

LITTLE STRANGER

Chapter 3: Olivia

I brush my hair in the mirror, pull it into a high ponytail to keep it out of my face, swipe on some mascara, then hunt for my favorite lip gloss. If I don't hurry, I'm going to be late for cheer practice, and as the captain, I need to be responsible and try to be there at least twenty minutes before everyone else.

My vanity shakes as I slam the little drawer, and I let out a long, annoyed breath. "Where is it?" I mutter, searching through my makeup bags again. I pull my school bag across the floor then scan the rest of my room.

I bend down to look in my school bag again just as a knock sounds on the room door.

Malachi stands in my doorway, holding up my lip gloss.

"Why do you have that?" I ask him, frowning. Then my brows soften.

"Did I leave it in the kitchen again?"

He nods and silently steps in, closing the door behind him. He tosses my lip gloss to me then pulls off his cap, turning it backwards to tame his wavy hair.

Over the last year, Malachi has changed from a boy to a young man. For seventeen, he looks twenty with a chiseled jaw, long lashes, and bright, diamond-like blue eyes. He has muscles that are starting to become noticeable through his clothes, and he loves to run. He once signed to me that it helps clear his head.

Sometimes, we run together. We'll listen to the same song-usually Taylor Swift if I choose, or Bad Omens if he does then we'll sit by the lake and watch the sunrise before we go home and get ready for school.

All my friends want to kiss him. He's the quiet, mysterious Malachi Vize that everyone wants a piece of. It sickens me especially when they go into detail in the group chat about things I'd rather not read. He's not popular-he's the "silent weirdo," yet they say things behind his back because they're too scared to say anything to his face.

Malachi leans down and sniffs my hair, just like he does every day, then sits on my bed and signs, Where are you going?

"Abigail's having a sleepover. Dad said I could go."

His eyes darken a touch, and his jaw tightens.

He does that a lot too.

"Are you going out?" I ask him, and he shakes his head.

By going out, I mean on the motorbike Mom got him for his seventeenth birthday. He drives around like a lunatic, and he thinks our parents don't know he smokes, but we can all smell it coming from his room on the other side of Vize Manor.

Mom moved him into his own room after he kissed me on the lips in front of them. It was innocent. We'd just won a board game together and were celebrating. Apparently the wrong way.

Watching them empty his side of the room was the worst day of my life- and probably his. I've never felt lonely, not since Mom and Dad adopted me; Malachi was always here, keeping me company, especially on stormy nights.

My nightmares have come back, and sometimes, when I can't even breathe because of them, I sneak over to his room. He never turns me away -he misses sharing a room with me too.

We used to push our beds closer and hold hands, and he sometimes sat on the edge of my bed until I fell asleep. He's such a protective brother. Always making sure I'm okay. Even years later, I hate that he's on the other side of the house.

Stay, he signs. Watch a movie with me."I already said I would go. We can watch a movie tomorrow night," I say, swiping the gloss onto my lips and puckering them in the vanity mirror. I pout at him in my reflection. "Aw, is my big brother going to miss me?"

He gets up from my bed, and I gasp as he grabs my hair and pulls my head back. Taking my cheek with his other hand, he swipes the sticky lip gloss across my mouth with his thumb.

My brother pulls my bottom lip down, watching it snap back. He looks... mesmerized?

And for some reason, I'm stuck in a trance too as he grabs my chin, pulling my hair hard enough that I hiss, yet I don't fight him or tell him to stop. A part of me wants him to tug harder-I want him to... something. What's happening?

He releases me and backs away, his chest rising and falling as if he's trying to control himself. Malachi stares down at his thumb, shining with gloss from my lips, then at my now messy hair.

My breaths are heavy as I wipe my mouth, my heart racing in my chest, confused about how I feel and why I'm so flushed.

The chair I'm on is rolled back into position in front of my vanity, and Malachi takes my hairbrush, pulling my pony from the hair tie, then starts to drag the brush through my hair as if nothing just happened.

Three days later, Mom is cutting vegetables when I enter the kitchen, the radio playing quietly as she hums along to the song. Dad is at work, as always. If he doesn't have his nose buried in some paperwork, he's on a conference call or at court, representing some crazy person who's trying not to get life imprisonment for murdering six people in one night.

The Vizes are famous for the cases that usually plaster news channels and social-media platforms worldwide. Dad is a criminal defense attorney, and my mom is a judge. However, ever since she adopted me and Malachi, she works less and less and paints in her art room while we're at school.

I don't remember much of my life before being here, but I do remember how my body felt when I went days without food; when my drug addict of a mother let men in and out the house; the way my baby brother stopped crying forever. He lay there in his crib for days before child services burst in and found his decaying body cradled in my arms.

Apologizing over and over again for not saving him, I was rushed to the emergency room, and a week later, the Vizes introduced themselves and said they'd make sure I never knew what it felt like to go hungry again.

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They kept their word.

Even though I'm scared of my dad, I love him. He's heavy handed with Malachi and swears like a sailor, but he's trying to be calmer, better. He no longer consumes alcohol and keeps himself busy. I can't say Malachi receives the same treatment from him as I do. The only reason my brother is still under this roof is because Mom and I love him, and he's a part of our family regardless.

Said brother walks into the kitchen behind me, his shoulder brushing mine, then ruffles his hair as he stares into the refrigerator and grabs an orange juice. His eyes slide to Mom then to me, and something shines in his eyes. I did go to my friend's house the other night, but I snuck out when everyone fell asleep, and instead of climbing in my own window, I climbed right into Malachi's.

But that's a normal thing siblings do, right?