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ASYLUM OF
DICTION

AN ANTHOLOGY



ALYSSA MILANI

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Edited By:

Christine Wheary



To the most inspiring woman I know.
I love you, Mom.

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Thank You.

And so it begins...



Cigarette at Dawn

ALYSSA MILANI





CHAPTER ONE

CIGARETTE AT DAWN

I always have a pack. I hide it at the very back of my underwear drawer in my dresser. My ratty old dresser painted robin's egg blue from my childhood; its look, worn and weathered. I suppose I should get myself a new one, eventually.

I find the pack between two lace numbers. Looks like it's been crumpled, then flattened out. It's still wrapped in the plastic for some reason. I open the pack. Two left. Two left in a plastic wrapped pack. Only two. Shit, I need one. *Three years you haven't lit up. Three goddamn years.* I take one out and search for a lighter as the stick hangs between my lips. My tongue touches the tip. I feel like I can taste it.

The lighter. I got it. Barely any fluid, but enough to light it. I raise my shaking hand to my mouth, supporting it with the other. The flame hits the end of the cigarette. The ash forms almost instantly, glowing orange from one side to the next as the rush fills my lungs. I choke slightly when the smoke escapes my nostrils and my eyes water, but by God, I needed this. It's stale, but I don't care. Draw after draw I inhale

as if my life depends on it. I sit at the edge of my bed in the dark. I feel alert and powerful, every draw wakes me up. This drag, long and exhausting. The burning tobacco crackling quietly, its embers igniting my whereabouts in the darkroom.

I was waiting for that call. That dreaded phone call. It came in the middle of the night, of course. Three thirty in the morning to be exact. *He's dead*, they said. *He died peacefully in his sleep*. Died peacefully as if they know what it feels like. But that wasn't what caused me to need this cigarette. Fuck no. Not that. I couldn't wait for him to die. I counted down the goddamn days.

What prompted me to light this cigarette, which was now slowly shrinking in between my fingers, was the raspy breathing that woke me up at three twenty-nine this morning. I was jerked awake by the horrific memory of that rasp in his last days. The last days before I put him in the hospital. That rasp, however, stayed with me throughout my childhood. Just lingering. Waiting. My eyes shot open to my dark bedroom. Alone I slept. I always slept alone. The scant moonlight made my drawn curtains seem useless. I heard it, though, and when I turned over I saw it. His aging face. So frail and lifeless. His eyes. Those yellow eyes piercing through me. The air caught in my throat. I felt the ceiling shrink only mere inches from the sides of my face. Its crusty, peeling paint tickling slightly. The rasp. It went on.

The rasp exploded my eardrums. I hated it. Despised it. Feared it, even, and there he was just inches in front of me. The smell of his stale, booze-ridden breath infiltrated me. Filling me like a hot-air balloon. A smile crept onto his face, cracking the wrinkles in his cheeks. It resembled thin ice on a warm spring day. One step and the crack echoes. Another and it spreads. The cracks on his face spread soundly out to either side. Spider-like veins moving to his ears and opening him up slowly. I followed one as it spread like the crack on a windshield, down his throat I saw the insides, the fucking insides of his throat, but not a drop of blood poured out. But by God, I swear I saw it. The pulsating

veins. The Adam's apple. His goddamn jugular. I craved a cigarette. I needed that cigarette.

He opened his mouth, the corners of his lips tearing open. The appearance didn't scare me. His mouth looked like uncooked steak tearing apart. Piece by piece. The sound, though. The ear blistering sound that escaped his mouth shot an ample wave that knocked me out of bed. I felt out of control, as though I was walking into the ocean. A salty wave crashing into me and knocking me on my behind. I had to find that pack. I knew it was somewhere. My back hit the wall with brute force, leaving a back shaped hole beside my dresser. Like clockwork, the phone rang and the time read three thirty.

The cigarette filled my lungs with a satisfying tick that I wondered why I ever gave it up. Oh yeah, for him and his rasp. That fucking rasp. The smoke clouded my view as I looked out the window and the moon finally poked through; the glow seemingly dull in the starless sky. I watched it anyway. I watched it for fear of turning around and looking behind me. Was he there? Was it all a dream?

Dreams.

I've been having the dreams again. What those have to do with anything is beyond my train of thought. Maybe I'm just looking for a distraction. Maybe not. But the dreams started again. I wake up, not remembering anything except the feeling. The sense of loss. The sense of panic. I wake up paranoid that something is wrong, but there is nothing for me to worry about. Not anymore, anyway. They started as a kid, those damn dreams. I was a kid when that rasp started. That goddamn rasp. Every dream was always the same. From what I remember, at least. I'd wake up in a panic. I'd see myself walking in the darkness and turn around to look at myself, then smile. That smile. Rotting from the inside out. The same dream occurred night after night, until one night it stopped. I stopped walking, I guess. Stopped smiling. No waking up feeling utterly stricken or unable to die. No waking up screaming with no sound escaping. No, I'd wake up only when the sun poked through the cracks in the curtains and I was able to inhale my

cancer stick once again. The cigarettes would help me forget. They'd keep it away. They'd keep the rasp away.

The cigarette reaches its end and I take out the second one. My trembling hand rising to it and flicking the lighter. It clicks once, twice, three times before a flame sparks and lights the tip. The first inhale is always so satisfying. Always so alluring. It's like that first cigarette after good sex. The dizziness that swoops in while inhaling deeply, filling the lungs with deadly chemicals. It's fine, though. Fuck yeah, it's fine. It's fucking good, too. Fucking goddamn good.

I rise and turn slowly, the ash swirling at my feet. Why do I turn? There's no good in turning. Don't fucking turn. He's there again. His cracked face now grey and almost transparent. His smile crooked, mocking even. He's standing at the corner of the room. No, he's floating. Holy fuck, he's floating. I raise my shaking hand to my mouth and leave the cigarette between my lips just watching him. His grotesque toenails are inches off the ground and his rotting corpse appears green now. Why is he green? Do corpses turn green?

I feel bile build up in my throat. I don't want to do it. But that rasp. The rasp returns along with his smile. That fucked up, toothless smile just staring at me. I swallow hard; smoke follows the bile and I'm able to hold it. For now.

His arthritic fingers shake at his sides, the skin cracking at the knuckles and peeling off. Peeling? Is he fucking peeling in my bedroom? I let out a soft groan and meet his piercing eyes. I feel nothing but disgust. I don't want to look at them, but I do. Fuck, I do. His rotting flesh. That nasty, rotting flesh is peeling off. It's peeling right the fuck off and falling. I watch it, of course. Like the sick and twisted fucker that I am. I watch it fall slowly from him. Dangling in the air like a frozen leaf. He's fucking peeling.

His head jerks to the side. I hear the bones crack in his neck. The disturbing smile remains. His neck tears slightly. More rips follow and spread down his chest. He's deteriorating in front of me. I don't want to fucking see this and yet I can't look away. Blackness oozes from the tear

in his neck and floats out like smoke. It spreads around him, almost entirely hiding him from my view. I rub my eyes as I take another drag. I debate whether or not I grabbed my special cigarettes instead. A bad trip. This was definitely a bad trip. It had to be.

The black cloud of smoke fills my room. I wave my hand but it does nothing. I try to search for the window, but I can't even see the hand in front of my face. I start to cough. The fuck is this stuff? It tastes like tar and ash all at once. I take a step back and feel my nightstand hit the back of my legs. The smoke fills me. It's all I can see. It's all I can feel. We're instantly becoming one. I cough once more, gasping for a breath of air.

The rasp echoes in front of me. I can't see it, but you bet your bottom I can hear it. As quickly as it filled my room, the black smoke escapes into his open mouth. Sucking it in like a vacuum. Disturbing sounds encircle me. Sounds no human should ever hear.

There he is. I see him now, barely. He is definitely disappearing before me now. Is he a fucking ghost? The rasp escapes him again through that thing I call a mouth. That cracked, open tear. That flopping deteriorating skin. He opens his mouth just inches in front of me. The rancid smell. Booze and rot. I gag slightly and bile fills my throat again.

A small gasp escapes me, but that's all I gave him. The stale stench of an ashtray and the bottom of a bottle filling my nostrils. The rot joins momentarily. Those eyes locking mine. That smile.

With one last rattle, his body shimmers into nothingness before me. Shimmers like it was just a shower in the wind. I fall to my knees; the burning cigarette still in my hand. He's gone. He is finally gone.

ALYSSA MILANI



THE DECISION

ALYSSA MILANI



CHAPTER TWO

THE DECISION

I couldn't see anything. A bag was draped over my head and a blindfold covered my eyes. The sour smell of dampness and mildew filled my nostrils. Perhaps it might've been stagnant water, I wasn't entirely sure. They say when one of the senses is weakened, the others kick into high gear. I'm guessing my sense of smell isn't one of those heightened senses. I tried to pry my hands loose, but they were secured tightly in front of me, causing the feeling in my fingertips to numb. Blackness clouded my vision, and the more I tried to see through the fabric, the more my eyes strained, and caused me even more panic.

My captor shoved me in the direction they wanted me to go, tossing me around like a rag doll. Their leather gloves pierced my skin by

their fierce grip, and the strong scent of peppermint followed us through the damp tunnels.

Afraid would be an understatement, and it would undermine my feelings. *Fright*, however, would level it, and utter *panic* wouldn't even begin to describe it. Dread rolled in around me like a fog. A fog I wouldn't even know what to do with or how to react once it cleared.

A metallic scrape echoed through the area, scratching the cold, wet floor. My nerves rattled even more before I could muster what was happening. My breathing shook, hyperventilating pressed in and sobs followed. I tried to spit words at my captor, yell at them, plead with them, but I was in too much of a panic to do anything.

The bag was ripped off my head, but my eyes were still covered. The silence was deafening around me, and my ears began to buzz. In darkness, the other senses usually heightened, and mine surely did. I could hear the quiet sobs and muffled cries of others. Others I couldn't see.

Whoever took me scurried out of the damp room leaving, the strong smell of peppermint behind. The door scraped and then slammed shut. I brought my hands to my eyes, slowly peeling the blindfold from them, and letting the dark fabric fall around my neck. My eyes adjusted to the darkness around me, trying to see through its density. The muffled yelps hollered beside me again; I was too frightened to really see, but too curious to look away.

With a zap and a bang, lights flooded the room. Its peeling paint, cement floors, rusting pipes, and dirty walls seemed to cave in on me as I tried to catch my breath. The air in my lungs felt stuck, lodged deeply

like a cork on a wine bottle without an opener. The yelps grew louder, directed at me like I was supposed to be their savior. I looked down at my hands, trying to pry them loose, but my curiosity overtook my will, and that's when I saw them. My troubled past, present, and future. Everything around me froze; their scared and battered faces were all gawking at me. I ran toward Mike first. He was gagged, scratched, and both hands chained behind his back by a large and long chain affixed to the wall behind him.

"Are you alright?" Mike asked when I pulled the gag from his mouth. His hazel eyes were fresh with tears and his dirty-blond spiked hair was in shambles.

"I don't—I don't know," I said, trying my hardest to keep it together and not lose control.

"Did you see anything? Anything at all that could tell you where we are?" Mike kept on.

I had no time to justify an answer, no time to stop and think. Not while both Tom and Raleigh were glaring at me with their tear stained eyes. I pulled the gag from Tom's mouth; he was in the middle of the three men. His large brown eyes were so worried and scared, his shaved head featured fresh scratches and the beginnings of bruises. I tried to flash him a meek, reassuring grin to calm him, but the fear in my tear-filled eyes failed to console him.

"I can't untie you," I sobbed, forcing the chains down Tom's hand. They were locked, tightly and securely. A device that appeared to

look like a lock was holding their chains around their wrists, keeping them in place. Three lights flashed on them, all blinking green.

“Did he hurt you?” Raleigh asked after I pulled the gag from his mouth. His aqua eyes were brighter behind his tears.

“No,” I sniffed. Raleigh strained to get his hands loose, shifting some of his blonde, slicked-back hair into his face, but he didn’t succeed, and was still secured tightly.

“Where’s—” Raleigh paused, looking to the ground, then meeting my eyes. “Where’s the baby?”

“I don’t know. It happened so fast. I just—he took us both,” I said through a curtain of tears.

The three men gritted their teeth; Tom and Raleigh tried their hardest to pry themselves loose. Mike did not even move. His lower lip quivered, his gaze affixed on a puddle on the floor before him, as if lost in his own sadness and fear. I felt horrible, numb, and a failure, even though what was happening was out of my control.

“Welcome, my friends, to *The Ultimatum*,” a voice rang over the intercom. The static and scratching noises startled us all. Unfortunately, I knew exactly what *The Ultimatum* was. I wrote a piece on it just last month. I interviewed countless victims, heard innumerable stories, and they all led me nowhere. Fear built in me even more, I didn’t think it was possible to be more frightened, but I was. I looked to the men before me so perfectly aligned. All three with their arms chained behind them, all three standing in the same position, and all three looking right at me. “Hardy, in front of you are your conquests. To your right, your husband

Raleigh, father to your son. To your far left, Mike, your current fling. And in the middle, Tom, the man you say you still love, and your rebound after Raleigh. I have to admit, I've been wanting to take you for a while now, but as I watched you and saw your life crumbling before my eyes, I knew I needed you all."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Raleigh yelled.

"You have a decision to make, Hardy—you and only you can make this decision. If you don't comply or they make the decision for you. You will automatically lose," the voice went on.

"Lose what?" Mike yelled.

"In the box under the window, you will find a gun. It is fully loaded," the voice went on. Another light sparked and a mirror with no reflection, stained by water and calcium, came into view. Under it was a box with a latch atop of it. "The choice is this: who do you love most? Raleigh? Mike? Or Tom? Kill one to find your son."

"Where is he?" I barked.

"He's safe, for now. In one hour's time, if the decision is not made, I will make the decision for you and I can choose whomever I want, including your son. However, if you can't decide who will be sacrificed, you have the option to take your own life to spare theirs. Remember, this decision is *yours* and only *yours* to make. If you don't make it in time, not only their lives and your own could be up for grabs, but you son's as well...time starts now."

*

Silence spread like a blanket of snow among us. I let out a heavy breath and turned to the men I have loved in so many different ways. I looked to Raleigh first; our love was unique—simply put, love at first sight. We were together for six years, and married for four of those years before he cracked. Something about “finding his inner self”. Sex between us was always wild, always an adventure, and yet, he still cheated on me with his whore of an assistant, then moved to India with her where he embarked on his “spiritual journey”. She eventually left him to continue her journey when he felt it was time to come home. I was broken, completely torn by his actions, blaming myself for it all. The more I thought about it, and the more I analyzed the reasoning; he wasn’t ready to be a father in spite of the love he had for me. He liked the idea of passing on his seed, but being there time and time again for someone wasn’t for him. I yelled, I screamed, and I cried...oh boy, did I cry. But at what, really? He was going to embark on his journey whether I stood in his way or not.

That’s when I let out my emotions and rage on Tom. He is five years my junior but our relationship was just as intense as any. We were friends for a while beforehand, and there was always that flirtatious spark between us that we never acted upon. We started quick and remained uncomplicated for the two years we were a couple. At first, he was simply a rebound, someone I could just fuck without having any attachments. Simply sex. Just someone to make Raleigh jealous, and it worked, but Raleigh didn’t care as much as I expected. Instead, I grew to care more about Tom than I intended. He may have been immature but he knew me; we knew each other. We’re definitely one and the same. Even though

our relationship didn't last long, we surely did go through heaps. As a journalist, I was able to bring my work with me wherever I went. We traveled the world, making it our goal to bring my son, Oliver, everywhere and experience everything alongside us. It was fun while it lasted; the heat and energy between Tom and I was unlike anything I could ever express, or could ever compare it to. He was just as wild as I was, and his family adored me—more than the in-laws I was legally bound to. Then one night, while we were staying at his flat in London, he had gone out with some of his buddies for a few drinks and a couple games of pool. I was woken up at three in the morning to an array of texted photos of him kissing some girl. The irritable feeling boiling within me struck again, and I was afraid I would never be able to simmer down. All I could think of was *is it me? Am I the reason no one wants to be with me? To love me? Am I not good enough?* I packed all my things, taking everything we had built together, removing Oliver from Tom's life, even though he called him Daddy on a number of occasions. I was on the next plane out of there. No note, no nothing. Just what Tom deserved.

Lo and behold, that was when I met Mike. I walked off the plane, eyes red and puffy with my sleeping son in my arms, his drool on my shoulder, and I walked right into Mike. I was lost in my own little bubble, not even noticing someone was standing there in the first place. His drink was knocked out of his hands and it landed on the floor, splattering onto his white shirt. I apologized over and over again, and he continued to say it was fine and it didn't matter. The twinkle in his hazel eyes made my insides flip-flop. That was two months ago, and we haven't kept our

hands off each other since. Talk about coincidences, he was a journalist as well, which I found extremely exciting to be able to compare our notes and stories. I would proofread his articles, and he'd always comment on mine. He often spoke of my article on *The Ultimatum*, how courageous I was to interview all the surviving victims, what they lost, and what they gained. Although he hated how many sleepless nights I had, just trying to piece together a puzzle that didn't fit. I tried my hardest to help the detectives find the monster who designed such a horrendous scheme, but that's all it was, right? A story I wrote.

Next thing I knew, I was staring at these men, wondering which one I had to kill in order to save my son's life.

*

"This is madness," Tom cried. "He's lying, he's got to be."

"Does it sound like he's fucking lying?" Raleigh growled. "The choice is obvious isn't it?"

I frowned and studied each of their faces, still unsure what to do.

"Fifty-eight minutes," the voice echoed over the intercom.

The non-reflective mirror rattled softly as the countdown sparked up. The digital numbers decreased in neon red, giving me the unwanted urgency to decide who I was to kill. One of the victims I interviewed had been stuck in the same predicament, but it was her verses her husband and only one of them would walk out alive. They had three hours to make the decision and she shot him in less than two.

I raised my bound hands to my mouth and the moisture on my face from the utterly maddening tears that fell spread to my fingertips;

how was I to make this decision? I was nothing but a writer making ends meet with new and exciting stories. I knew it was my fault we were all in this predicament. I knew it, and yet I said nothing. The three of them helped me survive; without them I was nothing. No one. How could I choose which of them to kill? I sobbed quietly, trying not to look at them.

“Sweetheart, hey,” Mike started. “It’s okay, you know this. Do what you have to. None of us will judge you for it, not for his life—”

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” Raleigh scoffed. “You just want her to keep you alive.”

“I could give two shits who she picks! As long as she and Oliver walk out that door.”

“Hardy,” Tom pleaded. Tears were falling down his cheeks. “I can’t...not yet...”

Arguing spread among them, their deep voices filling the empty room. Raleigh barked at Mike; Mike barked back. Tom howled over the two, screaming until his eyes bulged. All I could do was watch the numbers. They moved so entirely slow, and so entirely fast at the same time. The seconds seemed to speed up the longer I watched them, ticking by like there was someone’s finger on the fast-forward button. Time marched on and all I could think about was survival. The numbers began to shift, doubling the more I watched them. The seconds reflected onto the water on the ground that dripped down the walls, *fifty-six* it read.

There was no more air left in me, nothing left for me to exhale, and yet I sighed, twisting at the braces around my wrists. Chains rattled as the men tried to pry themselves loose and attack each other. Their yells

and profanities clouded around me like a haze, but I ignored their noise, ignored their bantering, and I waited until I could think of some solution.

Scanning the room, there was nothing I could see that would free my wrists. Puddles decorated much of the ground and two rectangular pillars were situated directly in the middle of the room. The rust on the walls also climbed the base of the pillars, staining them burnt orange and reflecting the color into the water surrounding them. Much of the cement on the pillars was caked off and flaked to the ground around, revealing the metal bars that barely held the structure steady. The more the men's yells rattled, the more the dust shook from the pillars. I tried to relax my racing heart and calm myself as much as I could.

The loud voices around me slowly muted as all I could hear was my breathing, rough and jagged. The sound of my pounding heart joined in momentarily. I watched the numbers, knowing I had to get a move on. I knew that I'd walk out of there with not three, but two of the men I loved more than anyone in the world. All to save my beautiful boy, Oliver. The question was who was I going to choose?

*

The muted voices grew louder and louder, until they were full force and slapped my ear drums, shaking me into reality once more. Raleigh's pale face was a deep red as spittle shot from his lips; Tom's eyes bulged from his head and his face was red as well. Mike tried his hardest to get his point across, his lip quivering with every yell he expressed, those hazel eyes glossed over with tears.

“Stop it! Stop it all of you!” I yelled. As if a switch was flipped, the three of them stopped their cacophony. Their heavy breathing echoed around me, spittle collected at the corners of their mouths, and their reddened cheeks slowly washing away from them as they relaxed. They looked at me, three pairs of glossy eyes analyzing my every inch, my every move, my *everything*.

“Why? Hm? So we can watch you think about who you’re gonna kill? Please, we know exactly who you’re gonna choose so just do it already,” Raleigh yelled, shaking his head and making me believe he should be my first choice.

“Fifty three minutes,” the voice echoed again. I couldn’t help but look at the digital numbers behind me.

“Why us, Hardy?” Tom started, out of breath. “What do you know?”

“Nothing,” I scoffed, trying to fathom a way to bend the truth. “I just did a piece on him, you know this.”

“Could that be why he chose us?” Mike said.

“What did you write in that article, Hardy?” Raleigh barked.

“Of course you didn’t read it,” Tom scoffed.

