place in a flash as she eased next to Ami on the couch. Her voice lowered to soothing tones as she calmed the young girl, whispering reassurances to her trembling child. She worked Ami's shirt off, her lips moving over Ami's skin in time to her travelling hands, seeking to comfort and distract instead of their normal goal. Picking up the ointment, she worked it into Ami's naked skin as gently as she could manage.

Ami had cried herself to sleep while Clea worked, and she gently shifted her into bed. She settled beside Ami, fitting the schoolgirl protectively in her arms before pulling the covers over them. She

didn't think she'd be able to let Ami out of her arms for a long while. Just before sleep claimed her, an idea came to mind. Clea was definitely not going to let Ami's stepfather abuse her any longer.



Ami yawned as she rolled onto her side to wrap her arms around Clea, her mind still caught in the fading remnants of sleep. Her arm fell through the empty air, and she blinked into full consciousness when she realised she was alone in bed. The sheets were still warm next to her, and she laid her cheek against them, inhaling Clea's scent. Her left hand absently clutched the sheets, and she considered going back to sleep. Her body more than welcomed the idea. She didn't want to face the waking world. She wanted to stay in bed, where there was only Clea and herself, and she didn't have to worry about anything.

Light streamed in from the open window, and a quick glance at the clock confirmed that it was nearly noon. She'd missed her morning English and history classes. If she hurried, she could probably make it to her math class and hand in the paper that was due today. But that would mean going back to her house for her schoolbooks... Ami shivered. She didn't think she'd be able to go back there for a while; she was too terrified. Her Mom must be worried, unless her stepfather had made up some lame excuse why Ami's belongings were there and she wasn't.

Ami forced herself to get out of bed, at least to see if Clea was still in the apartment. She tiptoed barefoot and found her clothes folded neatly beside the bed, and she dressed quickly. From the corner of her eye, Ami caught her reflection in the large mirror across from Clea's bed. She turned, half wondering if the person reflected was actually her. Red lines were scattered across her face, her neck a deep purple where her stepfather had grabbed her. As she buttoned up her shirt one-handed, she could see more bruises along her chest. She could feel others all over her body—points of dull aches that made moving a chore. Shuddering, Ami turned her back to the mirror and shut out her memories of the previous night. Despite her attempts, she could still faintly hear her stepfather's voice yelling at her in the back of her head.

Clea wasn't in the living room when Ami stepped out of the bedroom, nor was she in the open kitchen across from the bedroom. Hesitantly, Ami knocked on the door to Clea's studio. She'd only been in there once before, very briefly. After a moment with no answer, Ami pushed the door open and flicked on the lights. Paintings leaned against the wall and stood on easels, with a few choice pieces hanging on the walls. Ami glanced around the room quickly, but Clea wasn't here either.

Ami was about to leave when she noticed that the paintings on the walls had changed. When she'd been in here over a month ago, the paintings had been of Clea's old models, never more than one painting of each person. Now almost all the paintings featured a single person: her. Ami took a hesitant step towards the left wall, the one that had been set aside as a display of Clea's favourite works. In the

centre of the display was one of Clea's most recent paintings, made the day Ami broke her arm. A small piece of paper on the wall below it gave the date and a title: "*Sleeping Beauty*".

Ami smiled as she left the studio. She'd been happy that day, she remembered it clearly. She'd been so worried that Clea wouldn't want her after they'd made up in her bed, but her fears were groundless. Clea cared about her more than Ami had ever expected her to. And she loved Clea because Clea cared about her, because Clea was nice to her, because Clea made her feel good, because Clea paid attention to her.... She'd been terrified and mindless last night, and the only place she had thought to go was Clea's apartment. Because knew she'd be safe here, that Clea would help her when she didn't even know what could be done to help herself.

Ami slumped on the couch and pulled a blanket off the back to cover herself. It was lonely in the apartment without Clea. It felt too empty. She shivered with cold and wished she had another body next to her to warm her up.



Clea unlocked the door to her apartment, fully expecting to find Ami still in bed. A smile slipped across her face as she saw her little lover's form curled on the couch, fast asleep. Walking over quietly, she lightly called Ami's name as she gently shook the young girl awake. Ami blinked at her sleepily for a moment before her eyes focused on the two men waiting in the doorway.