“She writes a lot of shit; sorry I can’t read ‘em all!” Raleigh yelled.

“Goes to show how much you give a shit,” Mike snarled.

My shuddered breathing and thudding heart pounded in my ears. Their chatter started again. Their yells continued to spread, and I couldn’t hear anything but my beating heart. Who was I to choose? I had to think of my son and what was best for him.

Raleigh, his father. Oliver needed his father. Didn't he? For two years Raleigh had been absent from Oliver's life. Two years that Oliver didn't know his father. Two years I had hated Raleigh for what he did to us, how he broke us. For two years Oliver called Tom his father, and time and time again I corrected him saying, "no baby, this is Tommy," but all the same, he still didn't know who his biological father was. Tom was there, so he was Oliver's father. Tom helped me throughout those two years in so many ways I couldn't even begin to explain. Although he hurt me, too. Broke me like Raleigh broke me. Do I choose Tom because he's younger than all of us, and has so much to live for? No.

Mike. Then there was Mike. My head said to do the right thing and choose Raleigh, the father. My heart was telling me to choose Mike, the gentleman. The sex-god: the man who made my toes curl. Yet I barely knew Mike, I barely knew who he truly was...standing there before the three of them, I barely knew myself. I knew I had to listen to my heart, it would know what was right, it would know who to choose, but the last time I listened to my heart, it broke me.

"Hardy, please," Mike yelled.

"Stop wasting time for fucks sake and just do it already," Raleigh barked.

"Forty-nine minutes."

"How do you expect me to choose?" I yelled. "I can't fucking choose any of you, I just can't."

"Hardy," Mike said. "It's your son."

“He’s my son, too,” Raleigh snarled, and then glared at me. “I know you better than these two fuck-heads. You already made your decision the second that asshole gave you that ultimatum. Stop wasting time and just shoot me, love.”

Tom sighed, as if in relief. Raleigh was wrong, so wrong. He did know me, but he also knew I couldn’t choose him. I would *never* kill him.

*

Beyond Raleigh were a few wooden crates piled up in the corner. Darkness clouded it, but I knew I had to shove my fears aside and investigate in case something was there I could use to set them free. I ignored their pleas, their requests, and the damned time that flashed by. My feet splashed in the puddles as I made my way over.

“Hardy?” Tom said urgently.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Raleigh turned. Chains rattled all around me.

The lights seemed to ignite as I approached and a cluster of broken glass glinted at me; I knew it would be enough to cut me free from my restraints, but not their chains. My hands dove into the water and its brownish, pink-purple hue rippled as I pulled out a shard of glass. I sawed at the restraints furiously, desperately wanting to get loose before the timer hit forty-five minutes.

“Hardy?” Mike yelled.

“Baby?” Tom added.

“Hardy!” Raleigh growled.

A groan escaped me as my wrist came loose. The tie wraps left chaffing marks, but that was the least of my worries. I tucked the shard of glass into my back pocket and lifted a lid on one of the crates. Empty. I tried the next one was empty as well. There were rotting cardboard boxes on the third crate, and black mold and mildew growing out of it. I pushed a few of the boxes out of the way and pried open one last crate, to my surprise and relief, a rusted bolt cutter gawked back at me. What a coincidence, right?

“Hardy!” Raleigh barked again.

“What are you doing? You don’t have time to dilly-dally,” Mike yelled.

“It’s called patience,” I said as I wiped my hands on my thighs and raised the bolt cutters.

“That’s my girl,” Raleigh grinned.

“Forty-five minutes,” the voice echoed. “I suggest you take the gun out of the box, Hardy.”

“No,” I muttered under my breath as I clamped the cutter down on the chain around Raleigh’s wrist.

“Who’re you going to choose?” Tom asked, glaring at me with watery eyes as I tried my hardest to break the chain.

Raleigh tried to twist his arms to help me as I struggled to force the cutter closed, it remained still, as if jammed. The more I opened it and repositioned it, the more it would drop down, then lodge in place. I strained and squeezed as hard as I could, but the cutters would not budge.

“Fuck it, Hardy. Just leave it,” Raleigh said.

“No, try again. Try them on me,” Tom urged.

“They’re jammed,” I sniffed. I looked up at Raleigh, his aqua eyes drinking in my fear. “They won’t work. I’m sorry. They won’t work!”

“Make your decision then,” Raleigh said softly.

I dropped the bolt cutter, their clank rang in my ears as I noticed the welding adjustment on them. There was no way they would ever work. I looked up at Raleigh, his worried face gave me a nod, assuring me I needed to make the decision sooner rather than later. My feet moved on their own, striding through the glistening puddles, and stopping before the decreasing digital numbers. My hands shook as I raised them to the box, painted so perfectly white, its hinges a pristine stainless steel, completely out of place with the decaying room.

A revolver sat alone in the box, and I reached in to grab it. So heavy, yet so light in my hand. I didn’t know what to do, so I glared at it as if it would give me the answer.

“Hardy,” Mike began. I held the revolver and slowly turned to look at them. “You have to make the decision. Remember who *they* are, what *they* did to you, what they—”

“Oh, fuck off,” Raleigh barked.

“I didn’t do anything!” Tom yelled.

Their arguing commenced again, fighting like irresponsible teenagers. Arguing about stupidities, when there was nothing stupid to argue about. My hand shook at my sides as I held the revolver. It had been the first time I ever held a gun; it was heavy in my hands. I didn’t know what to do, or how to use it. I’ve played enough arcade and video

games to make myself believe I knew what to do, but I was just as lost as anyone else would be.

“I’m no better than any of you,” I said, breaking up their yells, and still looking at the revolver in my hand. The arguing stopped and they glared at me, Mike spoke first, seemingly the most concerned.

“What? What do you mean?” Mike said.

“Raleigh fucked that skank, Tom made out with that whore, and I...” I said, looking up at Mike again. “Even though he hurt me, I—”

“We slept together,” Tom said, his eyes welling with fresh tears. “We never stopped really, because I didn’t do anything.”

“What?” Mike said. “There’s proof that you cheated!”

“I was set up,” Tom said, looking over at me. “I told you I would never hurt you, babe.”

Raleigh’s laughter pooled around them; his face expressed the insanity of the situation. The crinkle around his eyes was magnified by the dirt and grime that painted his face. Two scratches with caked and dried blood decorated the side of his neck. His laughter oddly calmed me a little. After subsiding slightly, he looked at me and shook his head. He was enjoying my pain while I still couldn’t wrap my own head around it.

“That’s bullshit,” Mike barked. “When? How?”

“Does it matter?” I said.

“Yes,” Mike snarled.

“Thirty-nine minutes, Hardy,” the voice persisted. “I suggest you make your decision.”

I groaned and turned to the digital numbers; I wanted to grab the bolt cutter and wack at the mirror, hit it until its glass turned to dust. I wanted to attack with everything I had, all the pent up aggression, all the anger, all the hurt and betrayal building up. I didn't. I gritted my teeth and looked down at the gun in my hand. It seemed to be getting heavier the longer I held it.

"How do I even know he's alive?" I yelled, looking up at the corners of the room for any sign of a camera, any sign that he was watching us somehow.

"Make a decision and you will find out," the voice echoed.

"No, prove it now!" Raleigh barked, the chains echoing behind him.

A guttural chuckle escaped the intercom, then silence fell. The kind of dead silence that eats away at you. My heavy breathing moved around me, mixing with the strains and groans of the three men before me. That's when I heard it. The cry. Instinctually, I made my way to the rusted, metal door and tried to pry it open. I pulled, I pushed and yanked, but it wouldn't budge. A loud ring escaped the from intercom and blared for a second too long until the voice spoke again.

"Put the gun back in the box, Hardy," it commanded.

I did as I was told, much to Mike and Raleigh's dismay.

"Don't!" Mike yelled as I dropped the gun in the white box and stepped away from it.

"Keep the fucking gun, Hardy!" Raleigh urged.

Thirty-four minutes.

Three clanks echoed, three locks opened, and three straining men tugged at their chains, thinking they were free. The rusted metal door opened and the masked man with the leather gloves and peppermint smell, which I could only assume was aftershave, stepped through with my crying son in his arms.

“Mommy!” Oliver screamed. The pain it caused me to stand there and watch his poor innocent face so red and wet with fright was unbearable. My legs moved before I could even muster up a chance to think as I ran toward him. “No! Mommy! I want my Mommy!”

The rusted metal door slammed with a scrapping bang. My body met it with a shove, and I tried to open it once more, screaming and crying for Oliver, but the three locks secured it back in place. I banged my fists on the door, sobbing as I stood there, then I slid to the ground. My heart ripped in two, pounding rapidly and fiercely, until Raleigh’s voice broke through, attempting to calm me, but only served to irritate me more.

“Take me, Hardy. Just fucking do it and end whatever the fuck this is,” Raleigh yelled through falling tears.

“You can’t make the decision for her, numb-nuts,” Mike said through gritted teeth.

“She was going to pick me anyway, jackass!” Raleigh barked back.

“You’re the father to her only kid, I highly doubt she would choose you,” Tom said.

“What the fuck do you know, you’re just a kid yourself,” Raleigh scoffed.

“As if you’re any better,” Mike chuckled and shook his head.

“What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean?” Raleigh tried to turn to Mike, the chains rattling behind him.

“You know exactly what it means,” Mike continued. “If you weren’t ready to be a father, don’t get her fucking pregnant and then leave once things get tough. What kind of fucking man are you?”

“More of a fucking man than you’ll ever be,” Raleigh growled. “I made one fucking mistake that I regret every fucking day for the last two years, but there’s *nothing* I can do about it. Nothing at all.”

“You could shut the fuck up!” Tom yelled. “Both of you. You think this is easy for Hardy, making this decision? Your yelling and arguing is just adding to her stress—”

“Oh, fuck you, Tom,” Raleigh scoffed and turned to me.

They were right, they were *all* right. I didn’t know who I was supposed to choose or what direction I was supposed to go in, all I knew was, I had to get out of that god-awful room, and I had less than thirty minutes to do so.

“Stop it,” I said softly. “Please, just stop.”

I leaned my head against the door; my bottom was already soaked with whatever was puddling on the ground. The hint of peppermint still lingered as I looked at the chained men before me, one of which I had to kill, and soon.

*

“What’re you going to do, Hardy?” Mike asked.

I couldn't look at them; my focus was on the digital numbers continuing to decrease. Who was I to choose? The memories I shared with Raleigh were indescribable. We were always so happy, so full of life, and we were constantly all over each other. Our life together was just one giant spontaneous experience. He proposed in the rain during an argument; I wanted to walk away from him, to end it all, and when I turned around to scream at him, he was down on bended knee with a ring in his hand. The spontaneity was so us, I said yes without even thinking twice. What we had argued about was still a mystery.

I knew I loved Tom the moment I met him. He was always so cheery and happy. He would make me laugh just from a simple look. No matter what I asked for, he would do it. That heavenly British accent of his reminded me of traveling, and no one could take our love away from us. The way he helped with Oliver was unlike anything I would have ever imagined he would do. At five years my junior and taking on fatherly roles at just twenty-one was a big deal, but Tom did it without a single complaint. He was proud to be called a step-father, proud to hold Oliver's little hand and watch me with him. Tom was proud to call me his own.

"Baby," Tom said softly through fresh tears.

I pushed my hand into the wet ground as I rose; the moisture did not feel entirely like water. An oily residue stained my palm, shining in the fluorescent lighting. Wiping my hand on the side of my leg, I made my way back to the white box where I slowly pulled out the revolver once

more. The room was clouded with utter suspense and intensity the moment its stainless steel nose glinted in the light.

“I don’t even know how to use it,” I sniffed.

“Cock, aim, and shoot, love,” Raleigh said, preparing himself for the blow.

I took a few steps closer to them, a few steps too many. My hands shook, my body ached, and I felt dizzy enough that I might pass out right there, before I had a chance to make my decision. I kept shaking my head, as if telling myself that this was the right decision and this had to happen.

“I’m so sorry,” I said without looking at any of them.

How was I to do this? I knew who to choose, but how could I end one of their lives? My hands shook at my sides, the nose of the gun hitting my leg every so often. I didn’t know who to choose, not yet anyway. Or maybe I did. Maybe I was just stalling, raising the suspense. I had to make a decision, and fast.

“It’s okay,” Tom said.

“Hardy?” Mike’s voice sounded crazed.

“I love you,” Raleigh muttered.

I cocked the gun, as instructed to do, and raised it quickly; my finger did not hesitate on the trigger. The echo of the gun blast shot through the room and my ringing ears put me in a state of being disorientated. The kickback stung my shoulder, but that didn’t bother me as much as it should’ve. I heard their yelling, their cries, and the groans

of the one I shot. I felt the world around me shift out of focus and move while I stood still. I shot him; I couldn't believe I shot him.

I looked up slowly and met Raleigh's relieved eyes, he had thought I would choose him. He had believed I would end him, but I couldn't do that, not to Oliver. I dropped the gun and staggered backward a few steps as I looked over at the blood pooling on the ground. Mike looked up at me, his painful gaze shooting daggers through me as well. Blood seeped from his mouth, decorating his chin and seeping down his neck. He coughed, spraying red splatter onto the pillar before him. Tom's large eyes gazed at the hole in Mike's stomach, his insides seeping out.

The rusted, metal door flew open and the masked man stood there with Oliver, his cries swarming me. I wanted to run to him and yank him out of the masked man's arms, but I couldn't move, by God, I couldn't move. A chuckle escaped the masked man, that peppermint scent following with him. *I'll fucking kill you*, I thought. My back hit the pillar that Mike's blood had splattered onto as I tried to step away from the masked man, even though he held everything I lived for, and everything that kept me going. Mike's ragged breathing clouded my eardrums, slowly nearing his final breath.

"Alive and well," the masked man said in regards to Oliver. The digital numbers on the clock stopped, twenty-three minutes and thirty-four seconds. "Took you long enough to decide."

“You’re okay, sweetie,” I said through falling tears, my feet planted on the ground before me, still in utter shock at what I had just done.

“Ollie,” Raleigh called. “Daddy’s here bud, it’s okay.”

“Step one of *The Ultimatum* is complete,” the masked man chuckled over Oliver’s sobs. “But don’t you worry, step two won’t be as tough.”

“What are you talking about?” I yelled, glancing at Raleigh, then back to the man. “I did what you asked, can’t you see?”

The masked man chuckled and the rusted, metal door scraped on the ground and clanked shut, sealing us in that room once again. I ran to the door, hoping it wouldn’t be locked, hoping I would be able to walk through to the other side, but I was let down as the door did not budge, and the three locks bolted in place.

“Why are we still chained?” Tom asked a moment later, all of us still absorbing the situation we were in.

“What? Am I supposed to kill them all?” I screamed and banged on the door.

A whirring sound escaped the device holding their chains in place and with hums and snaps, the restrains on Tom and Raleigh were unhinged, and they were free. Tom held each wrist for a brief moment, twisting them in circles, and rubbing the sensitive skin around them.

“You may have ended Mike’s life, but *The Ultimatum* is not over, Hardy,” the voice sounded over the intercom as the lights went out

around us, leaving us in the eternal darkness. “You have one last decision to make, and this decision will determine your freedom.”

*

I took a few steps back, trying to retrace my steps to the pillar. I gasped as I felt Raleigh slide his arm around me, his familiar musk of vanilla-whiskey enveloping me.

“It’s just me,” Raleigh said quietly. I felt Tom touch my arm as well, backing slowly into the darkness with us. I felt Raleigh move closer, his lips touching my head, and his breath tickling the hair tucked behind my ear. “Alright, what the fuck do we do now?”

“The only way out is through that door,” Tom said, taking my hand.

The digital numbers sparked away again, decreasing and informing us that we only had twenty-three minutes to find a way out. Tom stepped away a moment, and his shadow was illuminated by the glow of the red numbers in the otherwise dark room. The gun. He picked up the gun.

Another scraping door opened behind us, causing light to pool in and call us to it. Raleigh turned to it first and gripped the back of my shirt so I would follow. The light kissed the side of Mike’s lulling face as saliva and blood leaked from his lifeless mouth. There were no more breaths leaving him, only an eternal pause. Tears welled in my eyes; how truly sorry I felt for ending the life of a man I barely knew, but had shared so many intimate moments with.

“Raleigh,” Tom said and lifted the gun in his hands.

“Stay behind me,” Raleigh looked at me and took the gun from Tom.

I nodded, feeling Raleigh release his grip from the back of my shirt, and move forward. Tom walked behind me, his gaze piercing the back of my head as we moved past Mike. Raleigh peered around the corner, looking down two dimly lit paths that were more deteriorated than the room itself. Cement caked and cracked on the ground, and remnants of old paint stained parts of the cement walls as moisture and rust decorated the rest. Long, thin black wires spread along the ceiling, barely holding lightbulbs that flickered every so often.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“Fuck if I know,” Raleigh said.

“Owe anyone money that would wanna kill us?” Tom scoffed.

“Listen, rich boy,” Raleigh said lowering the gun. “Only reason I haven’t shot you yet is because of her, so shut your fucking mouth and stop acting like you know anything about my life.”

“I know enough to know you’d abandon your family when times get tough and—” Tom’s face was met by Raleigh’s fist. Tom staggered backward into the doorframe with a grunt and lifted his hand to his bloodied nose.

“Stop it,” I raised my hand to Raleigh’s chest. “Now’s not the time for jealous bullshit.”

“Fine,” Raleigh scoffed and looked down each path again.

“Are you alright?” I asked Tom, raising my hand to his face.

“Yeah, I’ll live,” Tom said and pushed my hand away.

“Let’s try this way,” Raleigh said, clenching and unclenching his fist at his side.

“What if it’s the wrong way?” I said, eyeing the freshly painted red arrows on the ground and the wall. “What if we can’t get to him?”

“Then we’ll double back and go the other way.” Raleigh asserted his leadership role amongst the three of us. I let him; if there was someone to save us, it would be him.

“The arrows could be a ruse to trick us,” Tom said.

“Or they could also be a way to make us go the other way and walk right into a trap,” Raleigh said.

“Let’s just go this way,” I said, and I began to follow the red arrows.

Raleigh stepped in front of me and lifted the gun once more. There were open doors to either side of the path, darkness leaking out of them. We walked slowly, one my one, in a row. Tom gawked behind us, and into some of the rooms trying to see through the darkness, but there was nothing there.

A loud vibration surrounded us and moved the dust and particles from the cement walls, drifting them to the ground. A sneeze escaped Tom as the vibration magnified. We all stopped momentarily and leaned against the wall. It felt like an earth quake, shaking our bodies and the area around us, urging us to safety.

“Seventeen minutes,” the voice echoed.

“Why is there a timer?” I cried.

The vibration stopped, and the pouring of water replaced it, flowing from behind us. It kissed the ground at rapid speed, sending all of us a couple of steps forward from its momentum. Water continued to flow, reaching our ankles, and rising with every second we wasted standing there watching it.

“That’s why there’s a timer,” Raleigh gripped my arm and pulled me into a run through the water. Tom followed behind, keeping a watchful eye.

There was no sure exit at the end of this path, no sure escape, but we ran through the rising water anyway. Raleigh led the way as he whipped us left, right, then left again. A black door at the end with light seeping around the edges gave me a moment of relief. The water was nearing my knees as we reached the door and my legs were growing weaker the longer I pushed forward. Raleigh tried to jimmy the doorknob; he shoved and pushed into the door, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Hold your ears,” Tom said to me as Raleigh pointed the gun at the doorknob, but he shot before I had the chance to register what Tom had instructed me to do.

The gun fired and stung my eardrums with a blast; they were still recovering from the shot at Mike. I tried to unblock them, tried to hear Raleigh as he barked at me, but the ringing took over. Raleigh pulled me through the door into a brightened stairwell as the water also rushed in with us. Blacked out windows decorated the top of the staircase as the flickering lightbulb beside it dangled side to side.

“You alright?” Raleigh asked. I kept my gaze on the swaying light as it casted devastating shadows on the sets of stairs. “Hardy?”

“I’m—I’m fine,” I said, the ringing still poking through.

Raleigh looked at the gun as he made his way into the stairwell, taking one step at a time. He checked to see how many bullets were left and spun the rotating cylinder shut. He tried to peek out of the cracks in the blacked out windows to see anything at all, but a shake of his head told me it was a lost cause.

The water was rising faster, nearly reaching Tom’s bottom as he finally climbed the steps after us. He was keeping a watchful eye on the path we come from. The stinging smell of burnt wood hit my nostrils and Raleigh stopped on the second flight of stairs, retreating backwards. Smoke pooled at his feet as he urged me back down the stairs.

“Tom,” Raleigh called and tossed the gun at Tom. “Break the fucking window.”

The water completely devoured the first set of stairs, and started seeping onto the platform we stood on. Tom hit the window with the butt of the gun, once, twice, three times until the glass shattered and fell into the rising water before him. The brightness of the sunshine stung my eyes and I looked behind me at the raging fire that continued to grow and steadied at the top of the second flight of stairs as if on command to do so. Raleigh and Tom pushed open the rusted, metal bars that blocked the window. Their clank on the ground echoed around the area.

“She goes first,” Raleigh said. Tom didn’t argue or deny Raleigh’s orders.

Tom helped me onto the windowsill and Raleigh supported my bottom as I stepped through and onto the thin ledge. The crisp breeze stung my wet legs. The thin ledge was barely even two feet wide. I had no idea how these men would be able to walk across it, let alone balance. Forestry surrounded us and gated us in the building we resided in. I had a feeling I might've known where we were.

“What do you see?” Tom asked.

I gripped the windowsill, attempting to see further out than I could. Raleigh gripped one of my wrists. There was a seemingly open window as battered curtains billowed out of it. The dark blue curtains were torn with burn holes, and salt stains decorating them. The thin ledge led to an unstable fire escape, barely able to withstand the crisp breeze.

“There’s a window, I think it’s open, and a fire escape,” I said turning back to them. My eyes immediately shot to the masked man stepping out of the water, scuba tank in his mouth.

“Baby,” I said, still unsure which of the two men I was referring to.

Tom turned slowly as the masked man waved. Tom raised the gun at the masked man and a chuckle escaped his covered mouth; the loud breathing of the oxygen worried me. Where was my son?

Raleigh jumped up and climbed out the window, putting his hand out to Tom, and as he began to quickly scurry out the window the masked man grabbed hold of Tom.

“Hey!” Raleigh yelled as a glinting knife shone in the sunlight.

Raleigh hit the masked man, reaching for the knife so that Tom wouldn't get hurt. The gun flailed in the air as Tom tried to get loose. All I could see was one of them getting their throats slit, or the knife sliding into them like butter. With one more aggravated punch, the masked man stumbled backward and Raleigh pulled Tom onto the ledge, gun shaking in his hand.

"Oh my God," I cried as Tom's body dropped, nearly falling to his death and splattering on the ground. A scream rose within me, echoing out at the masked man. "What the fuck do you want?!"

"Five minutes, Hardy," he chuckled as he stuck his head out. His manic cackle echoed through the area.

"Move," Raleigh ordered.

I stepped backward as Tom's frightened gaze shot through me. The laughter from the masked man echoed around us as Raleigh trailed behind, taking the gun from Tom and trying his hardest to protect us. We still wondered why he hadn't shot him yet.

The closer I inched to the frail fire escape, the more I realized the jump to it would be nearly impossible. The state it was in would make it just as dangerous as the jump. The bright sun was warm against my skin, but the cool breeze sent shivers from my wet legs throughout my body. The more I looked around, the more I knew where we were located.

We were at the abandoned insane asylum that we all thought was haunted as kids. For years, many of us would come here and party the nights away, expecting to discover some creepy ghost or lost patient, but nothing of the sort ever happened. I was never sure why not, but they

never tore this place down, nor did they attempt to fix it up and reopen it. It was seemingly an abandoned corpse rotting away like the patients that used to reside in it.

I glanced behind me; Tom's face was pale, his body trembling, and sweat poured down his forehead. Raleigh was on the lookout, gazing far out at the forestry that shielded the abandoned asylum from the outside world. Sweat also painted his frightened face. As we marched, I couldn't stop my curiosity—I peered at the window we escaped from. The masked man was no longer leaning out of it.

“I don't think we can get to the stairs,” I said, glancing back again.

“Where the fuck are we supposed to go?” Tom scoffed, glancing at the open window just ahead of us, the curtain dancing slightly.

“Down would be best,” Raleigh chuckled and looked at the fall to the ground below.

“Shut up,” Tom scoffed again.

“Even if we get down,” I licked my lips and shook my head, gazing out at the vast greenery around us. “There isn't anything or anywhere we can run to.”

“How do you know?” Tom asked.

“This is the abandoned asylum, I'm sure of it. Gated area with an electric fence and barbed wire. We used to sneak in here as teenagers to drink and smoke up,” I said. “There isn't anything else for miles.”

“What do you know about this dude?” Raleigh asked.

“Not enough,” I lied somewhat. They didn’t need to know my truth, not yet anyway. “The article was just about the victims...I barely even touched on how fucked up he is or who he might be.”

“What is *The Ultimatum*?” Tom asked, urging me onward.

“His game,” I shrugged. “He never really kills anyone, his victims do it.”

“Some fucked up Manson shit right there,” Raleigh grunted.

“I guess,” I said under my breath as the curtain before me picked up with the breeze and tickled my face.

“Let me go first,” Tom said and pulled the curtain to the side, lifting himself up and inside.

Raleigh helped me up, gripping my hand a moment longer than need be. The room smelled of that same stagnant, mildewy water. The floor boards were cracked, splintered, and broken. A large hole in the middle of the room revealed a dark room below it. I peeked into the hole; it felt like looking into a dark abyss, no true clear sight of anything but darkness. Another victim spoke of a room they were trapped in, “a room with the entrance to hell”. The burning smell seeped in through the walls, but nothing to sense that anything would be caught on fire any time soon. If I knew the masked man’s trickery, everything in this abandoned building is set perfectly to his little games, and timed to his delight and preference.

The flowered wallpaper in the room was peeling, revealing a seafoam green underneath it. More water stains leaked down from the ceiling and left black stripes along the walls. A rotting bed rested to the

right of the window, its mattress had become a canary yellow over time with stains of brown and pink. Parts of the floor underneath were also stained with what appeared to be dried blood—large puddles of it. A few droplets splattered the wallpaper and flooring, and left a heaping blow on the raggedy pillow in the center of the bed.

There were three doors to choose from. Each door was freshly painted a dark green. I was barely able to tell the difference between its forest hues to the blackness that surrounded it. Two doors were opposite the bed and one single door faced the window.

“Don’t get too close to the hole,” Tom said, putting a protective arm in front of me as I was leaning forward to peer into the hole.

Raleigh gripped the back of my shirt again and gently tugged me toward him, gripping the gun in his other hand.

“Guess we gotta pick a door,” Raleigh sighed.

I sensed he somewhat enjoyed the little games and trickery; it seemed to bring some color into his stagnant life. Maybe I was looking at it the wrong way, but I knew him and he didn’t seem to be scared at all. Maybe I was overanalyzing, and he was just masking his fear for my sake and the sake of our son. There was no true way to tell.

Tom stepped around the hole and opened the first door; it was nothing but an empty closet. The second door was right beside it and he opened it as well. The sharp smell of peppermint stung our noses as the door revealed darkness with nothing to guide our way.

“Maybe not that one,” I gulped. I was growing to detest that peppermint smell.

“Third one’s a charm,” Raleigh said and stepped toward the third door in the middle of the room.

The door creaked open revealing a hallway with more wooden flooring decorating the area and spanning far to the left as I peered out behind Raleigh. The walls were once painted white, but were now faded and cracking. More doors, abandoned wheelchairs, crutches, and beds crammed the hallway. The hanging lights were the same as the ones I saw on the path to the staircase. Black wires were stapled to the walls as single lightbulbs hung from them, some shining brightly, some flickering, some completely burnt out.

“If there’s stairs to the fire escape, then there’s stairs out of here,” I said, my arm grazing Tom’s. “We find the exit, then we find Oliver.”

“Shouldn’t we find him first?” Tom said.

“And get trapped in here without knowing the way to escape? No,” Raleigh met my eyes. “You up for a challenge?”

I frowned at his statement, frowned with every fibre of my being not to lash out at him, thinking he might be involved in our capture. I don’t know why, but that was the first thing that popped in my head, that we were in this not because of my article, but because of something Raleigh had done.

I bit my tongue and nodded, eyeing Tom before I turned to the deteriorating and abandoned items left in the hallway. Cobwebs whisked lightly in the breeze, some dangled low, stretching as far as they could before they became one with the dust and dirt on the ground. Uneasiness spread through me, and I became irritated and itchy as a spider crawled

along the wall beside me. Its eight thin legs scurried across the wall and into a crack, more darkness looming in as I watched it crawl over the wires, splintered wood, and broken drywall.

A loud alarm blared above us, the five minutes were up. The doors began to slam shut at the end of the hallway. *Slam* went one, *bang* went another. Each door sealed shut one after another until the one beside us did the same. The loud bang was met with a rush of dust that rose around it. I coughed, fanning the motes in front of my face and looking over at Raleigh.

“Welcome to phase two of *The Ultimatum*,” the voice chuckled. “Make it out of this one alive and you will get your son back. The objective, if you’re up for the task, is to outrun as many as you can before your time runs out.”

“Outrun what?” I asked, furrowing my eyebrows at Tom, then Raleigh.

Beside us, a hissing sound escaped and more dust blew and danced in the air. The wall slid open to reveal a caged door and three ravenous, barking hounds behind it. Their eyes were filled with anger and determination. Their mouths dripped saliva and their lips were pulled back in a snarl to reveal their sharp teeth to us.

“You have thirty minutes to make it to the exit before they get you,” the masked man laughed. “Because I like you, Hardy, I will give you all a five minute head start. Remember, there is no telling where my puppies will come from. No place is safe until the time runs out.”

“What?” Tom asked, suddenly out of breath.

“Does he have fucking dogs all over this place?” Raleigh turned to the barking animals.

“We should run,” I said, my eyes bulging at the ravenous beats. “Now.”

We darted for the clusterfuck of a hallway filled with abandoned artifacts. Raleigh pushed forward and yanked a turned over wheelchair out of the way, tossing it to the side. Tom wheeled a stretcher from our path, the squeaking wheels piercing my eardrums. I snagged a turned over IV pole and pushed it aside. The guttural laughter of the masked man escaped the intercom as we continued to jump, run, and dodge our way through the hallway.

More growls and barks curled out from behind closed doors, taunting us, and frightening us. My heart was leaping from my chest, left behind with the cries of Oliver that echoed far beyond. I wanted to cry, I wanted to pull my hair out and scream until I had nothing left, but I couldn't do that, not to Oliver, not to Tom, and not to Raleigh. Something within me was pushing me forward, to be strong, and conquer this bastard that was tormenting us.

“Thirty seconds,” the masked man giggled.

The end of the hallway was nearing, but there was too much debris and abandoned items for us to even begin to move through it all. Raleigh stopped and gawked at the opposite end of the hall where a loud alarm was blaring and the barking grew violent as the gate slowly started to open. His distressed face gaped at me, his heavy breathing slapping

my face. My gaze was focused beyond the debris and abandoned items to the curve in the hall that led to a stairwell that poked out over the pile.

The gate opened and the dogs darted for us, thick chains following them as they already made it halfway down the hall. The chains snagged on one of the dogs and its yelps and howls overtook the fear that was boiling within me.

Raleigh lifted me up and helped me climb over the rubble as another alarm blasted, and another set of dogs were revealed behind a door. The cage was still affixed, but that didn't stop them from barking and charging at us. Their heads slammed into the metal bars, but no yelps escaped them. Two of the dogs neared us, even though their chains somewhat held them back. They barked and growled, tossing their white foamy saliva at us the more their exposed teeth glinted in our direction.

I slid down a bent piece of cement, dodging metal bars that poked out of the sides. Parts of the cement slide were cracked, and deteriorating paint also decorated it. I saw stairs before us, just a few feet away from the bent piece of cement flooring that I slid down. Tom slid down after me, moving slightly to the left instead of behind me and his leg was punctured on a curved piece of metal.

“Fuck!” he yelled.

Raleigh slid down after him as the gate to the next set of dogs opened, their ravenous barks mixing in with the barks of the other violent beasts.

“We have to move,” I said, trying to help Tom up, his torn jeans revealing the piece of metal jammed into his shin.

Blood began to squirt out of his leg as I tried to pull the metal bar from it. My shaking hands were wet and painted red. Tom's screams blasted into my ears, but we had no time to waste as Raleigh pushed my hands aside and yanked the metal shrapnel from Tom's leg. Cries mixed with screams drowned out the sound of the beasts. I took off the long-sleeved shirt I was wearing and wrapped it around the wound. I used the blindfold I still sported around my neck to tie the shirt in place as tightly as I could. Goosebumps immediately spread through me as I sported nothing but a black undershirt.

"Can you walk?" Raleigh asked in a way that was more like an order.

"No, but what choice do I have?" Tom said as we helped him stand.

Debris rumbled above us, and two of the dogs reached the top of the pile. They were choked immediately by a set of chains that pulled at the cords in their necks. A look of anger and violence boiled in their eyes. There was nothing like it, and I was more frightened of what those dogs would do to us than of what would happen if we didn't finish phase two.

*

Raleigh supported Tom as I ran down the steps first; the dampness took hold once more as moisture dripped from the ceiling. A large digital clock revealed the timer in the usual neon red glow. Raleigh groaned as he tried to help Tom down the last couple of steps. Tom moaned and gripped onto the railing, gawking around the dark gloomy area. There were four

pillars to one side and another four on the other. Boarded up doors and windows surrounded us as the barks of the dogs diminished significantly, although the rattling of chains dragging along the ground sounded as if someone was pulling them away. Two simple doors rested at the end of the area, waiting for us to enter them.

“We should’ve grabbed a wheelchair,” I said, as a meek grin escaped my lips.

“Yeah, wouldn’t that be something,” Tom chuckled.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

Raleigh crouched down and pulled some of my shirt—now stained crimson—away from the wound. Blood immediately poured out and painted his hands. He affixed the shirt back in place, assuring the blindfold was secured tightly, and went to remove his belt.

“That bad?” Tom asked, his face sweaty and pale.

“This’ll help,” Raleigh said, and pulled the belt around the top of Tom’s leg.

“Here,” I said, pulling the shard of glass from my back pocket. “To puncture a new hole.”

With a quick poke, Raleigh fastened the belt around Tom’s leg and gave me the shard of glass back, its translucence now stained red. I slid the shard back into my pocket and glanced at the two doors at the end of the area. It reminded me of every horror movie I’d ever seen; through one door was escape, but also a trick. Through another was immediate death. Through the third, was a combination of the two. There was no true exit.

“This guy is fucking mental,” Tom groaned, hopping on one leg to adjust his stance.

“What’re his rituals, Hardy?” Raleigh asked. “The victims you interviewed, did they all go through this?”

“No,” I shook my head, trying to remember the truth from the lie. “Some never even saw him; they were only given instructions on what to do. Escape the room before you drown, escape the room before you burn to death, claw your way free before you fall to your death...hardly anything like what we’re going through.”

“What did you write in that article for him to want to do this to you?” Raleigh said, nostrils flaring.

“Nothing, just—” I started trying to remember the printed words.

I had called him psychotic on numerous occasions, a troubled man with a troubled past, a momma’s boy, and my favorite, a poor excuse for a serial killer. I might have tweaked the truth a little, but not enough to merit a capture, right?

“You pretty much called him a pussy, Hardy,” Tom said and raised his eyebrows.

“Yeah,” I shook my head again.

“Jesus, love,” Raleigh said. “You don’t go calling a serial killer names when he hasn’t been caught yet.”

“I didn’t think he’d read it,” I said.

“People like him get off on having themselves and their victims in the news,” Raleigh barked, his hands raising and clenching into fists at me. “God, sometimes.”

“Sometimes what, huh?” I said, taking a step forward. “What’re you going to do, big man? Show dominance? Show that you’re in charge? Please, Raleigh. Spare us the obvious ego boost you need—”

“Fuck you, Hardy,” Raleigh interrupted me and continued toward the two doors at the other end. I took another thundering step toward him, wanting to continue the argument we’d started and that I needed to rise to the surface, but Tom’s clammy hand took my arm.

“Hold your anger in until we get out of here,” Tom said, squeezing my arm. He pushed off the railing to follow Raleigh. Tom’s limp conveyed his pain.

I grunted softly; my fists clenched as I watched them make their way to the doors. The glow of the numbers cast on the wet ground were still decreasing and nearly reaching under twenty minutes. I exhaled sharply, releasing the pent up anger of being trapped in this abandoned asylum with the two men who had hurt me in so many ways.

I reluctantly followed them, only because I had no other choice. The digital numbers to my side mocked me, taunted me, and warned me that if I didn’t make it out of there soon, none of us would be safe.

Raleigh tried to pry one of the doors open, but no matter how hard he shoved, the door wouldn’t budge. He turned and glared at me, the anger radiated from him as he tried the second door. Much to our surprise, it opened to another hallway. Tom limped through first as the

hanging bulbs flickered to life. Raleigh held the door and waited until I stepped through. A mixture of fatigue, anger, and worry painted his handsome face. No matter how upset I was, I knew I couldn't hold a grudge, at least not until we were out of this mess.

The hallway was much the same as the one we first stepped through. The old paint stained the walls in patches, water dripped down from the ceiling, and cement caked and crumbled from different parts along the wall, and piled together on the ground as if recently swept.

“Eighteen minutes,” the masked man chuckled. “Tick-tock.”

I started walking, not paying attention to which direction I moved. Raleigh and Tom didn't say anything and followed closely behind. Tom tried to keep as close as he could to us even though the pain in his leg was causing him to limp pretty bad. The blood had already soaked through the shirt I tied around his leg and had begun collecting inside his shoe, leaving droplets behind him. His face was still extremely wet with sweat, and his eyes were bloodshot. I tried not to look at him, but when I did, I prayed he would make it out of there alive.

“Well, we're going the right way,” Raleigh said and pointed to an EXIT sign that flickered before us.

My pace quickened as I heard the barks of those dogs again. They were ravenous and violent, as if they hadn't eaten in days. An alarm blared and a door blasted open behind us—there were bars covering its entrance. Five beasts pummeled over each other, trying to get out as their growls and barks deepened.

“Jesus Christ,” I exclaimed.

“Can you run?” Raleigh asked Tom.

Before Tom could muster up an answer, the gates creaked open and the raging dogs ran out. No chains held them back this time. My feet picked up so much speed, they were barely able to touch the ground before I lifted the next foot. Raleigh gripped Tom’s arm and forced Tom to run at the same speed as him. No matter how much it hurt Tom, no matter how loud his yells were, and no matter the pain he appeared to be in, Raleigh forced him to push through it.

Glass doors lit up the end of the turn in the hallway. As soon as we reached it, we would complete phase two and be home free. I pushed with everything I had as the dogs were mere feet from us, their barks rolling in, and their growls echoing louder the farther we ran. My body met the glass door and I pushed it open, tumbling onto the sunlit ground. Raleigh pushed Tom through and slammed the glass door behind him, leaving the ravenous beats to bark and jump behind it. Their saliva sprayed onto the glass. Tom landed beside me, his groans and whimpers drowned out our heavy breathing.

“Are you okay?” I asked Tom who was holding his leg. “Let me see it.”

“No, it’s fine,” he pushed my hand away. “I’ll be fine.”

“Hardy, help me,” Raleigh said, holding the glass door as the dogs pushed into it.

The mirroring door beside it began to jimmy loose as the dogs continued to try and get to us. I stood and searched for something I could grab that would hold the doors shut. Debris, soot, rot, and mulch covered

much of the side of the building, but a metal pole and chain caught my eye. I snagged them and shoved the pole into the handles as Raleigh let go of the door. The dogs still pushed against it, but the door stayed in place. Small cracks were beginning to appear, and began to deepen with every blow from the dogs. He took the chains from me and looped them in and around the handles, being extra cautious to keep the beasts inside even though the crack seemed to be spreading.

“And with time to spare,” the voice echoed over the intercom in the yard. “Phase two completed, and none of you died. Such a shame.”

“Where’s my son?” I yelled, looking up at the building, believing that bastard was looking at us through hidden cameras.

“Follow the red arrows and you will find your son,” the masked man said as the intercom rang, cracked, and static emerged.

“Another fucking game?” Raleigh sighed.

My head darted every which way trying to find red arrows. The sun shined bright on the overgrown grass and a shadow of the building was cast upon us. Tom attempted to stand, but gave up after the fourth try. Raleigh adjusted the gun in his pants and glanced around as well. Faint but recognizable, a thin stripe of red paint dripped down one of the poles that used to house basketball nets.

“There,” I pointed.

Raleigh turned to Tom and helped him up as I jogged over to the pole, touching the still wet paint. I cocked my head in the direction the arrow was pointing, and followed that as well, Tom limping behind as

Raleigh caught up to me. We turned the corner of the building and followed the drips of paint on the ground as it led to a series of arrows.

“Slow down, will you,” Raleigh said, gently taking my hand. “He can’t walk as fast.”

“I have to get to *him*,” I said as my eyes met Raleigh’s, tears welling within them.

“And we will, together,” he squeezed my hand slightly and I slowed my pace so that Tom could be closer to us. I knew Raleigh was right, we were better off as a group than individuals, especially with one of us wounded. I exhaled, feeling my heart rate slow slightly. Only for a moment, I knew it was only for a moment.

Another painted arrow on the ground pointed to an open door on the side of the building. Raleigh let go of my hand and pulled the gun from his pants. The muscles in his arms flexed as he pointed the gun into the darkness. I hadn’t realized how toned he had gotten during his time in India. Every muscle was defined and every curve so intricate. Tom joined us and leaned on the side of the opening, peeking in, but also taking a moment to rest.

“And?” Tom asked, his weakened voice trying to steady itself.

“Wait here,” Raleigh instructed and glanced at me.

He stepped into the dark building, and within mere seconds, his entire body was eaten by darkness. My heavy breathing and violently pounding heart were all I could hear, aside from the ragged breaths and groans escaping Tom. I felt anxious and annoyed the longer I waited for Raleigh to return and announce that we could follow him. The harder I

tried to strain my eyes to see, the more everything felt like it was closing in on me, devouring me, like it devoured Raleigh a moment ago. I felt like I was drowning but unable to die.

Scurrying and yells echoed from the building, but I couldn't see anything or make out what was being said. I took a step forward, preparing myself to run in there when Tom grabbed my arm and halted me.

"Wait," he said and took a breath. "What if it isn't safe?"

"What if he's in trouble?"

"You're better help to him alive than in the same state," Tom said shifting his weight again.

"Love!" Raleigh's voice cleared and swept through the room. "Love, I got him! I got him!"