"Wake up, sweetheart, we're going to get your stuff."

"Huh?" Ami gave Clea a confused look as she sat up, her sleepy mind not grasping what Clea was talking about.

With gentle patience, Clea repeated her words. "I need you to get up so Brandon, Tyler, and I can go get your belongings from your house and bring them back here."

Chocolate eyes widened in shock as Ami fully sat up. "But..."

Clea put a finger over Ami's lips to stop her from protesting. "You're moving in with me. Don't argue, because it's already been decided. I won't let you stay in your stepfather's house anymore." Clea pulled Ami close and whispered fiercely in her ear, "I won't let him or anyone else hurt you *ever* again."

A mix of emotions clouded Ami's eyes, and she hugged Clea tightly, her head buried in Clea's shoulder, stifling a sob. "Thank you."

Clea returned the embrace for a moment before standing once more, drawing Ami up with her, "Let's go, sweetheart."

Ami followed Clea and her friends out of the apartment.

Chapter 10: A New Life

Clea looked at the tiny house Ami guided them to with a bit of amazement. It seemed like a quaint little house, separated from its neighbours by a small, well-kept lawn. Clea glanced at the houses on either side and wondered what kind of people lived there. She wondered what kind of people could stand hearing a little girl being beaten and do nothing about it. It was better for them that Clea didn't know the answer; they were safer that way.

Clea walked beside Ami as they approached the house, Tyler and Brandon directly behind them with a stack of empty boxes. Ami looked at the door as if she'd never seen it before, a hint of fear in her eyes. Clea touched Ami's shoulder, the move seeming to jolt the girl out of her daze. She reached into her pockets, looking for something that didn't seem to be there.

"I forgot my key..." Ami looked at her apologetically, "when I ran out last night. There should be a spare key around here somewhere."

Clea didn't wait for Ami to look; she simply knocked loudly on the door. A middle-aged woman answered the door, looking quite surprised at seeing her daughter, a woman, and two men standing before her.

"Is your husband here?" Clea's tone was flat, emotionless.

Ami's mother, Clea remembered her name was Madison after a moment, shook her head. "No, he's at work."

Clea stepped into the house silently, taking Ami with her. Ami was surprisingly docile and followed her easily, her head downcast to avoid meeting her mother's gaze.

"Ami, why don't you show Brandon and Tyler where your room is so they can start getting your things?"

Ami looked at Clea once before nodding and walking upstairs, her movements stiff from her bruises. Clea stayed behind with Ami's mother as her friends followed Ami.

"What's going on?" Ami's mother seemed to suddenly recover her wits, and she looked between Clea and Ami in shock. Ami had half-turned at the top of the stairs, but Clea motioned for her to keep going. She waited until Ami was out of sight before she started speaking, her eyes shifting to pierce Ami's mother with a hard glare.

"Your husband tried to rape Ami last night. I'm Clea Skymore, Ami's girlfriend. She's moving in with me on my insistence."

Madison's eyes widened, and she brought a hand to her mouth. She seemed almost on the verge of running up the stairs after her daughter.

"Is she alright? Did she get hurt?"

Clea let her gaze soften in the face of the woman's concern. "She's frightened out of her wits. She's beaten up. She has bruises all over her body." Madison seemed in shock, but her reactions weren't at all what Clea had expected. "You don't seem surprised by what happened."

Ami's mother fixed Clea with a level gaze. "I've worked at the hospital long enough to know signs of abuse when I see them. Ami wouldn't tell me anything, so I didn't know if it was from home, school, or elsewhere. I never thought Jonathan would..." Ami's mother drifted into silence for several moments. Clea could hear Ami talking to Brandon and Tyler upstairs, but their words were too faded to make out what it was about.

"I'm Madison, by the way." She held out her hand, and Clea shook it lightly before speaking.

"Ami's mentioned you before."

Madison nodded and turned to walk into the kitchen, motioning for Clea to follow her. Clea's eyes fell on a photo framed and hung on the wall as she followed Ami's mother. Both a young and an older man were present in the photo beside Ami and her mother, all of them smiling so happily that it was hard to tell they weren't a normal, happy family. As she walked into the kitchen, the first thing she noticed was a broken dish on the counter. Shards of broken pottery filled a small bucket by a screen door on the other side of the room. Clea thought she saw flecks of red on the shards, but it could have just been a design on the plates.