Raleigh came running out, fresh water droplets decorating his shirt. He was holding a sobbing Oliver to his chest, with little arms gripped around Raleigh's neck. I took Oliver from Raleigh and gripped my son so tightly I caused him to cough. Everything around me lifted, the immense relief that spread through me was overwhelming. I was just content to have him in my arms again, content that with him here, we'd finally be able to tackle the bastard that had taken him. Tom looked relieved and leaned his head back against the wall, the hint of a smile on his face as he looked at the clear blue sky.

"He's okay," I said under my breath and tears fell from my eyes.

Raleigh kissed Oliver's head, then mine, and leaned his head on my head.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said and looked over at Tom. “Up for a stroll?”

“Shut up,” Tom said.

Before we could collect ourselves and make the long trek through the forest, thundering footfalls echoed from the open door and the masked man chuckled as he neared the opening. Tom staggered back toward us, keeping a protective arm in front of Oliver and I. Raleigh did the same, only he held the gun. The masked man’s chuckles turned to laughter, a manic laughter that eerily wrapped around us.

“You think I’d let you go that easily?” he asked. Oliver’s screams stung my ears as he tried to get me to move away from him. “You know better than anyone that I have three phases to *The Ultimatum*, don’t you, Hardy?”

“What’s he talking about?” Raleigh asked, the gun shaking by his side.

“Tell him, Hardy,” the masked man chuckled again. “You might have interviewed countless of my surviving victims—*scarred with the memories of their terrors*, blah, blah, blah. But the one thing you wrote that *really* sparked my interest and made me decide to make you my next victim were your false ideas about what I really do here.”

“What’s he saying, Hardy?” Tom asked, wide eyed.

“Phase three will commence when you discover the truth about me, the real truth and not the made-up bullshit you conjured up,” the masked man growled and slowly peeled off his mask.

I held Oliver's head to my shoulder to hide him from the horror we were witnessing. The masked man's face was burnt, parts of his skin were stretched and sagging, much of it was concaved and discolored. His one brown eye did not match the other, which was a disturbing white, and the eyelid around it was nonexistent. Only one eye was able to blink as liquid spewed from the other eye. Raleigh pushed me and Oliver behind him, using himself as a shield. Tom stood there frozen at the sight we were all witnessing. Why wasn't Raleigh using the gun? I tried to tell him to shoot, but the words were caught in my throat.

Curiosity won out over my fear as I analyzed the masked man, and I wondered how it happened. Was he in the fire that struck this building over twenty years ago? Did his whole body look as disturbing and fried as his face did? Most importantly, how did he survive?

"Fuck," Raleigh said under his breath.

"As soon as you discover the truth, phase three will begin and you may go free," the disfigured masked man said. He stepped back into the darkness as he slid the mask over his distorted face. "If you try to escape beforehand, my pets are roaming these grounds and will attack on my command. Time is no longer ticking, but you better get started if you want to survive."

*

Silence grew among us as we all listened intently. The rattling of chains echoed from the building, the whistling of the wind between the trees shook the leaves in uneven spurts, and the slamming of another door echoed farther away in the building out of our sight. I couldn't look at

them; not a single part of me wanted to anyway. Not now. Oliver's sobs slowed down, but his grip was still tight. I inhaled his toddler smell, wanting to remember it forever.

"What's he talking about, Hardy?" Raleigh finally said, gritting his teeth. "What the fuck did you write?"

My eyes welled with tears once more; it felt like they were unable to stop, like someone turned a faucet on and snapped off the handle. I slowly shifted my gaze to Raleigh as a stream of tears trickled down my cheeks.

"My editor said to make it more appealing, to catch the reader's attention. That the victims' stories weren't enough," I sobbed.

"What did you write?" Raleigh pressed.

"I made up *The Ultimatum*, the phases. When he takes a victim, he just mentally tortures them into killing the person they're locked in the room with, nothing more...but I made the story more alluring, more exciting," I sniffed. "How the fuck was I supposed to know that he would read it? I didn't know...I just didn't know."

"Fucking Christ, Hardy!" Tom yelled. "Are you for real?"

"So when he learned about your fucked up love life he came up with the perfect plan," Raleigh smacked his lips and glanced at the darkness that leaked from the open door.

"I'm sorry," I sobbed again, holding Oliver as close to me as I could, his sniffles mixing with mine.

"It's okay, love," Raleigh sighed, looking back at me. "You couldn't have known, right? You were just doing your job."

“I’m—”

“What truth does he want us to find out?” Tom asked, avoiding any eye contact with me.

“I don’t know,” I said through a curtain of tears and shook my head.

“This was an asylum, wasn’t it?” Raleigh asked, looking up at the building.

“Yeah, until—” I paused, putting the pieces of the puzzle together. “Until a fire caused it to shut down and move their patients to other facilities.”

“I’m guessing not all their patients made it out,” Raleigh nodded.

“No, not entirely. Some died, some escaped,” I scoffed. “They must have medical records and files somewhere. Maybe that’s the truth he wants us to find.”

“*If* the files survived the fire,” Tom added.

“Let’s get to the front of the building and into the admin room, there has to be something in there that could show us who he truly is, right?” I said.

“Christ, with a face like that,” Raleigh stated. “You know something fucked up happened.”

“You got us into this mess, so I guess it’s up to you to get us out of it,” Tom said and limped forward.

Raleigh scoffed at Tom, then looked at me and our son in my arms. What had I gotten myself into? I led that man to us, and led the men I loved in so many different ways right into his trap. Mike’s death

was on my hands, and soon another one would be. I knew I wouldn't walk out of there with both of them; I'd have one final choice to make before ending it all.

How was I to decide, who it would be?

*

I followed Raleigh as he followed Tom around the side of the building. There were a series of open doors, but none of us wanted to go inside and explore the dark paths of the abandoned building. Oliver's cries died down significantly the more we roamed the grounds—he was almost completely calm and his body began to get heavier and heavier the farther we walked.

The crisp end of summer air tickled the back of my neck as a breeze swept by, rustling the leaves of the trees nearby. It would be easy; a simple dart in the right direction would lead to the main road out of there. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. Then again, his hounds were far too dangerous to outrun with a child in my arms. We were trapped here. We were trapped here because of me.

Every so often, Raleigh would turn back to look at us; I think to make sure there was no one following us, and to be sure I was alright holding Oliver. Tom, on the other hand, didn't look back once. His limp was worsening the more he walked, blood still flowed from his leg and seeped out of his shoes. It left a trail on the ground behind him like a sick and twisted version of bread crumbs leading the masked man right to us if he wanted to find us.

A rusted sign was barely held to the side of the building that read *Administration*. Tom stopped, and leaned on the wall beside it, finally showing me his face. The bags under his eyes were dark and diminishing. The paleness of his skin was sickening to look at, and the shine that seeped out of him in the sunlight was something out of a horror book. The front of his shirt was drenched in sweat, pooling at the nape of his neck and soaking into the cotton that clothed him.

“Tommy,” I said, worried and afraid.

“I’m fine,” he said weakly.

“We’ll find a first aid kit or something,” Raleigh said giving me a look of concern. “C’mon, man. Just a little farther.”

We unwillingly stepped back into the building where dead and dried leaves were rolling on the floor. Remnants of animal carcasses floated in the puddles before us as mud and sticks poked through some of the cracks in the ground. Mother Nature was taking back her land.

Raleigh hopped over the reception area and explored some of the drawers and file cabinets in search of something to help Tom. Oliver was getting even heavier in my arms, and I suspected he had fallen sleep as his heavy breathing warmed the side of my neck. Tom limped forward and entered one of the main offices, cocking his head for me to follow him. The door was cracked open and the stench of mold slapped me in the face. Most of the cabinets in the office he entered were overtaken by rats and mice, and water had worked its magic and made the room its own. Webbing collected in the corners of the room, spreading in every

direction possible and I knew spiders would be close by waiting for fresh prey.

“Why don’t we go into this one?” I asked, gesturing to the office that was the cleanest and had a few chairs to sit on.

Tom limped onward and plopped himself down on the torn sofa that had seen better days. It reeked of stale puke and old piss. He elevated his leg onto a turned over trash bin, and exhaled deeply, relieved to be sitting down. Partially burnt file folders rested upon the desk, some stained with water and soot, others growing mold and bacteria. Raleigh followed us momentarily with a white tin case that featured a green “X” on the cover.

“Aren’t we lucky?” Raleigh chuckled.

“How did you find it?” I asked, still feeling cautious around him.

“Just lucky I guess,” Raleigh shrugged and placed it on the arm of the sofa as he peeled my blood soaked shirt off of Tom’s leg.

“Here,” I said to Tom. “Can you take him? Something is telling me we should be looking at those folders.”

“Yeah. I got him,” Tom said as I lowered Oliver into Tom’s arms.

“This is gonna hurt,” Raleigh said as he popped open a bottle of rubbing alcohol.

“I don’t doubt it,” Tom strained as he held Oliver close to his chest.

I tried not to look at all the blood seeping out of Tom. There was an infection brewing and I considered a tetanus shot was required. The

sight of it sent shivers through me. I stepped over puddles of stagnant water, slimy leaves, and bird's nests, and made my way behind the desk.

The papers crinkled and pieces tore as I flipped through some of the files. The delicate edges were growing weaker from age and moisture. All the files were on patients that used to reside in this very building. I had no idea if these patients were ones that escaped or were ones that died. Some of the documentation was too deteriorated for me to even attempt reading, especially with Tom's silent groans and fidgeting at the corner of my eye.

There wasn't much in the first aid tin, a few bandages and the bottle of rubbing alcohol was about it. Raleigh had cleaned the area the best he could and pinched the wound shut with butterfly stitches, then wrapped it again in gauze.

Oliver had been so entirely frightened he wore himself out with fear. The screaming and crying that must've escaped him throughout the entirety of our capture kept weighing on me. I could only imagine what he was going through, what that bastard had said or done to him. I knew hearing the sound of my voice and the beating of my heart gave him the security he needed to doze off. I knew that the two men with me would do anything to keep him safe, too.

The file folders before me were of no use, they were either completely destroyed or of people that would clearly not resemble the masked man. I sighed heavily, feeling myself give up slightly, until I saw the lone folder atop the filing cabinet. Rotting boxes blocked my way, but I stepped through them as if they weren't there. My hand touched

the manila folder with such determination; I knew it was the right one. I peeled open the front page and a face grinned at me; parts of the photo were burned in the fire, but a face like that I would never forget.

Ralph Stevens, it read.

The masked man, I thought.

His brown eyes were large and alluring, his devilish grin and thin lips mocked me, and I couldn't imagine what on earth happened to him. His file was nearly empty; there wasn't anything that would explain to me why he had been committed.

"Ralph Stevens was a family man; he left his two children and pregnant wife when he admitted himself. Claims that his wife had been having an affair and questioned whether or not the children were his. He feared he would harm them if he stayed around them...Jesus," I read and looked over at Raleigh and Tom. *"Mentally tortures patients into doing things for him, similar to how he felt when he claimed he wanted to kill his family...you think that's why he chose me, because of all of our shit?"*

"I don't know," Raleigh shrugged and slid in next to Tom on the sofa. "What else does it say?"

"He was quiet...kept to himself...wrote letters to his wife daily, but refused to see her. He tried to get her to admit to her affairs, and when she did, *she had to be punished for her disgusting act*. He loves sucking on peppermint candies," I skimmed through the file notes, finally piecing together why on earth that peppermint scent kept lingering around the building. "How is this supposed to help us get out of here?"

“Maybe if people know the truth about him, that he was just a patient here who lost everything. That—” Tom replied.

“The truth about him is he’s a fucking coward who kidnaps people and plays stupid games with them so that they kill one another. He’s fucking crazy, Tom. His file states that, and there’s no use in pitying him,” I interrupted Tom.

“He takes pleasure in seeing other people suffer,” Raleigh said. “Gets them to tell the truth about the shit they’ve been hiding.”

“Look what happened with Mike. Fuck, what if we have to make a decision again?” I said, agreeing with Raleigh.

“And I told you,” Raleigh started. “You take me.”

“None of us are dying,” Tom said. “We’re all getting out of here.”

“Tom—”

“Congratulations, Hardy. You found my file,” Ralph’s voice echoed over the intercom.

Tom immediately put his hands over Oliver’s ears to block the voice from waking him. Raleigh stood and gripped the gun in his hands once again.

“Yes,” I started. “Now you have to let us go.”

“That is what I said,” Ralph said over the intercom and began to laugh. “But not what I meant.”

The door to the office slammed and three locks bolted it shut. Raleigh jumped for the door and gripped the handle, pulling it with all his might, but nothing happened.

“What the fuck is going on now?” Tom gritted his teeth, trying to move as minimally as possible with Oliver still asleep against his chest, and the pain shooting from his leg that rested on the turned over trash bin.

“Phase three will be the last of my tests, won’t it Hardy?” Ralph laughed again. “All truth should be laid out on the table and I’ll escalate things as I see fit, should need be, of course. And only two of you will walk out of here. No more, no less.”

“Take us,” Raleigh yelled. “Let Hardy and Oliver go, and just take us.”

“That my friend, is a decision the three of you have to make,” Ralph added and static echoed behind him before he radio silenced completely.

“There is no question,” Raleigh said, glaring at Tom. “And there’s nothing to discuss.”

“I don’t wanna die, man,” Tom said, face full of tears.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Raleigh said, trying his hardest not to sob as well; his lower lip quivered slightly.

“I’m so sorry,” I said softly through falling tears as I sat down in the broken chair behind me.

“It’s not your fault, love,” Raleigh said giving me a once over.

“If it wasn’t for my article, we wouldn’t be in this predicament,” I growled, then lowered my voice, looking over at Oliver.

“He said he was watching you before all this,” Tom said, his voice weak.

“If it wasn’t us then it would be you,” Raleigh added. “I—we can’t lose you.”

I looked out the dirty window beside us, hearing the howling beasts that roamed the grounds and the whistling winds that seeped through the cracks in the glass. I couldn’t let it happen I already lost Mike—a hurt and heartache I had yet to even begin to process—I wasn’t going to lose these two men as well.

I shifted my gaze to Tom, who was looking down at Oliver sleeping in his arms, his heavy breathing caressing Tom’s chest. When my gaze shifted to Raleigh, he was already looking at me. Hope shone in his eyes, a love that had once been extinguished was flickering slightly again. I wouldn’t give in. I couldn’t give in. I wouldn’t be able to handle going down that road again.

“What truth could he possibly want?” Tom asked, holding back his tears.

“Why you did what you did,” I whispered, still looking at Raleigh.

The tears finally flowed from his eyes, rolling delicately down his cheeks and getting lost in his beard. I couldn’t think of any truth the masked man wanted us to share, any secrets I held that needed to be exhaled to the world. My only sin was killing Mike.

*

We sat in silence for some time, thinking quietly and awkwardly glancing at one another. I tried to think of ways in which we could escape. Ways in which none of us had to get hurt. The serious problem was Tom’s impairment at the moment; he could barely walk.

I thought of us breaking through the window and running as fast as we could through the forested grounds. I vaguely remembered my way around; the last time I had come here, I was barely legal enough to drink, let alone do drugs. I knew there was a hole in part of the fence, but remembering where exactly was the problem. I felt so alive and free when we would break in here, and it would always be the same group of us, too. Charlie, Adriana, Hunter, Mattie, Kyla, and myself. I was the youngest of the bunch, being a grade below them, but Adriana was my best friend and had been since we were in diapers. She'd include me in all her adventures, big or small, until we became adults and life took over. Now we're lucky if we include ourselves in the birthday text we send to one another. Most of the group was paired off—Mattie and Kyla, Adriana and Charlie. Hunter had his slew of women, being the popular kid and all, but boy did I have a crush on him. The first time they included me in their little rendez-vous to the abandoned asylum was the night I finally got my wish and kissed Hunter, and that only led to more, more of which I wasn't even ready for, but let happen anyway. We always broke in through the same rusted hole in the fence, the same trail that they footed out, and the pile of empty and broken beer bottles they tossed like they couldn't care less about the place. Those bottles, however, were our guidance through the dark forest when we weren't sure which way to go. For years we entered through that passageway, drank the same beer, smoked the same cigarettes, puffed the same weed, and fucked the same guys; and yet, I had no idea where on earth that hole in the fence may be.

“What’re you thinking about?” Tom asked me after several moments of silence among us. I pushed my lips together, their sudden whiteness poking through as I slowly shifted my gaze from the window to his large brown eyes that got dimmer each minute he bled out.

“I used to come here as a teenager,” I nodded licking my dry lips. “I remember puking on that very couch you’re sitting on. Every Friday night we’d meet up and break in, it felt like the only safe place to get high, get drunk, and have sex without a parent walking in...I’ve come here so many damn times, and I can’t for the life of me remember how to get out.”

“Why would you need to remember?” Raleigh asked, still giving me that look.

“I won’t lose either of you,” I started. “It’s either we get out together, or no one at all.”

“Think of our son, love,” Raleigh said and began to pace.

“I am thinking of him,” I said and stood. “They’re just dogs. You have a gun; all we have to worry about is Tom keeping up if we run for it.”

“Hardy,” Raleigh scoffed and put his hand to his face.

“Raleigh,” I urged.

“How many bullets do you have left?” Tom asked, interrupting us.

“She only shot once,” Raleigh shrugged a shoulder. “I did too. We have four rounds.”

Tom glanced at me as if he knew exactly what I was thinking.

“Can you make it?” Tom asked me, not skipping a beat.

“Yes,” I said with a nod.

“Make what?” Raleigh asked.

“He’ll come after you,” Tom continued as Raleigh glared between the two of us, confused out of his mind and waiting for an answer.

“I know, but it’s worth a shot,” I said, unable to keep my gaze off of Tom and Oliver.

“I trust you,” Tom added before Raleigh scoffed.

“Hello? I’d like to know what’s going on between you two,” Raleigh shook his head.

I sighed, feeling a cool tingle rush through me. The hair on the back of my neck rose with every goose bump that followed. I put my hand out to Raleigh, asking for the gun.

“Trust me,” I said to Raleigh with a meek grin.

“How can I trust you when I have no idea what’s going on?” Raleigh asked.

“Leave the gun with Tom and Ollie. We’ll barricade the door with all this shit, and make a run for it. You and I both know we can do it, it’s about a mile from here to the gate, all we have to do is find the opening,” I said, still holding my hand out to Raleigh.

“Are you insane? What about those fucking dogs he has? If one of them takes us down, the rest will attack. Hardy, this isn’t a good idea,” Raleigh shook his head, still refusing to give me the gun.

“Baby, we can do it, I know we can,” I said, not realizing what I called him.

“And you’re okay with this?” Raleigh asked Tom.

“Well, I didn’t exactly know what she was talking about,” Tom groaned. “I thought she was going to make one of you go out there with the gun and find help. But Hardy, are you sure?”

“I have no choice but to be,” I shook my head. “I won’t kill you, either of you. I can’t.”

Raleigh sucked his teeth and spun the gun, so the butt of it was pointed at me. I took it and gave it to Tom, trying not to overthink my idea. It was a definite risk, especially leaving Tom and my son alone with that murderous bastard a-foot. I simply felt like I had no other choice, no other solution for the four of us to walk out of here unharmed.

I moved some debris out of the way in order to place something in front of the door. Raleigh began opening some of the filing cabinet drawers, as if he were looking for something. Oliver’s soft snores escaped his little mouth as Tom kept a watchful hand to Oliver’s tiny ear.

“C’mon,” Raleigh said. “We’re gonna move this in front of the door.”

The filing cabinet was a bitch to move, but with an immense amount of adrenaline running through our veins, we managed to slowly tip it on its side, then push it in front of the door. We did the same with the desk, and jimmied it in a way that even if the door opened, the desk would jam it as the corner of the wooden desk was lodged into a deep crevice in the floor. No psychopath would be able to get through that

even if they tried. I stacked as many things as I could in front of the door, mostly for peace of mind, but also for assurance that if the masked man were to get in, Tom would have enough time to wiggle his way out the window with Oliver in tow.

“Okay,” I said, unsure if it was more of a question or a statement.

“You know how to shoot it?” Raleigh asked Tom.

“Aim, shoot?” Tom chuckled softly, his face sweaty and pale.

“It’s already cocked,” Raleigh nodded. “Count your bullets in case you...you only have four.”

“I’ll be alright,” Tom nodded.

I leaned over Tom and softly kissed Oliver’s head, debating whether or not I should do the same to Tom. I opted against it, and squeezed his shoulder instead. Raleigh pushed open the crank window, and helped himself out of it to take a quick look around. The cool breeze swept in again, and a shiver spread through me. Tears were building up and everything around me was going blurry. I turned to Tom; his lips touched the top of Oliver’s head and he wrapped his arms around my son.

“Tom,” I whispered. He slowly turned his head to me, but not completely. “I’m sorry.”

“Love you too,” he whispered back and leaned his head on the sofa.

Raleigh reappeared and held his hands out to me. I took them instantly and pulled myself out the window with him. He gripped me tightly as he slowly put me down. My heart was hammering in my chest

at what we were about to do. My reason to live was fast asleep and I was leaving him there to run to my potential death, all so that we could possibly find a way out. It wasn't even definite.

"Are you ready?" Raleigh asked.

"No," I said as the tears finally fell.

"Yeah, me too." Raleigh gave me a weak smile. "But we can do this, I know we can. We have to."