Ami's mother turned from the counter to hand Clea a piece of paper. "That contains the address of where I work and our home address, in case you don't already have it, as well as the numbers to reach me at both places."

Clea tucked the paper carefully into her pocket. Reaching out, she took the pen and pad of paper that she had just used to write the note. Scribbling her address and phone number, she handed it back to her. "Here's where you'll be able to reach Ami. Feel free to stop by anytime, without your husband."

Madison nodded. "Please take care of my daughter."

"I will."

A knock on the wall interrupted them a few moments later. Clea turned to see Ami standing there, looking pale and exhausted. Clea followed the girl's frozen gaze to the broken plate, and she stepped forward to break the connection, placing her hand gently on Ami's shoulder.

"They're done packing my things," Ami announced quietly.

Clea nodded and squeezed Ami's shoulder gently before stepping past the girl to start up the steps. "I'll go help Tyler and Brandon take your stuff to the van."

Clea took another look at the picture of Ami's stepfather as she moved, storing the man's face in her memory.



Ami looked at her mother nervously, unsure of what to say. But her mother had always understood Ami better than she did herself. She opened her arms, and Ami found herself stepping forward automatically. She felt like she should be crying, but her eyes were dry. Her body had long ago forgotten how to cry.

"I'm sorry." Ami knew it was stupid to apologise, but she couldn't help herself. She felt like it was her fault that this was happening—her fault for breaking apart the family like this, her fault for being who she was, her fault for liking girls instead of boys.

"It's not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong, honey. Nothing at all. It's okay." The words were whispered softly in Ami's ear as her mother brushed a hand through her hair, a gesture that had always comforted her. "It's not your fault, baby."

"But I ruined it!" Ami's voice cracked as she spoke. "I ruined your new marriage by being... this way."

Ami was surprised at the strength in her mother's hands as she lifted her head to face her. "Don't ever say that, Ami. Don't even think about it. There's nothing wrong with being a lesbian. You didn't ruin anything. This is all Jonathan's fault for treating you like this, and my fault for not seeing it."

"But I lied to you about it like a little kid, and you didn't know."

Madison placed a light kiss on her daughter's forehead. "I knew something was wrong, but I wasn't sure what," she sighed. "It doesn't make you a little kid, Ami. You've changed and grown up so much since your father died; it makes me really proud of you. But placing blame won't do us any good right now. All that matters is that you're alright and that you'll be safe with Miss Skymore."

They stood there quietly for a few moments, just holding each other.

"Do you love her, Ami?"

Ami nodded against her mother's shoulder, feeling her eyes misting.

"And she's a good woman?"

"She is, Mom."

"Then I'm happy for you two. I wish you nothing but the best of happiness."

Ami blushed slightly. Her eyes caught on the broken plates, and she felt her smile fade. "What about you? What's going to happen?"

"Do you want me to press charges against Jonathan?"

Ami took a step back in horror. "No!" She didn't want to break up her mom's new marriage, not when she'd been so happy.

Madison nodded, accepting her daughter's decision. "Jonathan and I need to have a long talk when he gets back. Depending on the answers he gives me, I may file for divorce."

"But you can't... you were so happy. I didn't tell you what was going on because I didn't want to ruin your marriage."

Madison laid her hand gently on the side of Ami's face. "Jonathan and I have been having problems for a while now, dear. I was happy because I thought you were happy, because you tried so hard to make sure I was happy. His difficulties with you are a big concern, but they're not the only problem. You were my daughter long before I met him, and you'll *always* come first."

Ami didn't know how to respond, so she simply nodded with a lump in her throat. Her mother smiled at her before nodding towards the other room, "I'll be fine, sweetie. Your friends are waiting."

Ami turned to see Clea watching from the doorway. She hugged her Mom tightly, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek before whispering in her ear, "I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, Ami."

Ami stepped away slowly and followed Clea out of the house without a backward glance.



"Excuse me, are you Jonathan Caldwell?"