"You're not—" I started, thinking of asking him if he knew anything more than I did about what we were all doing there, but I opted against it again. I just wanted to get out of there without any more trouble. "Why didn't you shoot him?"

"What?"

"When we got Ollie, why didn't you shoot that bastard?" I asked, clenching my fists at my sides.

"I don't know, Hardy," Raleigh scoffed. "I was just—I don't know."

"You had the chance to," I shrugged a shoulder.

"I know I did."

"We could've been free by now."

"I know."

"Why did you hesitate?" I asked in a low whisper.

"What if he isn't alone?" Raleigh said shifting between my eyes.

I nodded, glancing over at Tom, then back to Raleigh. Tom's shoulders shook, appearing as if he were sobbing quietly. Raleigh could

be right; there was no sure way of knowing. We had to stick to the plan I still wasn't too certain of.

Raleigh pulled a pin out so that he could manually close the crank window, and nodded at Tom as he did so. I took as many deep breaths as I could before I darted for the forestry next to the building. Raleigh was right behind me, keeping his gaze around us for any of the ravenous dogs that supposedly lurked the grounds. All I could hear was the pounding of my feet against the pavement, and the ragged breathing that escaped my mouth. Our harsh footfalls mellowed and didn't sound as hard in my head when they hit the mushy grass.

As we reached the end of the clearing, a swarm of birds cawed and swooped down at us before perching in the trees. Raleigh yanked me toward him, nearly making me fall, but I managed to keep my balance, and he released his grip.

We entered the forest and the scent of dead and dry leaves wafted around us. The moistened feeling of mud oozed into my pores the more we ran, whipped, and blasted through the forest. There were no growls, there were no barks, and there were no cracking of twigs to derail us off our course. It was a straight shot to the gate.

I was so focused on our destination that I didn't look where my feet were falling and my foot snagged a root in the ground, plummeting me face first into a pile of mush with a rock camouflaged underneath it. Blackness was all I saw with a twinkling of white spots behind my closed eyelids. The sound of my beating heart was barely audible as I faintly heard my name being called in the distance. A moan escaped me as the

pain seeped through. My forehead felt wet, but I didn't raise my hands to touch it. My body felt cold and dirty, irritated from the feeling of wet and rotting leaves. There it was, my name again, just on the cusp of my perception. My body was rolled over so I was on my back and I felt something touching my head, cradling my neck.

A few stinging hits to my cheek caused my eyelids to flutter. The blackness was coming to life again, only being taken over by the far distance of trees reaching up to the clear blue sky. The white spots were still there, a few of them were black as my vision adjusted to the forestry around me. Raleigh's face was wet with fear as he looked down at me.

"Hardy?" his voice zoomed into me and struck me into consciousness.

"Oh God," I said through a groan, finally raising my hand to my head. Wetness coated my fingertips, and it wasn't the kind of wetness I envisioned.

"Can you stand?" he asked in a panic.

"I don't know," I moaned again, feeling the surging pain throb through my forehead.

"We have to go now, love," Raleigh urged and lifted me to my feet.

That's when I heard them, the barks, the growls, the ravenous paws scraping against the concrete and silencing immediately as they touched softer ground. Raleigh clamped my head in his hands and peered into my eyes.

“I’m—I’m alright, I’m alright,” I said, shifting my gaze between his eyes.

He gripped my hand and pulled me forward. The gate was just a few feet away. My head was spinning, and I felt the blood seeping down my forehead even more, clouding parts of my vision. That didn’t stop Raleigh from gripping my hand so tight I was losing feeling in my fingers.

We took a sharp left turn around a sewer tunnel, and to our luck, found the ditch that Hunter, Charlie, and Mattie had made. Raleigh pulled me with him as he followed the small trail, leading us to the very rusted opening in the fence. Relief escaped his sweaty face as he glanced back at me for the briefest of moments.

“You can try to run,” Ralph’s voice echoed through the trees.

“C’mon,” Raleigh said through gritted teeth.

I pulled my hand out of his grip and stumbled into a tree.

“I don’t think—I can’t go any more,” I said, out of breath as the world around me was spinning.

“You have to,” Raleigh cried. “We’re almost there, just get through the fence and I’ll hide you.”

“What about Ollie?”

“I’ll come back for him, and you. I promise,” Raleigh said, his lower lip quivering.

“You make a lot of promises you can’t keep,” I blurted out, as a shot of bile followed it. Raleigh rubbed my back as I stumbled, then spat on the ground.

“I know, but this one I will keep.”

I groaned as I pushed off the tree and Raleigh took my hand again as he led me toward the opening. We could hear the dogs yapping in the distance, blurring their suspenseful barks at us as we patiently and hesitantly waited to get pummelled by them. The opening was nearing us and Raleigh lifted me up and squeezed me through it, cautious not to snag any of my clothing with the rusted pieces. He crawled through after me, and supported my bottom as I used a tree to steady my staggering steps.

“Wait,” I said, out of breath.

“Love, we have to continue.”

“I know, I know,” I replied, licking my dry lips through stinging breaths. The sour taste of vomit still lingered in my mouth. “There’s a payphone just through there; I’ll find a place to hide, okay?”

Raleigh glanced in the direction where I was pointing and a small phone booth could be seen through the bushes. He nodded and met my eyes. For one reason or another, he kissed my lips; a kiss that meant he was sorry, a kiss that meant his promise would be kept, and a kiss that meant not to worry.

“I’ll be back soon, I promise,” he said reassuringly and I felt like I had no choice but to believe him, but that kiss meant nothing to me. Nothing at all.

I knew I was supposed to hide, somewhere safe and somewhere I was still able to see what was happening around me, but as I leaned on the tree, I couldn’t move. My entire body felt stiff and jelly-like all at the same time. My arms felt like dumbbells at my sides, weighted more than

need be. My head throbbed in rhythm with my heart, and the taste of bile filled my mouth again. There was no denying that hitting my head caused a concussion. Not only was I disoriented, but the white and black spots in my vision were taking over once more and I felt the need to close my eyes. Just for a moment, just to relax.

I watched the small fragments of Raleigh in between the branches of the trees and bushes, his sweaty silhouette calling for help. I didn't even know if the phone still worked. God, I hoped it did. It sounded like the barking was growing closer, as if I could feel the hot, heavy breathing of the mutts against my skin, their salivating mouths dripping onto my heavy arms, and teeth gnawing at my shins. Nothing was there, nothing but the sound of beetles, crickets, and scurrying wildlife.

"R-Raleigh," I attempted to spit out. His name stammered out of me, but the world around me was becoming dark and overwhelming once more.

I tried to look up at him, my vision disfigured, and there were three of him; three separate versions of my cheating bastard of a husband trying to save little old me, our beautiful boy, and Tom. All I wanted to do was close my eyes, just for a moment. They fluttered slightly, then shut for a second, and I opened them the moment I heard footsteps making their way to me. Footfalls pounding on the ground, crunching leaves, squishing grass, and drawing nearer to me, even though I couldn't see clearly.

"Hey, hey, hey," Raleigh's voice came alive again. "C'mon, love, stay awake. Stay awake."

“Yeah, yeah I’m awake,” I slurred somewhat.

“Shit,” he said, and I could feel his grip on my face, moving and twisting my head. “You have to stay awake, promise me you’ll stay awake. If not for me, then for Oliver. Please.”

It was the kick I needed. I took a deep breath and I looked up at Raleigh. My eyes felt heavy but I forced them awake. *Just a little bit longer*, I thought to myself, knowing I had to stay alert for as long as I could.

“I think I’m gonna shut my eyes for a sec, just a quick second, then we can go get Oliver,” I sighed, feeling my head go heavy, even though my mind told me to keep it up, and then my entire body gave way under me.

“Fuck,” he said, gripping onto me. My eyes fluttered in and out of the darkness, and I could feel him shaking me, but all I wanted to do was sleep. He lifted me in his arms and moved me a few steps before I was gently put down and covered in cold, wet leaves. I felt his lips again, on my forehead before he covered it, then my lips again before he covered those as well. “Love? Love, can you hear me? Fuck, I hope you can hear me. Please don’t move, I’ll be back as fast as I can, okay? Just, don’t move. Please. I...I’ll be back.”

The squishing and crunching of leaves diminished, and the sound of the howls did as well. All I saw was blackness, utter and total darkness. The more my eyes moved behind my eyelids, the more the galaxy-like colors swirled. A kaleidoscope of colors. The white spots crackled and popped at will, tormenting me. Every time I tried to move, I felt like I

was not in control of my body, like I was asleep, paralyzed, and unable to tell my body what to do.

Light glinted in and out of my covered eyes as they fluttered open every so often. I tried to breathe, I tried to keep myself partially there, but I wasn't there, not entirely. I was someplace different, some place magical. The colors danced around me, keeping me from going, but also keeping me from coming back. They called to me, glistened around me, and sparkled. I was like a moth to a flame.

*

I must've fallen asleep, but for how much time, I wasn't sure. I felt myself inhale sharply and was invaded by a mouthful of wet, sludge-like leaves. My coughs echoed around the area, and my head pounded rapidly with my racing heart. The sun had gone down enough for me to know it was nearing the later end of the afternoon, and a cold shiver swept through me. Slowly, I was in control of my body again, and I lifted each hand to my face, removing the disturbing feeling of wet and rotting leaves from my body. There was no sound in the air; silence had swept through, until it didn't and the ragging sound of bullets echoed.

It took me a moment before I could muster up the knowledge of what those bullets meant; before I could even begin to understand where I was and what was happening. Footsteps sounded close to me, unexpected footsteps as another shot went off. *Four bullets.* It was coming back to me. I jumped to my feet as a rush of blood raced through me, my vision disfiguring and the blackspots returning. *Tom, Raleigh, Oliver.* Tears filled my eyes as the footfalls grew nearer. *Mike.* A barking dog

mixed in with the cool breeze that whistled through the dancing branches of the trees.

The footsteps grew even closer, so close I wasn't sure whether to run or stay put and discover who they belonged to. *The masked man*. My heart beat violently, so violently I was unable to conjure the immediate impulse I needed for survival. My feet were planted, and I was leaning on a tree, waiting to meet whomever was about to join me.

His face, I could never forget his face. Raleigh held our son within his arms, while Oliver wept and sniffled, frightened beyond belief. Raleigh was alone with Oliver; there was no one but the two of them making their way toward me.

"Are you okay?" Raleigh asked looking at me with concern.

"Where's—where's Tom?"

"It wasn't my decision," Raleigh said, adjusting Oliver in his arms.

"What're you talking about?"

"He told me to give you this," he said, pulling a chain from his back pocket. "He said he loves you, no matter what happened between you two. And he's sorry."

"What're you saying?" I repeated, taking the chain with the silver cross that Tom never removed from around his neck.

"His leg got worse, love. Much worse," Raleigh's lower lip quivered as he looked out into the forest as another shot went off. "He lost feeling in his foot, he was pale, he couldn't breathe."

"So you left him there?" I sobbed, still feeling lightheaded.

“He told me to, he was going to create a distraction so I could get Ollie out.” Raleigh pushed his lips together and gripped onto Oliver again. “I’m sorry.”

Everything, that’s what I felt like I lost. The past stayed with me, the present stayed behind, and the future I had killed. As much as I wanted to break down, as much as I wanted to scream until there were no breaths left, Oliver looked up at me and pouted. It helped me stay grounded as I neared the edge. As I neared my limit.

“Where’s the masked guy, Ralph?”

“I don’t know,” Raleigh shook his head. “With Tom?”

“How do w-we get out of here?” I asked, bringing a heavy arm to my head.

Sirens blared in the distance, answering my question. Raleigh cocked his head in that direction and took my arm with his free hand, pulling me out of the greenery. I tried to focus my gaze, but everything zoomed in and out of focus, tormenting my fuzzy mind. The sun kissed my chilled skin as we stepped out onto the open road.

An abundance of vehicles sped our way some turning into the abandoned asylum while one, followed by an ambulance, raced in our direction, then screeched to a halt in front of us. I felt like crying again; crying out of happiness, out of relief, crying because we were saved. Yet all I could think about were Mike, Tom, and all the other victims that were tricked into death by the masked man, Ralph Stevens.

Two officers ran up to us as I looked at the bushes we had come from. One officer was talking to me, asking me questions, asking Raleigh

questions, and the other was talking on the radio, notifying whoever was on the other end. I, on the other hand, couldn't take my eyes off the shaking bushes as those horrendous eyes glared at me, watching me as all the breath was caught in my throat. Even though the officer was barking at me, all I could hear was the guttural laughter sounding in my head, asking me to make a decision. His disfigured face spun and twisted the more I tried to focus; the more I tried to look away.

"Ma'am? Ma'am, can you hear me? Ma'am?" The officer's voice finally burst through.

"Hardy?" Raleigh asked, peering into the bushes I was staring at then, touching my lower back. "What's—you okay?—she hit her head when we were trying to escape."

"Hardy, you said?" a paramedic came up behind the officer.

"Hardy Jenkins, my wife," Raleigh said. "I'm Raleigh Jenkins, and this is Oliver, our son. Tom Ferguson, and Mike—I think it's Tarring, are still inside."

"Okay, Hardy, I need you to come with me," the paramedic said. One of the officers repeated the names into his radio and waited for a response.

"Where are we going?" I asked softly.

"Just to my truck. You're alright, okay?" the paramedic went on.

"I want—" I turned to Raleigh. "They *have* to come with me."

"I'm right behind you, love," Raleigh smiled softly.

The paramedic led us to her ambulance. Voices crackled over the radio, as more sirens blared and sped toward the asylum. There was a

part of me that hoped Tom was still okay and still alive. A part of me that hoped he was able to finish the job and I was just hallucinating the face in the bushes.

I cocked my head to the bushes once more, my vision blurred, but I forced myself to look, to find that bastard. Nothing was there, nothing was looking back at me. Only trees and the dancing bushes in the cool breeze. We were free, we were actually free.

“Hardy? Hardy, I need you to hop up here and lie back, okay?” the paramedic advised.

I turned to Raleigh, his wet face nodding in approval. I did as I was told, gripping onto both Raleigh’s free hand and the paramedic’s to climb into the back of the ambulance. As soon as my head hit the back of the stretcher, everything around me was vibrating, I tried to blink my eyes into focus, but nothing was helping. I looked over at Raleigh and Oliver. Another paramedic had come in and began speaking to Oliver, asking if he had any injuries, and the same with Raleigh. Their bodies all became one giant blur.

“Mr. Jenkins, I’d like to ask you a few questions,” an officer stated, while voices crackled over the static of the radio.

“Sure,” Raleigh said, glancing at me. “As soon as my wife is at the hospital and properly looked at, I’ll answer any questions you got.”

The officer nodded. He may have looked at me, or he may not have. Everything around me was shaky. The white spots were back, the black spots followed, and so did a cluster of colors in adventurous waves.

“Alright, Hardy, I need you to follow my finger, okay?” the paramedic asked. A bright light shone in my eyes as an object I can only assume was her finger was moving side to side. I couldn’t follow it, all I wanted to do was sleep again, just for a few moments. “We have to get her to the hospital stat.”

“Is she going to be okay?” Raleigh asked concerned. Oliver’s muffled snuffles poked through the low whispering murmurs of the wind.

“She has a concussion, that I’m certain of, and she’s going to need some stitches too,” the paramedic glanced at me. “But I can’t diagnose her here. A doctor will take a look at her and most likely order a scan to make sure there’s no internal swelling or bruising.”

“Baby,” I whispered and moved my hand out. Raleigh took it immediately. “Where’s Tom?”

Raleigh sighed heavily, and through my blurred sight I could see his lower lip quivering again as Oliver came over and hugged me. He squeezed so tight; I never wanted him to let go.

*

“Mommy, Mommy, Mommy,” Oliver cried in excitement. “Daddy’s here! Look, Daddy’s here!”

I placed Oliver’s bag onto the chair by the door and chuckled, his beautiful smiling face glancing down at Raleigh as he jogged up the front steps of our building. I stood behind Oliver, and kissed the top of his head as I waved down to Raleigh. His entire face lit up as he looked up at us, his leather jacket and tight jeans sweeping nostalgia through me.

I retreated from the window and buzzed him in. Oliver was running around grabbing last minute toys in anticipation for his weekend away with his father. I decided to hold his bag in my hand as I listened to him talk about all the things he would need, and why he would need them.

“I need Bumblebee to fight the laser jets, and Jetstream to help, too. I should bring Batman, and Captain America to protect the little people at Daddy’s house. I could bring my Marshall too, because Daddy has that big firetruck,” Oliver went on thinking out loud, and I couldn’t help but smile.

It certainly had been a hell of a ride these last few months. Countless sleepless nights trying to reassure Oliver that he was safe, and no one would hurt him anymore. Raleigh had slept over many nights in order to reassure Oliver that we were indeed safe. For weeks on end my son called for Tom, asking for him to come over. I didn’t know how to explain to him that he wasn’t with us anymore; that he had passed just like Mike. That they both were on to bigger and better things. Oliver’s sleeping had improved in the recent weeks, and Raleigh didn’t have to crash on the couch any more to “protect us”. I finally had my bed to myself again without the fear of rolling onto a sleeping toddler, and Oliver slept in his own room with the door open and a night light. I wasn’t going to lie, now that Raleigh was back at his apartment a few blocks over, life at home without him around felt slightly odd. I knew he was anticipating the next time we would need him to sleep over, and even though I knew I didn’t want him back permanently, I kind of missed

having him around. It was a lot easier with two people trying to tame Oliver when he got into a mood, or when fear struck...but in the end, things were finally getting back to normal, and who could argue with that.

A knock struck my door, and I unlocked the chain. Raleigh scratched at the back of his head as he smiled at me, flashing me those aqua eyes that used to drive me crazy. He trimmed his beard significantly, and constantly sported that mala necklace he swore gave him protection. He had offered it to me, urged me to wear it, but I didn't know how many times I had to explain to him I didn't believe in that kind of crap. His bright eyes smiled at me, happy to be in my presence.

"Hey," he said with a smirk.

"Hi," I smiled back.

"He ready?" Raleigh asked.

"Just about, he wanted to grab a few more toys," I said as Raleigh stepped forward and hesitantly pulled me in for a hug. His vanilla whiskey scented beard balm filled my nostrils instantly, and I couldn't resist wrapping my arms around him as well. I felt safe in his arms, I always had.

"How're you doing?"

"I'm alright," I nodded against his shoulder.

"How's the head?" he asked, letting go of me.

"Seen better days," I chuckled and lifted the bangs I now sported to reveal a lovely scar I will always have as a reminder.

"You're still as gorgeous as the day I met you," he blushed.

I chuckled again, looking down at the blue and orange backpack in my hands; white silhouettes of sharks decorated the majority of the blue fabric as the orange handles and zippers remained untouched. Raleigh had also changed the last few months; he was more spiritual than ever. Aside from having to crash on my couch for nights on end because Oliver wanted that sense of security, he had been much more present in Oliver's life. He would call every day, make sure to drop by and see him whenever he had the chance, and took him every weekend, no matter what. Raleigh had tried and succeeded in being a loving father, he had also tried very hard to win me over, to try and fix us. I didn't have the heart to tell him that some wounds don't always heal.

I smiled at Raleigh, my cheeks also turning a light shade of pink. I played with Tom's necklace around my neck and fiddled with it momentarily as Raleigh's eyes scanned my body.

"You ready big guy?" I asked, glancing at Oliver whose little arms were filled with an abundance of toys. I let go of the necklace, feeling it hit my chest and shook my head at Oliver. "Oh, no, no, no, I'm sure Daddy has loads of toys at his house, there's no need to bring all these."

"Nah, it's alright," Raleigh said and stepped farther into the apartment. He took a reusable bag from beside the door and opened it for Oliver. "We can never have enough toys, right, love?"

"Alright, just don't get upset if you forget something at Daddy's," I smiled and widened my eyes at Oliver.

"I won't," Oliver smiled.

“Gives me an excuse to come back and see my two favorite people,” Raleigh smiled, touching my hand. I wanted to retract it and tell him I couldn’t go down that road again, but I let him hold my hand a moment too long, before I turned to Oliver and smiled.

“I love you,” I said, and lifted him into my arms. I planted endless kisses to his cheeks and squeezed him tightly. “You be good for Daddy, okay? And call me every day!”

“I will, Mommy,” Oliver said and squeezed me back. “Love you.”

“You know you can always come with us,” Raleigh said.

“Raleigh, we can’t—”

“I know, I know, I fucked this up really bad, but that doesn’t mean we can’t hit the restart button, right?” he said, a hopeful gleam in his eyes.

“Have fun,” I smiled at him and tousled Oliver’s hair. “I’ll see you in a couple of days my love.”

“Bye, Mommy,” Oliver said and hugged me once more.

“Bye, sweetie,” I said, feeling a slight emptiness inside of me begin to grow.

Raleigh stepped forward and kissed my cheek, his lips a little too close to mine, and squeezed my hip. A rush of ecstasy flashed through me for a moment, only a moment, before he removed his hand and met my eyes. He smiled and slowly planted a kiss to my lips, and for some reason I wanted it. I kissed him back and slid my tongue into his mouth, touching his prickly face. I hadn’t kissed him like that in years, and by

God did it feel great, even though I knew I was sending him the wrong signals, it just felt right. Raleigh pulled away and licked his lips.

“I’ll see you Monday, love,” he grinned and took the backpack from me.