The man nodded as he stopped on the sidewalk in front of Tyrell Corporation. He looked like an average businessman, with a conservative tie and slicked-back brown hair. He wore a dark pinstripe suit, a dark brown briefcase in one hand, and a cup of overpriced coffee in the other. He was the kind of man you expected to find with a smiling housewife, 2.5 perfectly average kids, and a dog named Spot. Clea pulled off her sunglasses and pocketed them, wondering how many of the 'normal' people who walked past her were as sick as the man in front of her.

"How can I help you?"

Clea smiled with a false cheer. "My name's Clea Skymore. I'm Ami's girlfriend."

The man's eyes widened seconds before Clea punched him in the face with as much force as she could muster. Papers scattered as Mr. Caldwell's briefcase flew open, thrown from his hand as he hit the pavement. The scent of hazelnut from the man's spilled coffee filled the air, and blood flowed from his nose as he looked up at Clea in shock. Clea gave the startled man a furious glare, her eyes daring the man to get up and hit back.

"If you *ever* touch Ami again, I swear I'll kill you." The cold in Clea's eyes and voice left no doubt that she would follow through with her threat. She held her glare a second longer before she turned and walked away, slipping her sunglasses back onto her face as she went.



Ami smiled as she unlocked the door to see Clea in her studio, working on a painting. She quietly set her school bag on the floor and turned to hang up her coat. Two arms soon found their way around her waist, and Ami leaned into the touch, her eyes drifting shut as she did so.

"Welcome home, my beautiful one." Clea whispered the words into Ami's neck as she kissed the little girl there. Ami smiled. It was good to be home.

Chapter 11: Learning to Love

"Ah! I... unn... love... you!"

Clea froze at the words, her pause unnoticed as Ami sighed beside her. The girl's small body tightened around her, and Clea couldn't help but follow suit, the passion of her body overriding her mind's panic. Ami was soon curled next to her; her right arm had finally healed enough that it didn't need to be in a cast. Clea encouraged Ami to fall asleep by silently rubbing the girl's back lightly. She made sure Ami was fully asleep before she let her smile fade, her breath escaping in a small sigh. Using the arm not wrapped around Ami's body, she brushed a few strands of blonde hair from her face and stared blankly at the ceiling. She wanted a glass of water, but not badly enough to leave the cuddly warmth of her little sleeping beauty.

What was she going to do now?

The question burned through her mind, and for once, Clea Skymore had no answer. She'd known Ami was in love with her for a long time; it was obvious from the way the young girl looked at her. But when Ami said it, vocalised those three little words, then it suddenly became real to Clea. She couldn't hide from it anymore. All along, she'd been planning to make Ami fall in love with her. After all, what better way to keep a model than to have them develop feelings for her? It had worked for her countless times before, and she'd had no problems getting rid of them when she'd tired of their beauty. But it was different this time. Ami was so young—still a child, really—and that scared her.

Clea Skymore did not commit. There was no person in this world that she couldn't give up and walk away from; there was no one that she couldn't leave. But she had definite feelings for Ami. She liked Ami; she really cared for her. After everything that had happened to her beloved girl with her stepfather, she just wanted to keep Ami with her and make sure no one ever hurt her again.

But she wasn't in love. She couldn't be; that was impossible. And yet, she was on the verge of love. She could feel it in the pit of her stomach. If they continued like this, she knew she would fall eventually.

She was softening by being around Ami, just like Ami was changing by living with her. The girl's smiles weren't as rare anymore, and Ami had actually laughed a few days ago. In all the time they'd been together, Ami had never laughed at anything. When they first met, there was a quiet timidity about

Ami, a serious air about her that nothing could dispel, and now that she knew about Ami's home life, she also recognised how afraid Ami had been about being hurt.

Now, all of that has disappeared. She was happy and more outgoing. She was a cheerful fourteen-year-old schoolgirl once again. When she was around Clea, she seemed perfectly at ease, like she didn't have anything to worry about.

And Clea was changing too. Since they'd been dating, she'd lost the desire for anyone that wasn't her little Ami. Normally, during her previous relationships, she'd have cheated on her lover numerous times by now. Even her friends had noticed this change, commenting on it when Ami wasn't around.