I nodded and watched as my past walked down the hallway, with our son in tow, to the stairs that led to the main door. I slowly closed my door and leaned my forehead on it, trying to be brave enough to last three days without my son, three days alone, three days of nothing but my own insane thoughts. Every time I was alone, the thoughts crept in, the memories filled the void. That peppermint smell always lingered even though there was nothing there. Even though nothing was there now.

I barred the door and went to the window that over-looked the front lawn, Oliver was already talking Raleigh’s ear off as he adjusted the backpack on his shoulder. Such a vibrantly colored backpack looked odd on someone in a leather jacket. Raleigh unlocked the doors to his vehicle and helped Oliver into the car seat, not before tossing the backpack and the bag of toys beside him. I had to watch, just until they sped off, I had to watch to make sure they were safe.

The backdoor closed and Raleigh made a funny face through the window. As he opened the driver’s door, he looked up at me and smiled. I crossed my arms, feeling a cool draft seep through the slightly fogged window, condensation seeping around the edges. I couldn’t help but smile back, giving him a quick wave. He chuckled and blew me a kiss as he started to get into the driver’s seat. I accepted the kiss and blew him one back, not that it meant anything, it was just for nostalgia’s sake.

That smell returned as it always did when I was frightened to be left alone; that stinging peppermint smell I hated so much. Before Raleigh could get into the car, his face grew pale and he began yelling profanities at me. I shook my head and frowned. That's when I felt it, the hot breath on the back of my neck, the stench of stagnant water and mildew growing fiercer. The peppermint was real this time. Raleigh's yells finally broke through the closed windows as he darted for the locked front door. I slowly turned, feeling the hot breath move to my cheek. Those eyes, I will never forget those eyes as they pierced a hole right through me.

"HARDY!" Raleigh yelled as he tried to pry open the door to the building. He stepped back, wanting desperately to get to me, but unable to look away at my inevitable fate.

"I told you I'd find you," Ralph's hoarse voice clouded my eardrums.

I was unable to voice my fears, unable to scream, unable to speak. A knife glinted in his hand, steady as a rock. In one swift move, the blade met my throat, met it with such veracity I didn't even feel a thing, like a hot knife slicing through butter. The blood splattered around me, soaking into the furniture, seeping onto the floors, and drowning me.

I tried to cough, but I couldn't. I tried to breathe, but I couldn't. Gurgling whispers escaped me as I looked up at the masked man, his disturbing face staring back.

"Phase three complete," he chuckled and his footsteps retreated.

Everything around me was going dark, the warmth of the blood soaked into my clothes, my fingertips, and everything around me as my

body hit the floor. There was no happy ending, no walking hand in hand with the man who wanted me back so desperately. There was no running in the fields, or holding our son together, or the hope of us making another life together. This was my fate, my lifeless body lying face first in a pool of my own blood as I watched the scattered toys slowly fade into nothingness. The hints of invisible silhouettes sat on my couch as my eyes fluttered between life and death. Tom and Mike sat before me, smiling. Watching me take my last breath. Their manic laughter blanketed me, sending me off properly.

This ladies and gentleman, is the ultimatum.



WHAT ARE YOU

A SHORT STORY BY ALYSSA MILANI



CHAPTER THREE
WHAT ARE YOU

Always the last to leave. Every night. Every bar. Just drinking my nights away. However, this one in particular, I'm not. My feet dangle off the bar stool as I swirl the last of the beer in the bottle. The warm piss-like liquid slides down my throat. I set the beer down and look at the array of bottles in front of me on the other side of the bar. Such a selection, so little time. The mirror behind the bar is stained with old booze and dust, making me wonder why I'm even in this place to begin with.

I see her reflection smile at me over the tops of the bottles and she rises. Her perfume stings my nostrils as she walks past me. Vanilla lavender. A familiar scent, but I can't seem to put my finger on it. Her beauty, utterly fascinating. Her walk, mesmerizing. I shift my gaze to the bottles once again. Tiny flies buzz around them, fucking gnats trying to get to the juice. Their buzzing grows louder the more I creep at them; it's all I can hear. The flap of their wings, the quick movement of their frail bodies. The short lives they live, spent entirely waiting to score. Vanilla lavender slaps me again as she sits beside me. I come back to reality and

smile quickly, then turn back to my empty beer. My thumbnail gently peels the corner label.

“Last call,” the bartender hollers.

I nod for another and he brings it over. The woman beside me shakes her head and watches as I take a large gulp. The cool bubbles burst in my mouth. The more I drink, the less reality stays in focus. Just the way I like it.

“I’m Melody,” she finally says. I tip my beer to her.

“Keith,” I say and take another gulp. Her yellow eyes meet mine in the flickering light.

“You don’t know me,” she says and shrugs a shoulder. “I’m trying to make it through the night.”

Now she has my attention.

“Rough week?” I ask, realizing it’s only Tuesday.

“Sure,” she replies, fidgeting with the ring on her finger. She catches me staring at the gold band and instantly retracts her hand from the bar.

“Want something to drink before he closes up shop?” I ask, more chilling beer sliding down my throat.

“I don’t drink,” she says, her eyes shifting from one bottle to the next. Saliva builds up in my mouth, watering at the thought of the sting on my tongue.

“In the wrong place for that,” I say, chuckling and take another swig.

“No, I’m in the right place,” she sighs. “No one will believe I’m here.”

“That’s one way to look at it.” I scratch at the stubble on my chin; I forgot to shave this morning.

“You come here often?” she asks.

“Enough to know I have a problem.” I wink, instantly regretting it. She chuckles anyway and relaxes, her shoulders easing up.

“What’s a woman like you doing in a dump like this?”

“Like I said before, just trying to make it through the night.” She clears her throat.

“Why’s that?”

“You’d never believe me, even if I told you.” She giggles.

“Humor me,” I say, fiddling with the label on the beer bottle, turning to her.

“I stole something.”

“*She* stole something,” I chuckle, and raise my eyebrows.

“And if I make it through the night, a life will be spared.” Her expression changes from content to serious.

“Whose life?”

“My husband’s.” She finally turns to me.

“What did you steal?”

My curiosity is at its peak. She opens her purse and places a USB key onto the bar. She rests her purse onto the bar as well and shimmies out of her jacket. I stare at the key, my tongue gliding along my molars. I wonder what’s on it. My mind wanders to countless places, but the only true thing that continues to circulate—even though my curiosity is at its peak—is if I can have another drink.

“You see, I don’t know how to crack it,” she starts. “I don’t even know what’s on it.”

I nod; my eyes stay fixated on the buzzing gnats before me.

“The dilemmas we face,” I sigh heavily, watching the bartender clean the beer taps.

“The dilemmas we face,” she repeats quietly and picks up the USB key.

“Why did you steal it if you don’t know how to crack it?” I peel the label off the bottle and crumble it in-between my fingers.

“I don’t know,” she says. “Would you know how to crack it?”

“No,” I answer without thinking and I try to catch the words as they run out of my mouth and crawl into her ears. Perhaps she would’ve offered me money to do it? Perhaps not? My mouth salivates as the bartender fixes a bottle of whiskey on the shelf.

“Oh,” she replies and places the USB key back into her purse. “I guess my curiosity was getting the best of me. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

She clears her throat and places her palms on the edge of the bar, she looks uncomfortable.

“It’s gotta be something if they have your husband.”

She sniffs and from the corner of my eyes, I could see her yellow eyes shimmer. *Shit*, I think to myself. *Is there anyone you can’t make cry?* I take the last gulp of beer and turn to her.

“Let me see what I can do.”

“You’d really do that for me?” she asks and wipes away a tear.

“Hey, I’ve got nothing to do ‘til morning and you gotta make it through the night, might as well make use of the time.”

She rises and walks back to the table she was sitting at, takes out a laptop, and then brings it over to me like she was prepared. I have a bad feeling about this, but I want to know what the big fuss is about. She powers up the laptop and places it on the bar. The USB key is then forced into the jack and she slides the laptop my way. I wait until a window opens. A password is required.

“I don’t know it, that’s my problem.” She shrugs.

I nod and start typing; my fingers have a mind of their own. The tapping keys move about and the bartender curiously makes his way over, cleaning the bar as he does. Within moments, I’m in. Endless documents pop up in a folder: *Confidential* and *Top Secret* is the title to most of them. I slide the laptop back to her.

“You’re in.” I wipe my clammy hands on my jeans. I haven’t felt a rush like this in years.

“Oh, thank you,” she says. She stares at the screen but does not open any of the files.

“Aren’t you gonna open them?”

“Can you?” She hesitates.

“Um,” I say...something’s telling me not to do it. “Yeah, sure.”

I scratch at my stubble again and she slides the laptop back, the sticky bar top giving it resistance. I tap on a few documents but nothing catches my eye. Confidential this, secretive that. Nothing that sparks my interest. She leans closer to me, her arm pressed into mine. My nostrils fill with vanilla lavender, why do I know this smell?

“What’s that one?” She points to a document unlabelled. I open it and wait as it loads.

It’s an autopsy report. Male, mid-thirties, blond hair, grey eyes. It conveniently matches my description. Sweat forms at the base of my temples. She continues scrolling through the document. Cause of death, unknown. Reason for death, unknown. Time of death, unknown. *Who is this guy?* She keeps scrolling to photos. Grotesque blood shots. Mangled face. Legs and arms unrecognizable. She stops on a photo of his chest—faded tattoo of eagle wings hidden behind dirt and blood. Like my tattoo.

I gulp and lean back. That's how I know that smell. Her fuck head of a husband reeked of it.

"How did you find me?"

She chuckles and flips her hair.

"Wasn't that hard," she replies with a grin. "You're pretty predictable. Nothing will stop you from getting your fix."

"What're you gonna do now?"

"If we make it 'til morning, I exchange you for my husband. The man who *supposedly* killed you."

Bludgeoned is more like it.

"You don't know what you're up against."

"Oh, but I do." She smiles. "Keith Michaels, son of Jeremiah Michaels and Elizabeth Michaels. Born in Wales in 1873. Died in 1901, then again in 1978, and again in 2018 by my husband. But look at you, alive and well."

"Clearly, your husband didn't do the job." I chuckle.

"The man who promised my husband would be released wants *you*, and if I bring *you* to him, my husband will be set free."

"Your husband is a monster."

"It was kill or be killed!" she raises her voice. "He had no choice."

Oh, but the big guy had a choice. He sure as hell had a fucking choice. I was just a lonely guy in a bar trying to get plastered when he came along and ruined me once again. He was some asshole with a crowbar and a death sentence, reeking of a girl's perfume. When will it ever fucking end?

"Everyone has a choice, it's how you go about making that choice that determines your fate."

"You don't understand—"

"Oh, but I do. Your husband, who you're trying to save, murdered me because he thought killing me would make *him* like me."

"That's not why he did it."

"Enlighten me then," I purse my lips and meet her eyes. She has no answer. "That's what I thought."

"What are you?" she asks, shaking her head.

"What do you think?" I scoff. I'm a guy who can't fucking die no matter how many times you try and kill him.

“Why are you like this? Hm, how did it happen?” she asks.

“It just did.”

“I can’t lose him,” she sniffs. “He’s my everything.”

“You don’t think I know loss?” I meet her yellow eyes. “I’m a hundred and forty-six years old, countless loves and countless friends have dropped like flies around me. Yet here I am. Alive and well. You can kick me in the head, tear my limbs off, and still, here *I* am. I don’t need your sob story. I have plenty of my own.”

“You don’t look a day over thirty.” She shakes her head. The bartender clears his throat and sets an empty shot glass on the counter. His face is reddened with embarrassment from eavesdropping on this useless conversation. I want to tell him that there’s nothing to be embarrassed about, we’re the fuckers who won’t leave his bar. “How can I convince you?”

“There’s no way to convince me.” I stand and take out some money. I place it on the bar and she grabs my wrist.

“Please,” she pleads. “Isn’t there something?”

I chuckle and pry her fingers off of me. I slip into my leather jacket and take out a cigarette. The sweet taste of nicotine fills my lungs. I step out into the rain and lift the collar on my jacket. The cold sting on my face makes me feel alive. Although, I haven’t felt alive in years. Years I can’t get back. A curse I can’t break. Lives taken from me for no reason.

I quicken my pace and ready myself to cross the street, but something’s holding me back. I turn and find her gripping my jacket, holding a gun in the other hand. It’s shaking, but that doesn’t mean she won’t use it. By God, that doesn’t mean I won’t have to start this bullshit over again does it?

“Look, lady—”

Everything goes black once again...



Alyssa Milani



CHAPTER FOUR
PARALYSIS

I awoke in a panic; my eyes sprung open and the faint sound of the television echoed in the background. I sat up and rubbed my eyes while they adjusted. The sheer feeling of being watched came over me and I looked around the dimly lit room; invisible eyes were prying their way through me. I stood; a sudden thirst for water came over me and I began to make my way down the hall. My body stopped, every ounce of me froze. *Look at her*, a voice echoed. *Turn and look at her*. My heart thudded in my chest and my eyes grew large when I saw myself lying in bed, fast asleep. For one reason or another, I looked down at my shaking hands.

I rushed over to my body, and tried to wake myself up. I spoke but no words came out. I reached down to touch my shoulder and felt nothing. I screamed and silence spread around me. I felt nauseous and out of breath. Where was I? Who was I? Why was this happening? I was

choking, unable to gasp for air, yet when I looked at myself asleep, I was calm and alright.

An overwhelming sense of dread came over me, and from the corner of my eye I could see the faint silhouette spark my curiosity. Slim and black as it rose slowly in the corner, slithering like a snake up the wall. I reached over to my wife, trying to call out her name, to warn her, but silence prevailed. The black figure leaped forward and lunged at me. I yelled, I fought, but nothing around me was aware of my actions. I felt its darkness seep into me, taking over my thoughts; the horrors, the pain, the inevitable end.

The figure stopped and disappeared as quickly as it had come when I gasped for air and sat upright in bed. Sweat soaked my clothes, I was shivering, but it wasn't cold. Everything around me moved in the more I listened to my rapid heartbeat. My vision disfigured the longer I gazed at the corner of the room, the bare wall mocking me. I looked over at my sleeping wife; her silent snores ringing in my ears. I called out her name and she moved, I said it again and she turned over. I sighed in relief; it was another dream. It was only a dream. I looked to the corner of the room at the empty wall, smiling...and that's when I felt it, the pressure on my chest. The weight that pushed me down.

With every blink, I saw the silhouette rising. I stared intently, trying to keep my eyes open. If they stayed open, I'd be safe. Yet, the longer I stared, the more my eyes would get heavy again. Heavy as though someone were forcing them closed.

While they fluttered shut, the silhouette crept forward, its long black fingers reaching toward me. My eyes unwillingly shut, and darkness spread once more...

SLEEP IF YOU DARE

MR. TOP HAT

ALYSSA MILANI



CHAPTER FIVE

MR. TOP HAT

“

You can't smoke in here, Holland,” Doctor Alder said, his glasses barely held at the tip of his pointed nose.

Holland put out her newly lit cigarette on the glass side table, a disgruntled look about her as her hazel eyes bored into his. She knew she wasn't allowed to smoke; it wasn't the first time he reminded her, but in times like these, a little puff relaxed her. Doctor Alder tried to make his office calm and inviting, using pastel colors, golds, and glass to keep everything up-to-date and modern, but Holland saw right through it and knew there was nothing in this office that gave her a calming effect. Not the glass tables with their gold trimming, or the mint couches with beige and pink pillows, or the god-awful glass shelving unit that featured several cacti and bizarrely shaped decorative pieces that she tried to wrap her head around. They just made her feel queasy the more she studied their unnatural curves.

Holland hated therapy more than anything. She was forced to go as a teenager after her parents died in a freak accident and now, after everything that happened, it was court ordered again, twice a week for one whole hour each session. During those heinous hours, Holland constantly found herself just watching the time tick by while Doctor Alder tried his damndest to get her to tell him something—anything about what happened that night, but what was there to tell? No one believed her and no one truly ever listened.

The smoke still rose from the crumpled cigarette, dancing, then evaporating into thin air. Her eyes shifted from the cigarette to the hexagonal bowl beside it, a blue-green cactus blooming within as pebble stones gawked back at her. This had been her fifth session, nearly ten minutes had gone by and she still hadn't said anything. Most of the time the doctor would just sit there and watch her, how she picked at her nails, cracked her knuckles, nibbled on her lips, and he would write everything down. He never truly pressured her to say anything, he mostly just reminded her that *this was a safe space*, that she *doesn't have to be shy*, or her favorite, *it'll be alright, Holland, you can trust me with whatever is bothering you*. Even though this was only their fifth session out of twenty, there was no telling what was on his little mind.

Since he was analyzing her, there was no trouble in Holland doing the same. During their first session, she couldn't take her eyes off that hideous mole he had growing out the side of his cheek, its grotesque brownish-green shade with a slight pulsating to it made her innards squirm. By the end of that session, she noticed not only the two tiny black hairs that poked out of the mole, but Doctor Alder had exactly six beauty marks on his face and three, that she could see, on the open part of his neck, including an odd amount of skin tags. In their second session, she analyzed his salt-and-pepper hair, so neatly brushed to the side and riddled with product that there was no wind that would be a match for it. She could only imagine the texture it had, the word *crunchy* kept filling her mind. That's what it was, crunchy. Their third session, she began to realize that he color coordinated his ties to his socks. His abundance of muted suits made his patterned ties stand out. The first session he wore a pink paisley, the second a red polka dot tie that matched his candy apple red socks. By their third session, she was kind of curious to know what pattern he'd have on—royal blue and gold, with matching royal blue and

gold stripped socks. The fourth session was boring; he sported a beige suit with a lighter beige tie, and of course, socks to match.

“This is our fifth session, Holland,” Doctor Alder said. Lo and behold, he sported a forest green tie with an image of trees on it, and green socks to match. She hated the way he said her name, too, he enunciated the *L*’s more than need be. “You have to tell me what happened that night. You have to tell me something.”

Holland groaned through a breath and looked out the window: the grey brick of the building beside them looked back. The sun poked through the best it could, and she wished she could get up and leave to enjoy this beautiful day—*the best she could*—but Doctor Alder had other things he wanted from her: to speak. Holland wasn’t sure if she should, nothing good ever happened when she spoke about *him*. No, nothing remotely satisfying ever came from saying *his* name... Doctor Alder also wouldn’t sign her sheet stating that she did, indeed, complete a session until the hour was up.

Her hazel eyes were alarmingly bright in the shine of the sun, displaying hints of green amongst the gold. She glanced at him, his glasses nearing the tip of his nose even more, as if with a sudden jerk they’d land right in his lap.

“We have fifteen more hours until these sessions are done. You can either work with me, or against me. If you work with me, I might just dock a few hours off,” his scruffy little voice said as he shifted one of his legs over the other; his green socks displaying a thin tree border. “What do you say, Holland? Ready to tell me what happened that night?”

“Even if I did,” she started, clearing her throat. “It wouldn’t change a damn thing.”

“Try me, Holland,” Doctor Alder said, taking off the glasses. She hadn’t noticed how dark his eyes were, doll-like some would say, or demonic, others would argue.

“I...” she paused, tonguing her molars, then her cheek. “God, I don’t even know where to start.”

“Let’s start from the beginning. The very beginning,” Doctor Alder suggested.

“The beginning?” she scoffed with a chuckle. “So you can do some psyche analysis from my childhood and discover some deep, dark

secret I didn't even know of that caused this psychosis everyone thinks went on."

"Well, the police report didn't make much sense, Holland." Doctor Alder flicked his glasses open from their folded position and placed them on the tip of his nose again. His eyes scanned the papers before him, then with a tap of his finger he looked up at Holland. "They said you told them a *Mr. Top Hat* did it."

"Well." She rubbed her clammy palms together. "He—he did."

"Then tell me about the night you first met this *Mr. Top Hat*?"

"You make it sound like I'm making this shit up, like he isn't real."

"I'm just trying to understand you, Holland."

She deeply hated the way he continuously said her name, like it was some annoying tick of his to repeat it; an annoying tick that was definitely getting under her skin. With a sigh, she nodded and looked to the brick wall again, trying to remember how she came upon Mr. Top Hat herself. She believed she must've been at least eight, or maybe nine?

Holland woke up from the rumble of thunder nearby. She always hated thunder, its loud growl waking the world below it, followed by a jolt of light that showed everyone the storm it was cooking. Hiding under her covers wasn't working, squeezing the life out of her stuffed bear wasn't doing the trick, either. She knew it was a short walk to her parents' bedroom, and she was definitely going to try and make it there before the thunder rolled in again.

Slowly slipping out of her bed, she tiptoed her way out of her room and toward her parents' bedroom. Her father's snores were escaping through the crack in the door, her mother's light groans seeping through as well. Holland tried to wake them up, boy did she try, but they were so deep in their slumber that no frightened child or rumbling thunder would wake them even the slightest.

Holland decided to take it upon herself to venture to the kitchen and get a glass of milk; she knew a tall glass would help nestle her back into a comfortable sleep. Only problem was, she had to make her way through their old house to the kitchen at the back; a house she loved so dearly in the daylight, and feared so frightfully in the dark. The nooks and crannies hid the most awful things that her imagination could muster. The monsters and ghouls she thought up, the wicked witch that lurked in the yard, and the cackling staircase that continuously taunted her, even in the light. Holland knew she could make it to the kitchen, she was no scaredy cat, but on that

night she felt more frightened than she had ever been. Something she couldn't quite describe churned her stomach. Something she couldn't quite explain.