She was starting to get really scared now. How long had she been with Ami? Four months almost, if her mental calculations were correct, and they'd been living together for two of those months. She couldn't remember any of her previous lovers lasting more than three months before she got sick of them, but Clea didn't see that happening anytime soon with Ami. She might very well have already—

Clea cut that thought out before it could go any farther and refused to think about it. Maybe it was time she cut Ami out of her life before things went farther than Clea could handle them. She didn't want to hurt Ami, but the girl was only fourteen. It wasn't right, and as much as it pained her, she didn't think she had a choice. She needed to get rid of Ami before it was too late, and got them both into bigger trouble than either of them could handle.



Ami nervously looked at the high-class crowd gathered in the art gallery. Aside from the restaurants Clea had taken her to, Ami had never been around so many wealthy and famous people in her life. She felt like a child and out of place here, like she shouldn't even be here. But this showing was important to Clea. It was the premiere of all of her most recent works, most of which featured Ami in various states of undress. Thankfully, none of them were nude or even fairly close to being nude. Clea had wanted her to come to the show and had even insisted on buying Ami an expensive outfit just for the occasion. She didn't understand why Clea fussed so much; after all, she was just a plain schoolgirl. Even with the expensive clothing, she couldn't imagine that she looked like anything other than a little kid to the rest of the people in the room.

But even her nervousness didn't lower the happiness she felt at being treated so nicely by Clea. After she'd started living with Clea, things had changed immensely for her. It was like all the negative emotions she'd experienced over the past several years had inverted, and now she was filled with so much joy, happiness, and love. Clea treated her so gently, showering attention on her almost constantly. She knew beyond a doubt that Clea cared for her, even though Clea never said anything. But she was fine with that. She didn't care if Clea ever told her how she felt; it was enough that she was with Clea because she loved her like she had never loved anyone before.

"You're Clea Skymore's new toy, aren't you?"

Ami blinked in surprise and then gave the other woman a hard glare. "I'm *not* a toy."

The woman was tall and dressy. Her brown hair was pulled back in a long ponytail, and her clothing looked like it was as expensive as one of the paintings on sale at the showing.

The woman's smile wasn't entirely pleasant. "You're her current model, right?"

Ami nodded.

"Then you're one of her toys," the woman waved away Ami's glare. "No use getting mad, that's just the way things work with Clea Skymore. No matter how much she smiles and treats you nicely, you're still just a plaything to her. I was one too, so I should know how it works."

"You were one of what?" Ami's eyes narrowed in annoyance.

"One of her models. One of her lovers. They're usually one and the same."

Ami's eyes widened, and she quickly forced down a sudden surge of jealousy. "Good for you." Ami turned to leave, but a hand on her arm stopped her.

"How long have you two been together?"

Ami wasn't sure why she answered. "Four months."

The woman's eyes widened, and she whistled. Ami definitely did not like the way the woman's eyes raked over her body, mentally undressing her.

"Impressive. You must be a pretty good screw for her to keep you around that long. I don't think any of the others lasted more than two months," the woman held out a card. "When she dumps you, give me a call."

Ami pulled her arm free with a sharp jerk. Sending a sharp glare at the woman, she quickly disappeared into the crowd. The nerve of that woman, thinking that she'd just jump from Clea's bed into another's. Besides, Clea wasn't going to dump her. She wouldn't. She cared for her, after all. She wouldn't do something like that to her. But her mental assurances didn't seem to quite reach the rest of herself, and she felt an overwhelming urge to find Clea as quickly as possible. She refused to believe that her fate would be the same as the other models Clea had had. It couldn't be. Didn't Clea love her?

Ami heard Clea's voice ahead, and she sped up to reach the painter as soon as possible. She rounded the corner and froze, shock filling her body. There was Clea, sitting on one of the couches against a back wall, with a tall brunette in her lap. Her dress was out of place, her breasts practically falling out in front of Clea's face. Not that Clea could really see them from the way her head was buried in her neck, kissing just below her ear. Her hands were all over, obviously wishing there were fewer layers between them. Ami felt her chest tighten, her eyes filling with tears. She felt so small and lost among these grown up people. She felt abandoned. Suddenly the huge art gallery seemed the size of a broom closet, with all the many patrons crowding around her unbearably close. She could feel something inside her breaking, as if there was not enough oxygen for her to breathe.

Clea looked up then, their eyes meeting for a brief second before Ami turned and fled.



Clea couldn't believe she'd just left her own show to chase after Ami. One of the largest publicity events for her this year, and she'd left before it was even half over. She didn't even want to think about the number of people who would be yelling at her tomorrow because of this. Things had been going well, technically. She'd thought the brunette would be the perfect candidate to help her forget Ami and purge her unhealthy feelings for the schoolgirl. She probably just needed some new, warm body before Ami was nothing more than a face in her paintings. So what if she'd imagined her eyes were brown instead of blue, imagined her curves were smaller, softer... It had almost been working until she'd looked up and saw Ami staring at her with such a lost, scared expression, and then it had all felt so wrong that she'd ended up dropping the woman on the floor to go chase after Ami.

But Ami was gone. She wasn't anywhere in the gallery; Clea had already checked all three levels, and she wasn't waiting at the car. Clea just hoped the girl had gone back to their apartment so that she didn't have to go searching the entire city. She pulled into the parking garage and was out of the car nearly before the engine had shut off, the elevator ride to the eighth floor seeming to take forever in her hurried state of mind. The door was already unlocked when Clea walked into the apartment.

Ami whirled from where she stood by the sofa just as Clea shut the door behind her, the girl's eyes blazing.

"What were you doing with that woman?" Ami shouted at her, furious.

Clea was a little relieved that Ami was angry. If Ami was mad at Clea, then it would hurt her less when Clea left.

"It's none of your business what I do!"

"Of course not," Ami's words dripped with sarcasm. "I've only been living with you for the past two months, so I obviously have nothing to do with you or your life."

"No, you don't, Ami." It felt like someone else was speaking for her; the coldness in her voice was a sign of how numb her body felt. She had to do this. Had to end it before it was too late. "You're just another fling, a silly kid that means nothing to me."

Ami looked visibly hurt, stunned into speechlessness. Clea didn't want to say it, but she forced herself to, nearly choking as she spit out the words, though none of that was visible to Ami.

"I *never* loved you, Ami. I never even cared very deeply for you."

Clea felt herself nearly giving in as she watched Ami break. She couldn't stand the lost look in Ami's eyes and the tears slowly spilling down her cheeks, so she turned her back. She had to end it if she

wanted to save herself. But why was it so hard to say the words? Why was a ploy to spare her pain making her feel like she was ripping out her own heart and stomping on it repeatedly?

"I know you can't go home, so I'll give the apartment to you. Everything's already paid for. I'll be back for my things tomorrow."

Ami ran forward with a cry to grab Clea's arm. "No!"

Clea instinctively flung the girl off and heard a thunk as Ami hit the armchair. She felt shock and horror course through her when she realised what she'd just done—that she'd just hurt Ami like her stepfather had—but she refused to turn and look. Taking a step forward, she put her hand on the doorknob and turned it. As she opened the door, she knew she could never look back. If she looked back, she'd lose her resolve. If she looked back, she'd never leave her again.

"Please don't leave me, Clea! I love you..." The broken whisper made her heart ache.

Clea walked out the door, but a low sound made her pause for a brief instant. It tugged at her mind, taking a few seconds for her to process what that sound actually was. Her mind screamed at her to turn around as another muffled sob broke from Ami's lips.

Involuntarily, her head turned, and she saw Ami kneeling on the floor, tears streaming down her face, one hand over her mouth, and her eyes closed.

She closed the door.



Ami heard the door click shut, and she stopped holding back the sobs that wracked her body. She let her tears fall. She curled into a ball with her forehead pressed against the carpet. Clea was gone. Clea had left her. She felt her heart shatter into a million pieces, and she didn't know how long it would take before the intense pain in her chest went away, didn't know what she was going to do without Clea in her life. The last time she'd cried had been a few months after her stepfather had first started beating her, and she'd thought she'd forgotten how. But the pain of this overshadowed anything her stepfather had done, and she felt like her insides were dying.

Soft footsteps made her head snap up, and then Clea was kneeling next to her, gathering the small girl into a tight embrace. Ami couldn't stop crying even as Clea held her, hot tears dampening the fabric of Clea's shirt where the painter placed Ami's head to rest against her shoulder. She clutched at the front of Clea's shirt, her knuckles going white from the tight grip. Her little body shook wildly, loud sobs making her breath hitch and her lungs contract painfully. The painter's hands rubbed her back, fingers running through Ami's black hair as she whispered soothing words.