Her childhood home was an old house, nothing too rustic, but nothing modern, either. The stairs creaked and cracked, either when someone walked on them, or just on their own. Her mother always said: "it's just the house shifting, sweetheart. Nothing to be scared of." Yet, the old furniture and dusty clothes that were left behind when her family moved in still lingered about, creeping in the shadows to remind her family that this wasn't their home, her family just lived in it.

The creaks moved through the home with every besitant step Holland took, even through the thundering storm outside. Her heart hammered in her chest as the dark living area that over looked the staircase seemed to grow darker the more she watched it. The corners rose in shadows, the objects clouded over the room like a dark blanket, the previous owners checking in. Her heavy breathing moved along the staircase as she reached the bottom step and peered to the kitchen at the end of the hall. So close, yet so far away.

For one reason or another, something told her to look out the front door. Call it her intuition, call it her naïve curiosity. She stepped up to it, the rain falling on the glass. The sound of the rain pouring brought a calming to Holland, she loved the tapping, the look of it, and the sheer smell it, everything getting wet from its touch. Lightning struck the sky, lighting up the front yard for a brief moment and yet, even in that brief moment, not even the blind could miss it.

A large, hunched man stood at the base of the walkway dressed entirely in black with a high top hat tilted ever so slightly to the left. Her curious eight-year-old mind couldn't take her eyes off him, such a strange time for a visit. The man in the top hat didn't move, not even a twitch or a shiver in the pouring rain. His gaze was kept on the ground, his hands to his sides, shoulders hunched as though he were just on the verge of falling over, but in control of his actions.

Lightning clapped once more and thunder followed; Holland turned slightly to peer behind her as her cat meowed and rubbed up against her leg. Holland petted the orange pussycat before it ran up the creaking steps. The light from the wet glass rose on the ground, shaping her silhouette on the floor. She watched it, mesmerized for a moment at how interesting the rectangle looked with the falling drops shadowing the floor. Though that wasn't all that was shadowing. A top hat slowly rose above her, seemingly appearing as if she were wearing it. Her little heart beat so loudly she believed she could hear it pounding in her ears. Her lower lip quivered and her body froze. Something or another whispered to her, telling her to turn. When Holland turned around, the piercing eyes bored so deeply into her that she thought she might have died

the instant his breath mixed with hers. His pale face was so strikingly cold, his piercing eyes so black they oozed death...

"...that was the night I named him Mr. Top Hat," Holland said as Doctor Alder wrote in his notebook.

"Who was he?" Doctor Alder asked.

"Not even the slightest idea." She shook her head, holding her index and middle finger to her mouth, pretending there was a cigarette in between the two...but she did have an idea, the smallest inkling, but still an idea. When they first moved to the house she found a top hat amongst an array of clothes left behind, be it the same one or purely just coincidental, who knows. However, she believed that when she put on that little top hat, she was *marked*. Their presence lingered in the home throughout her childhood. Even before she met Mr. Top Hat there was something present that didn't want her family to be there. "My parents didn't believe me when I told them about it. How could they? Story goes that I never woke them up, they woke *me* up. I was standing in the rain at the edge of the walkway, smiling. I don't remember a lick of that, like they don't remember me trying to wake them. I thought that maybe I was dreaming; perhaps I wasn't crazy and just have an extraordinary imagination."

"That wasn't the case, I presume?" Doctor Alder pushed his glassed up his nose.

"It most certainly was not." She cleared her throat again, a scratching started and she couldn't get rid of it. "A week went by before I saw him again. Sad thing is, I actually thought that I *was* dreaming. That I just happened to sleepwalk into the rain that night and my dream told me I was doing something else entirely. But Mr. Top Hat appeared in my room exactly a week later."

"And you have no idea why?"

"I might have some assumptions, but no concrete reasoning." She shrugged.

"Like what?" Doctor Alder pushed.

"When we first moved to the house, it didn't even look like the previous owners moved out. All their shit was still there. We kept what we liked and donated the rest." Holland swallowed hard and licked her dry lips. "One thing I loved was this tiny little top hat—coincidence, right? There was something about it I just felt attached to. Like I needed

to keep it for some fucked up reason...the moment I put it on—my mother tore it off my head and tossed it. I don't know what it was, or who it belonged to. There was so much shit left behind, that there was no telling how many lived there before us. The house always scared me, too, the darkness it had and the creaking sounds it made...I kept telling my parents that the house was haunted, but no one listened. My mother always said the same thing: *it's an old house that's just settling.*"

"Do you think it was *his* top hat?"

"Who knows." She shrugged again. "Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was just a coincidence, or maybe he followed me around, wanting that damned hat back that my mother tossed."

"When would you see him?" Doctor Alder continued.

"Night-time mostly...rarely during the days, unless it was raining. God, he loved the damn rain." She shook her head. "He would appear often, creeping in the corners. His piercing eyes glaring at me; sometimes they glowed a deep yellow, most of the time they stayed their deathly black."

"Did he ever say anything?" Doctor Alder asked intrigued.

"No, he'd just stare at me, like he was watching something. Sometimes he'd point at things, but I was always too scared to even begin to know what he was pointing at." She sniffed as her eyes welled with tears. It wasn't easy for her to talk about Mr. Top Hat, it was never easy. "Even when I had the courage to look, there was never anything there."

"Was it only in your room that you saw him?" Doctor Alder continued to write but kept his eyes mainly on her.

"Sometimes he'd appear in the basement, in the corners of other rooms, or in the hallways during dinner. Seeing him lying under my bed was a lot of fun, just staring up at the mattress. He never engaged, he just watched." Holland's eyebrows furrowed and she looked down at her trembling hands. Doctor Alder wrote it down; he wrote everything down. The way she moved, looked, breathed, acted; there was no hiding in front of this doctor.

"How long did that last?" Doctor Alder asked.

"Him watching me?"

"Mm."

"Well." She licked her dry lips again gazing up at the clock. "Throughout my childhood, that's for sure. Any dark corner featured his

annoying little top hat, and those unblinkable eyes. He slowed down during my teenage years, and stopped completely around the time I turned twenty.”

“Why do you think he stopped?” Doctor Alder asked.

“I don’t know? He was some pervert who noticed I wasn’t some flat chested little kid anymore. Who the fuck knows,” she scoffed. “I moved out? I don’t know.”

“Like every teenager, did you embark on experimenting?” Doctor Alder blinked.

“What, like drugs and alcohol?” she asked, and Doctor Alder nodded. “Well, yeah. What teenager doesn’t?”

“Could it be that you self-medicated yourself enough to push him away?” Doctor Alder tipped his hand to her.

“Sure.” Holland shrugged.

“When did he return?”

“I guess in university? I don’t really remember. I tried to keep him to myself. I did research, I read books to cope with my psyche, but it was all inconclusive. I was simply crazy.” She tongued her cheek. “He’d creep in the corners again, just looking at me with those yellow eyes. I’d see him in the halls of the dorm, the corners of the library, sitting on benches around campus...I felt trapped and I had nowhere to fucking go.”

Holland exhaled sharply, shifting in her seat. Doctor Alder studied her face, his eyes narrowing as if he were trying to read what was on her mind. There was nothing on her mind, there never really was. All she wanted was to go, to leave and hope that Mr. Top Hat wouldn’t follow, but he always followed. Always.

“Who is—” Doctor Alder flipped back a few pages in his notebook. “—Easton Wylde?”

“He was my boyfriend.” She nodded, her eyes glossing over. “But you knew that.”

“Did you tell Mr. Wylde about him, Holland?” Doctor Alder pushed his glasses up again.

“I might’ve.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it?” Doctor Alder insisted. “Tell me about your relationship leading up to the point you told Mr. Wylde about this Mr. Top Hat.”

Holland didn't know where to start. Should she start when she first met Easton? Did she start when they first had sex? Or when he asked her to be his girlfriend? She looked out the window again. Something about that ghastly brick wall was calming.

Easton Wylde, typical jock: blond hair, blue eyes, tall as a tree. He was on scholarship at the same university, cruising through his classes. There was something about Easton that was different. He might have been the typical jock, but his actions spoke louder than his appearance. He was kind, breathtakingly handsome, and wasn't a player like everyone else he hung out with. She first met Easton at one of the parties his friends threw. They'd throw many parties and Holland went to most of them to let loose from the hectic university life. Night after night she'd find him walking back to his dorm alone while everyone else had a woman or two clinging to their arms. They didn't speak much at the parties, it was always a vague: what're you drinking, followed with, I'll see you around. A couple of nights they flirted back and forth, but nothing was ever thrust upon them; the sexual tension was surely in the air. There was something about the way he looked at her that she admired; he looked at her differently than he looked at the rest of the prowling cats that tried to get in his pants. Maybe it was because she didn't try at all, or maybe it was her striking beauty that drove him crazy. One thing she knew, she would never get tired of that admiring look of his that longed for her.

On the night they truly engaged with each other, she had just left the library, not something very common for her, but she chose to party over the course of the weekend instead of buckling down and studying for her midterms. The door to the library closed behind her, leaving her completely alone on the long walk through the campus grounds to her dorm. Her purse sat heavy on her shoulder, a couple of books in hand. The street-lights on campus were flickering that night, as they did most windy nights, but something about them added to her already paranoid mind. Filled with fright, she speed walked her way to her dorm, trying to keep her head down. It had been nearly two years since she last felt it, that glaring sensation of someone watching, its presence lurking in the shadows, those deathly eyes eating at her soul. Even with her focus on the ground, she could feel its piercing eyes on her, the hair on the back of her neck rising, the goosebumps spreading...

She glanced up for just a moment; the dark campus was solely lit by the street-lights that outlined the pathways. A moment was all she needed for her eyes to dart directly at him; there he was again, leaning on a tree, his top hat perfectly tilted to the left on top of his rotting head. Her heart hammered violently, she felt a lump grow in her throat, but she kept walking through her fear, through her anger. She was

tired of it, tired of always having to feel watched, always having to feel frightened. His piercing yellow eyes glowed in the darkness under the tree. All she could think of was why he was back, why then, of all times, did his nasty little self decide to haunt her again, why wouldn't he leave her alone?

She was so focused on Mr. Top Hat that she hadn't noticed Easton walking in her direction, glaring at his phone in one hand and sipping on a cold coffee in the other, until the two collided. Her books slammed into Easton's chest, his phone flopped to the ground, and his cold brew soaked the two of them.

She yelped without even noticing, hunching her shoulders from the cold coffee soaking into her shirt. She was prepared to tell him off, prepared to give him shit, but as soon as their eyes locked, a smile crept on her face.

"Shit, I'm so sorry," Easton said, his bright blue eyes wide with concern. Before Holland could answer, her eyes darted to where Mr. Top Hat had been lurking, but the lurker was no longer there. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," she chuckled. "I'll live."

"Well." He picked up his phone from the ground and the books she had dropped. "Um...my dorm is right here...if you want a change of clothes or something."

"That's okay. I was just heading to mine anyway." She shook her head.

"It's the least I can do."

Easton's puppy dog eyes bore into her, and she couldn't help but to feel weak in the knees. Those two blue crystals just begged her to say yes, aching for her to follow him. It was the same look he'd given her at parties when he'd see her walk in, full of hope, lust, wonder, and a hint of desperation for her to like him, too. She sighed and looked down at her stained shirt, knowing she wanted him just as badly, but they were like two teenagers unable to muster up enough courage to act upon their connection.

"Sure, why not," she grinned. Easton smirked and cocked his head to the side.

"I'm just this way." He held her books for her.

Holland peered over her shoulder, while the sticky mixture irritated her chest, trying to see if her eyes weren't playing tricks on her and Mr. Top Hat was truly there, but he wasn't. The tree was bare, and the leaves danced in the quiet breeze.

"You coming?" Easton asked as Holland felt in a daze for a split-second, trying to find the person she so desperately wanted to lose.

"Of course," she replied, grinning.

They walked in the opposite direction of her dorm and he wiped at the under part of his chin.

"Moments like these I regret putting four sugars in my coffee," he chuckled.

"Honestly," she grinned.

"I'm Easton, by the way," he said with a smile, how she loved that breathtaking smile.

"Holland." She bit her lip.

"I've seen you around at our parties a few times." He pulled at his shirt, releasing its stickiness from his chest, then turned to her, still smiling.

"Nice to be able to have an actual conversation without blasting music." She couldn't help but to catch his contagious smile.

"Can't believe it took me soaking you in coffee to speak with you away from those booze fests," he chuckled with a snort.

"Am I that intimidating?" she laughed.

"You are very beautiful." He stared at her admiringly, his eyes like magnets, unable to leave hers.

"Keep saying stuff like that and we might not make it to your room," she teased, but she knew what she was doing, for she, too, had her eye on him at every party she went to, waiting for the perfect moment to make her move. Or more like waiting for enough courage to actually do something.

"I have been saying it, music was always too loud for you to hear me." He winked.

They barely even had the time to make it to his dorm room, her sticky books fell to the floor once more in the stairwell, his letterman jacket following shortly after. Her short jean skirt was stained with coffee as he lifted her, his lips meeting hers just as he helped himself inside. Her back pressed up against the wall of the stairwell, sending a cool shiver down her spine as he rocked against her, their howling moans echoing.

Barely a week had gone by and there was no Mr. Top Hat in sight, another week and still no sight of that ghastly man. By the third week, when Easton asked her to be his girlfriend, that's when she saw Mr. Top Hat again.

She was alone in her own bed for the first night since their stairwell escapade because Easton had an early exam and she didn't want to be a distraction for him. Her roommate was still in the library when Holland saw those piercing eyes in the corner of her dorm room, lurking in the shadows, just waiting for Holland to notice him. All the air sucked out of her lungs, she tried to ignore him, she tried to pretend he wasn't there, but that tilted top hat rose high up to the ceiling, casting its shadow from one end to the next. The tears welled in her eyes and stayed there until she was ready to accept that he wasn't going anywhere. He would never go anywhere, not while

her heart still pumped and there was air in her lungs. He marked her, marked her for life.

She tried to tell Easton, but every time she began to tell him, there was a part of him that didn't believe her.

"I'm telling you, he's real," she sniffed sitting in between Easton's legs in the middle of his bed.

"Are you sure you weren't dreaming? Your parents even said the first time you saw him, they found you in the rain." Easton's hands moved up her arms to her neck, massaging gently.

"I'm telling you, I wasn't then and...I'm not now." She brought her knees to her chest and hugged them.

"You're not now?" he asked, lifting her and turning her to him with ease. "What're you talking about? Is he back?"

"I don't know...he might be." She shrugged.

"When did you last see him?"

"The other night, when you had that stupidly early exam," she sniffed as he moved her hair behind her ear and thumbed a tear from her cheek.

"Did your roommate see him?" He searched her eyes; she could see the indifference in them, the lack of belief.

"No."

He tried to be consoling; he tried to listen to every piece of fear that encircled Mr. Top Hat. Although, every time she opened up about her insecurities, Easton would say that she must've been sleepwalking. She must've been dreaming, or her favorite, 'were you on something when you saw him?' As much as she loved Easton, there was a part of her that wished she had kept her mouth shut.

One night, she woke up to that usual feeling of being watched come over her. It always felt the same; the hair on the back of her neck would rise, followed by a gust of goosebumps spreading over her. Whenever she opened her eyes, he was always there. She squeezed Easton's hand, trying to understand if she was dreaming or not.

Her eyes slowly opened, and there was Mr. Top Hat, standing on Easton's side of the bed. Those piercing yellow eyes glaring down at her, not blinking—that was his specialty. Her breathing slowed to a panicked wheeze and Easton awoke by the trembling of her hands. The moment his eyes opened, he saw him, too. Easton saw those eyes, that decaying face, that annoying top hat that's always so perfectly tilted to the left.

Easton jolted backward for a moment, leaning into Holland with protection; the sweet smell of his aftershave filling her nostrils one last time. Her heart beat rapidly,

pounding in her ears, causing her vision to slightly disfigure. Easton's blue eyes shot at her before he attacked Mr. Top Hat; the look meant he was scared, the look meant 'I love you', the look meant 'you were right'.

"Our relationship was great," Holland stated with a smile. "Moment we met, we just clicked. God, he was so handsome. We fucked like crazy, too. Ha, to think he chose me out of all the girls who threw themselves at him, he chose *me*."

"How did he react when you told him about Mr. Top Hat?" Doctor Alder pressed.

"I barely even had to tell him." Her smile disappeared.

"So you never told him?"

"I did, vaguely. But he just knew something was bothering me. He tried to understand, but he never truly did. He always pointed it to me living in my dreams, or I was so overworked with school that I was seeing things. I tried to tell him it started when I saw a kid, but even then, he didn't get it. No one ever really does. No one ever really listens, either."

"That wasn't the case, was it?" Doctor Alder said. "You were never dreaming?"

"No, and Easton soon found out."

"Was this the first time he followed you to Mr. Wylde's room?" Doctor Alder shifted his legs.

"Unfortunately...and when I woke up to his *stupid* face glaring at me, so did Easton."

"And was Mr. Wylde the only other person to see this...thing?"

Doctor Adler clicked his pen a couple times.

"I think so." She shook her head. "He tried to protect me that night, I knew that much...but I don't even know if there's a way to stop this damn *thing*."

"What did Easton do, Holland?"

"He attacked it," she said. "And the *thing* didn't move."

Holland put her hand to her mouth, trying to hide her soft sobbing. The look on Easton's frightened face flashed through her mind: his widened blue eyes, his paleness, his last kiss goodbye...Doctor Alder was intrigued. He stopped writing and started listening.

"Go on."

“Our hour’s almost up. Can’t we do this another time?” she sniffed as more tears filled her eyes.

“Go on, Holland. It’ll be alright,” Doctor Alder nodded.

“Easton tried again, and Mr. Top Hat still didn’t budge. That’s about the time I made my way to the door to find it sealed shut. No doorknob, no nothing. Easton stopped attacking and shoved his shoulder into the door a couple times, trying to push down whatever it was that sealed us in. Mr. Top Hat just stood there, slowly turning to us. His eyes, though, they weren’t yellow anymore, that much I remember. They were black again...” She sucked in a breath and let out a soft sob. “Easton kissed me one last time, I can still taste it on my tongue.”

“It’s alright,” Doctor Alder nodded. Holland touched her lips with a hint of a smile, Easton’s beautiful face flashing through her excited mind.

“Then he swung at Mr. Top Hat. Swung with his fist first until he scrambled to get his bat. But nothing happened until Easton—”

Holland stopped as tears slid down her cheeks. She shook her head and looked at her hands again, cracking her knuckles. Her lower lip quivered, her breathing quickened, thinking about what happened next; the fright that exuded from Easton, the yells that escaped him, the horror that echoed through the halls...

“What happened to Easton, Holland?” Doctor Alder pressed.

“I don’t know. He was attacking and then just stopped. The bat fell from his hands and they locked eyes. It seemed like a really long time, but it all happened so fast. And next thing I remember, I’m being woken up with blood all over me, on the bed beside me, and Easton isn’t there. I don’t know what happened to him...”

“Did this Mr. Top Hat do that to Easton?” Doctor Alder asked.

“I don’t know what he did.”

“When’s the last time you saw *it*?”

“That night.”

“Do you think *you* might have done this to Mr. Wylde, Holland? That *you* might have hurt him?” Doctor Alder assumed.

“What? No! No, why would I hurt him? Do you think I did something to him?” She sat erect in her seat, her eyes glaring at Doctor Alder.

“I’m not saying that, Holland. I’m simply asking you a question.”

“I would never do that,” she sobbed. “It’s that—that thing. I’m telling you, it’s *him*.”

“Kind of a coincidence that Easton was the only other person who had seen this Mr. Top Hat, and now he’s dead—”

“He isn’t dead,” she cried. “*He* has him.”

“Holland,” Doctor Alder sighed. “There is no Mr. Top Hat.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she snarled.

“Holland, please.”

“No, something happened—every time I close my eyes, something happens,” she cried.

“If you just admit it, all this will be a lot easier.” Doctor Alder put the pen inside the notebook and placed them both on the glass coffee table in front of them. “All this will be put to an end.”

“There’s nothing to admit,” she sniffed. Her eyes darted to the sudden sound in the closet. A shuffling sound followed by a low moan. Doctor Alder glanced over his shoulder and looked back at her.

“Why—why don’t you explain to me what happened to your parents, Holland,” Doctor Alder said, another glance over his shoulder as more shuffling made itself known.

“House fire.”

“And where were you?” Doctor Alder sat upright, half his face was on her and the other focused on the soft sounds that escaped the closet door.

“I was—I was out.”

“Out where, Holland?”

“I don’t know, I was out with friends, I think.” She shook her head. “It was ten years ago—”

“You lost both your parents that night; some don’t forget a night like that.”

“I was at a party my parents didn’t know about. Why does this matter?” She wiped her hands on her thighs, relieving some of their moisture.

“When asked where you were, many of your friends said you went missing from the party,” Doctor Alder said, glancing at her file on the table.

“I was fucking my boyfriend at the time it happened.” She grimaced thinking of her ex-boyfriend; his brown hair and brown eyes matched his dirty soul.

“That isn’t what his statement says.”

“Well, he lied. We shouldn’t have been fucking in the first place.”

“Is that what you believe?” Doctor Alder narrowed his eyes.

“Why does no one ever listen to me when I tell them about Mr. Top Hat? Every time I open up about him, people think I’m insane, but if they just *listened*, truly *listened*, maybe bad things wouldn’t happen to those who call me crazy.” She gawked at the brick wall again, its calming feeling relaxing her angered state.