It seemed like an eternity passed as Ami cried on Clea's shoulder. A massive headache was building behind her temples, but Clea slowly rubbed it away. She was held in Clea's arms even after her tears

subsided, even after her shoulders stopped trembling. But Ami didn't look up. She was afraid that if she did, Clea would disappear, and she'd be left alone with her own misery.

After several minutes, Ami felt herself being shifted so that they were both sitting on the floor, with Ami sitting in Clea's lap. Reluctantly, she let Clea pull her head away from where it was buried, and Ami gazed dully at Clea with eyes that were no doubt bright red from crying. Clea studied her silently before gently wiping away the tear streaks on Ami's cheeks, placing a soft kiss below each eye as she did so.

"Ami. I'm so sorry."

Ami's throat was too raw for her to speak, but Clea continued despite her silence, gazing into Ami's eyes as she did so.

"I didn't mean what I said. About not caring for you. I *really* did care for you. I do care for you. I was just scared, and I thought it would be better for both of us if I ended it, and.... I'm sorry I threw you. I'm sorry I tried to leave. I won't do it again. I won't try to leave you again, Ami. I promise." Clea reached up to gently touch Ami's face. "I can't stand to see you hurt. I can't stand the fact that I made you cry. Pushing you away hurt so much, but I.... Can you ever forgive me, Ami?"

Ami nodded silently and leaned forward to kiss Clea. A few more tears slipped down her cheeks as she let her eyes drift shut, and Clea returned the kiss with closed lips. Gently, Clea pulled Ami to rest against her chest.

"Would you mind if I told you a story?"

Ami looked up in surprise and shook her head. "I don't mind." Her voice was soft and barely audible.

Clea rested her head against Ami's, and she smiled a little sadly. "Once, a long time ago, there was a girl named Allison Brownings. She was a shy little girl who had fallen in love with her high school art teacher. The girl was a very good painter; she loved painting more than anything, except her teacher. And she thought her love had returned. Her life was golden until the day the girl's parents found out about their daughter's relationship with the female teacher. They kicked the girl out of their house forever and never talked to her again. Distraught, the girl ran to the teacher for comfort, only to be turned away just as cruelly. The teacher lost her job, and the girl was left to wander the streets, homeless and penniless. Do you know what happened to the girl?"

Ami shook her head slightly, her eyes wide.

"Allison Brownings died on the streets. The girl changed her name and made herself into a woman who could survive on her own without relying on others. That woman went on to become rich and famous, but she'd developed one flaw: she was so afraid of losing those around her again that she pushed them away before they had a chance to get close to her. But then, one person got under her walls without really trying, and once again, she fell in love with that little person."

Ami wrapped her arms around Clea's neck, and Clea looked her straight in the eyes. "Ami, no matter what happens from this day on, I want you to know I'll always love you and I won't leave you. *Ever*. I promise."

Ami smiled at her and kissed Clea again, lightly. "It would take the force of a million suns to take you away from me."

Epilogue

Maybe it wasn't so bad, giving her heart away. Clea looked at the sleeping girl beside her, faint trails of dried-up tears still visible in the moonlight on the beautiful teen's face. She didn't really have a choice in the matter anyway; her heart had given itself away long before she'd noticed. But Clea couldn't think of a better person to give it to. If it was Ami, then maybe she was safe. Ami loved her; Ami was devoted to her. Ami wasn't going to leave her like her last love had, and she certainly couldn't do to Ami what had been done to her.

With a faint sigh, Clea rolled over so that she was face-to-face with Ami, pressed tightly against the little girl's side. In her sleep, Ami cuddled into Clea's embrace, one leg draping itself over Clea's own. Clea smiled and let thoughts of the past fade away. She couldn't do anything to change what had already happened; she could only focus on what was going on around her. And then there was the future to consider—a future that held visions of her and Ami together for a good while.

She'd need time to let herself get used to being in love again, she'd fallen out of practice.

But there was time, and Ami was with her. And neither of them had to worry about being left alone again.

The End