The shuffling turned to a banging at the closet door. Doctor Alder stood and began to make his way to it. She felt her throat tighten, that familiar feeling seeping in again: the hair on the back of her neck rising, shivers that spread through her...her heart thudded in her chest as she felt bile rise, unable to release it.

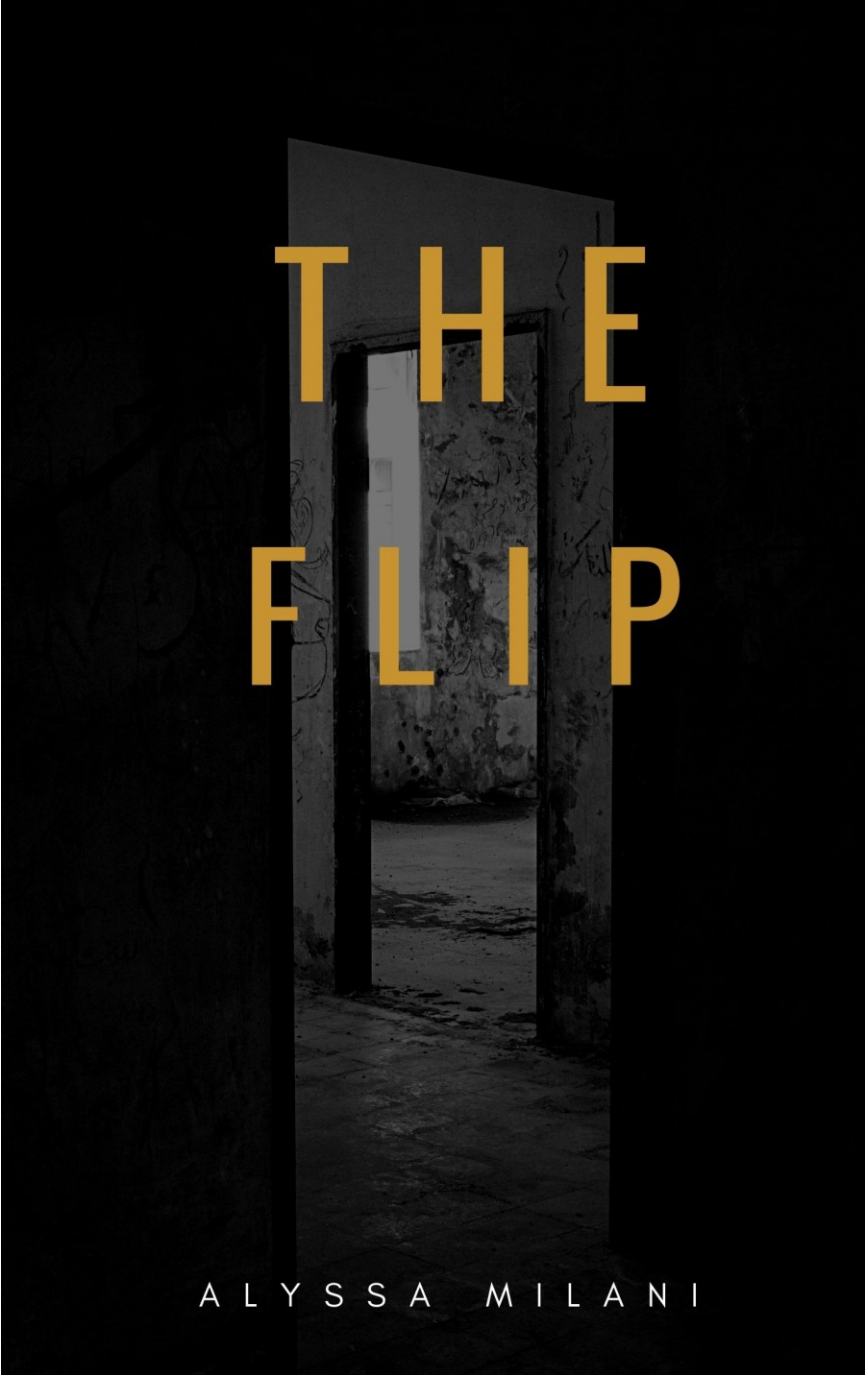
“No,” she whimpered. “Don’t open that door.”

“What’s behind this door, Holland, is just a figment of your imagination,” Doctor Alder said. Holland rose from her seat, slowly backing away into the large shelving unit behind her. His hand reached the door knob and slowly turned. To her surprise, nothing was behind it. Simply a dark closet with a couple of hanging coats and a few boxes to its side. “I told you, Holland. There is nothing here.”

Her eyes welled with tears as a shadow loomed over Doctor Alder. He turned slowly away from her and gawked at the shadow with such fright, the color washed from his face. Mr. Top Hat stood perfectly still in the opening of the closet, his hands held together in front of him as if he were holding a cane. She cried softly, trying to disappear within the unit. Doctor Alder stuttered out some words, muttered others as Mr. Top Hat’s eyes glowed a piercing yellow, the blackness of the pupils swallowing him whole.

“Leave him alone!” she yelled.

But no one ever listened.



THE
FLIP

A L Y S S A M I L A N I



CHAPTER SIX
THE FLIP

Ten Years Ago.

With the click of the lock, the large, solid wooden door decorated in stained glass creaked open and a wave of dust poured out. The kind of dust that proved no one had really entered in more than a hot minute. The dust motes glistened in the morning sun, beaming down onto the neighborhood. It was a quaint little area, something unusual for our mother's taste. Every house appeared the same, with slight differences. Some had shutters, some had flower gardens and trees, most had a porch swing or a bench of some sort. Our house was rustic, the wood panels were painted an olive green with a yellowish trim surrounding it. It wasn't the worst home she'd purchased, but it was definitely the most artistic. The motifs around the porch, the fifties styled brick steps, the dead plants that decorated the sides of the home. With a flick of her hair, our mother, Alice, sniffed. She looked mischievously proud of her purchase, and excited to show us her plans. She smiled at

us; I knew that smile. I did not like that smile. That was the smile of a mad woman about to pour scolding water onto her children.

“Home sweet home,” she said, and with a click of her heels, she stepped into the seemingly rotting corpse she purchased for an amazing deal. With her witty charm, she was able to drive the sellers down to a price no one would believe possible in that neighborhood. It was always her usual spiel, she’d either go to the open house in a very low-cut top, batting her lashes at the real estate broker or do the same at the auction. It was always the same old shit with her, and yet it worked; she always got her way, even when she had a fuck head of a husband calling all the shots.

I sighed heavily and looked to Miles and Pete, my adoring brothers who looked nothing alike. Miles had a short stature, dirty blond hair and dark blue eyes, whereas Pete was tall and lanky with dark brown, wavy hair he grew out past his shoulders and matching brown eyes. Miles and I were similar in a way, though Pete and I were too. I had darker hair than Miles, but lighter than Pete’s, just as wavy, and my eyes were a bright green. I want to say we got our distinct looks from our father, but I can’t even remember his face.

I nodded at my brothers sarcastically, and followed Alice over the threshold into the dust pit. I felt a cloud surround me, a cloud of regret, a cloud of shame; something told me not to return to them, something told me to run away again, and yet there I was standing in another corpse of a house with the woman I despised and the boys I loved so dearly. There were reasons why I had left, and reasons why I came back; yet I still felt utterly panicked the more time I spent in the same old routine.

The stench of stagnant water slapped us in the face, stale air mostly. My eyes searched the area, taking in our new residence. Most of the furniture was covered with sheets. Though it seemed no one had been there, footprints spread along the floors in the dust, leading up and down the hall and to the staircase beside us.

“Isn’t it perfect,” she went on. “Such a solid foundation. Just needs a little tweaking. I’m thinking I could get it done by June.”

“Then we up and move, and do it all over again,” I rolled my eyes and fixed the bag strap draping off my shoulder.

“Not this time, Cassie. This will be our forever home,” Alice smiled.

I nodded because I didn't know what else to do. June was her delivery date, a hard date she set for herself since we were already in the midst of April and now promising us our forever home again. If I had a dollar for every time she said that.

The pit of my stomach was in knots, my decision to return still lingered on whether or not it was the right thing to do. If I put them in danger by returning.

"For real?" Miles asked excitedly. "You're not just saying it this time?"

"I'm not just saying it," she smiled and stepped toward him, cupping his slightly bearded face—something he picked up to impress a lady friend, then ended up keeping after they moved out of state and away from her.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Pete said and peered at the staircase. "Do we each get our own rooms at least?"

"Master's mine, but yes, you do," Alice smiled and shrugged a shoulder. "Cleaners were in yesterday and attacked the upstairs, they should be in this afternoon to attack the first floor."

"How'd they get in?" Miles asked.

"There's a side door for service folk," Alice gave a lopsided grin.

"And the movers?" I asked, now understanding the array of footprints.

"Should be here soon. Why don't you go pick out your rooms?" she grinned.

"Might as well," I sighed, turning to my brothers. "Let's go, boys."

We marched up the wooden steps draped in a colorful carpet, its green stood out amongst the array of colors. The stale smell was overlaid with the scent of lemon and bleach, and it infiltrated my nostrils the further we climbed. I thought I would feel excited, happy even, to be away from the nightmares I endured, but I wasn't. I was more frightened than ever to be there; more nervous to be around the people I felt I had disappointed.

The floors were shining under the long rug that followed the carpet on the staircase, the furniture that was brought in was polished and light shone in from the open doors. Even though the upper floor was cleaned, dust motes still circled in the air.

“Think she means it this time?” Pete asked, stopping at the top of the stairs and looking down at us.

“One can only hope, bud,” Miles said and stepped past him, poking his head into the room by the staircase. “Guess you can take this one.”

With a heavy thud, Pete dropped his bag into the room. Miles continued to the room beside it and did the same. I, on the other hand, looked behind me down the dust filled hallway at the bottom of the stairs. The front door was just out of reach, but I couldn’t do it to those boys, I couldn’t leave them, not again.

Our mother had been flipping homes since I was five years old, Miles was a newborn and Pete wouldn’t be born for another three years. I can’t even remember how it started. Miles and I share a father and he left us just days after Miles was born. I remember very little about our father, even less any time I ask Alice because she always brushes us off trying to get me to forget him like she “forgot” him. Alice wasn’t the easiest person to get along with. We were always living out of suitcases, moving from one shithole apartment or house to the next. She owed a lot of people a lot of money, and the people she owed money were not the kind of people you’d take home to meet your parents. I remember many debt collectors coming around, their guns and tattoos frightened me, and they didn’t care if children were around, either. If you owed money, they would collect it any way they could. There were times Miles and I would have to hide at our aunt’s house so Alice could figure out a way to pay for her debts...I could only imagine how she did it; frankly, I did not want to know. Time and time again, I was forced to act as my brother’s mother, making sure he was fed, safe, and clothed. When she met Pete’s dad, Martin, things changed and we actually had money. They started by investing in a timeshare and rented it out to people. When she thought she could tackle more, Martin bought her a rundown shack to rebuild, and she did. She thought it would be fun to continue doing it, purchase one home then fix it up and sell it, then move on to the next. Of course, with the money from Martin at the time she had no complaints, and we didn’t have to live in the crappy apartments anymore...but when things between her and Martin started getting rocky, Alice began buying shittier and shittier homes and we ended up having to pack up our lives every time she bought a new one. At first it

was exciting, we got to visit all these different homes, got new rooms—forced to share rooms with baby brothers—and experience new towns and cities. A lot of the time Alice’s sister would watch us, she’d drive us to school, pick us up after school, and on weekends we’d usually hang out either at her house or play on the streets. That happened less and less the further we lived from her. Eventually, she stopped coming around and all the responsibilities fell on me. Things changed when I became a teenager because I didn’t want to move from house to house anymore. I didn’t feel it was right to have all the responsibilities of a mother at such a young age. I got myself a job and worked as hard as I could to get into a college far away from Alice. I hated leaving Miles and Pete, but I had to for my own sanity. Every chance they had, they came to visit me. When Miles graduated high school, he chose to stay with Alice and work for her. I don’t blame him, it was hard work with good pay. After horrid events, I chose to come back...I could blame it on my terrible break up, I could blame it on the job I quit, I could blame it on the fact I missed my brothers so much...but in the end, it was my choice to come back.

I inhaled sharply and continued up the staircase. Pete flung himself on the bed and turned his music up, the vibrating beats escaped his headphones. One door over, Miles opened his bag and started slowly unpacking. I walked to the door beside Miles’s, the last door on the left, and stepped into the large room. A naked bed resided against the center wall, two large doors were on my left, (one of them is slightly open, revealing a semi-walk-in closet), and a beautiful bay window overlooked the neighbor’s yard. I stepped over to the window, adjusting the cushion, and placed my bag onto it. To my delight, the neighbour was outside raking his lawn, the muscles of his back moving under his tight shirt as he attacked the grass. Perhaps being back wasn’t going to be so bad after all. I glanced once more at the neighbour before I studied the blue room I stood in. *What am I getting myself into?*

“Guys, the movers are here,” Alice yelled from downstairs.

I sighed and headed for the staircase. Miles popped his head out and nodded at me, his eyes telling me his feelings. *I’m tired of this Cassie, this better be the last one, when will it ever end...* something like that. Even though he worked for Alice, it wasn’t what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. Her manipulation got the better of him, that I knew for sure.

She already lost one child to her stupidity, she surely didn't want to lose the other two.

I tousled his dirty blond hair and draped my arm over his shoulders. He chuckled slightly and we walked down the steps together.

"What's missing this time?" I cackled.

"Hopefully nothing of mine," Miles sighed.

"Where's your brother?" Alice asked us.

"Present and accounted for," I joked as I removed my arm from around Miles's shoulders.

"I meant Pete," Alice groaned.

"He's listening to his music," Miles said and took his final step off the stairs and peered out the front door.

"Miles, can you direct the movers where the boxes go once they're upstairs; Cassie I want you to—"

"Mom, let me stop you there. I'm starving, so I'm going to the grocery store to pick up food. Also, can I borrow the car to go to the grocery store to be able to pick up said food?" I interrupted her with a smile.

"Ugh, fine," Alice face palmed her forehead, annoyance gleaming. "Take Pete with you."

"Sure thang," I said in a sing-songy way and marched up the stairs again to get Pete.

"What am I going to do with her?" Alice asked Miles.

"It's good to have her back, Mom," Miles grinned and stepped out of our new home to help the movers with the array of boxes we called our life. Of course, much of my things were in suitcases, some in a couple of boxes that a friend of mine sent via poste from my place in New York.

"Petey," I yelled, as he was still lying on his bed, tapping away at the music. "PETE!"

He glanced at me then nodded in my direction.

"What's up?"

"C'mon, we're going to get groceries," I said and motioned for him to get up.

"Nah, I'm good here," Pete said and sat up to fix his headphones.

"Hey, it's either you come with me or be directed by Mom and the movers."

"Fine," Pete groaned and rose to his feet. "Only if we buy—"

“I’m not buying you alcohol.”

“But?”

“Let’s go, kiddo,” I said as I headed for the staircase again.

The car keys rested on the banister, along with a couple of hundred-dollar bills. *Well, thanks Alice*, I thought with a grin. I twirled the keys around my finger as I gazed at Pete skipping down the staircase, teenage angst oozing out of him. He fixed a burgundy tuque on his head, and adjusted his black jacket with a grin.

He had changed so much over the years, less of a child and slowly becoming a man. Miles had always had a strong jawline, and looked older than he was from a young age, but Pete had a young look about him and I absolutely loved that. I missed so much when I left, I missed watching him grow, I missed having his first beer with him, his first hit...he now smoked heavily, something our mother was oblivious to, and partied more than any eighteen-year-old should. It should have bothered me, but it didn’t. I wanted nothing more than to see these boys happy.

As we stepped out into the morning sun, I noticed the temperature had already risen since we arrived; summer was fast approaching. The movers had backed their truck into the driveway and added a ramp directly to the front steps. I moved around them and walked across the lawn to our car, noticing a handsome gentleman pulling into the neighbor’s home. The front door opened and the man I saw earlier, who was now shirtless, stepped out; his large black glasses hid his eyes. *Am I being Punk’d?* I thought as the first handsome man approached the other and handed him a duffle bag. Words were exchanged between the two, smiles crept across their faces, but I was unable to hear what they were saying. With a nod, the door closed shortly after and the first man made his way back to his shining black car. I felt like a stalker, watching my next victim. The man reached his door handle and glanced up, flashing his baby blues at me. I grinned, biting my lower lip, as he opened his car door. He smirked slightly, and saluted me before I opened my car door as well. Moving back wasn’t going to be as terrible as I imagined it would be.

*

“Good night,” Alice said as I was fixing the comforter on my bed.

“Jesus, Mom! You scared me,” I said, my heart thudding in my chest.

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” she chuckled. “Your brothers are settled in; remember, I have people coming early tomorrow morning—”

“I know, I know,” I nodded. “I remember the drill.”

“Thank you,” Alice grinned.

“For what?” I chuckled slightly.

“For coming home.”

Alice closed my door softly, the light from the hallway pooling in around the edges. She thanked me? That was a first. I shook my head in disbelief and I sat on my bed, dropping myself back. My eyes adjusted to the stucco ceiling, wondering why on earth I decided to return to her madness. I missed my brothers, they were honestly the loves of my life, yet for some reason or another, I had the sudden urge to disappear in the middle of the night. I was a coward, scared of the inevitable. Scared I would be enslaved in her web of lies and there was no escaping; even if I wanted to, there was never any escape, even when I was on the other side of the country, she managed to bring her bullshit to me.

Times weren’t always easy in the Chastain household—well, whichever house we were living in at the time—my mother, being a single mother, expected a lot from me. Miles and I were only five years apart, so it was hard for me to try and get anything done without him up my ass asking to play. Every time I tried to do something, there he was, waiting for me to bring him along. Going out as a teenager wasn’t any easier either, I always had to sneak out when he was asleep, and make sure my shifts at work were solely evening to night shifts so he wouldn’t miss me as much. Suffice it to say, it was always my job to bring them home from school and be sure breakfast, lunch, and dinner was made for them. I was a better mother to them than ours will ever be, and I knew they saw it that way. Being back home felt like I had to be their mother all over again and I didn’t want to do that, I just wanted to get away from the reality of what my life truly was.

My eyes grew heavy, and within moments, everything drifted off around me...my life back home, my brothers, our old life, and the fear that grew the longer I was home. With a heavy sigh, I fell into a deep slumber.

*

“Cassie, Cassie!” Miles whispered, shaking me awake. “Cassie, please!”

“Go away,” I groaned, and rolled over.

“Please wake up,” Pete pleaded.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, annoyed.

I sat upright and rubbed my eyes, studying their faces. Miles and Pete looked terrified; Pete’s pale face was a shade lighter and Miles’s eyes were reddened.

“There’s someone in the house,” Miles whispered.

“What?” I asked, slight panic rising within me.

“I saw someone in my room,” Pete said, then turned to Miles. “When I turned on the light, it’s like they disappeared—”

“And my window was wide open. I hadn’t even tried to open my window yet,” Miles said. Pete folded his arms, his dark brown eyes full of fright and helplessness.

“Where’s Mom?” I asked and hit the home button on my phone; the time read two-thirty in the morning.

“We came to you first,” Pete shrugged. I tossed my legs off the edge of the bed and stretched out my spine. And so it began.

A large clatter echoed through the house, followed by shuffling, as though someone were making their way up the staircase. I put my finger to my lips mouthing *shh* to my brothers, and tiptoed toward the door of my room. My heart thudded violently it was our first night in our new home, and we didn’t need something to taint our first evening in our forever home. Tainting a first evening called for horrible things to follow. It was like the Johnson’s Villa. Alice purchased it eight years ago. Our first night in that house started with an electrical fire in the kitchen, condemning us from escaping through the front door. The home was saved, our things were saved, but the flip was nothing but a disaster there on out. The paint ordered was the wrong color, the pay checks to the workers bounced, and no matter what was hammered into the wall, it never held.

I took a deep, shuddering breath and poked my head out over the threshold; to my dismay, a large shadow moved into Miles’s room. Sheer panic filled my insides, but I had to stay strong for my brothers.

“Something just went into your room,” I whispered to Miles.

“Should we wake Mom up?” Pete asked.

“Don’t bother,” Miles said, clenching his fists.

“Okay, c’mon,” I said, trying to sound tougher than I was. “Three against one ain’t so bad.”

I tiptoed into the hallway and slowly made my way to Miles's room, with the two of them following behind. The shadow loomed beside Miles's bed with his phone illuminated in the shadow's hands, his partially lit face unrecognizable. I went to take another step toward the light switch, when Miles's foot hit a squeaky floorboard and the shadow turned in our direction, dropping the phone and lunging for the open window. I scurried toward the open window as Miles flicked the light on. The cool, early morning breeze blew my hair around the front of my face as I poked my head out the window, my eyes darted from one side to the other, trying to see what was truly out there...but there was nothing.

"You saw it, right?" Pete said, eyes widened.

"What the fuck was he doing with my phone?" Miles picked it up off the ground, then groaned. "Cracked my *fuckin'* screen."

"This house better not be fucking haunted," I clenched my jaw.

"They were trying to install something," Pete pointed to Miles' cracked phone. "Look."

Pete peeled off a small device barely visible from the corner of the screen and the phone glitched slightly. Pete was a tech nerd, he loved nothing more than to hack into neighbour's computers or internet connections. He liked taking things apart and putting them back together and studied whatever he could to learn different types of coding.

"What is it?" Miles asked.

"I don't know. Some kind of tracker maybe? Or listening device?" Pete shrugged.

"Why the fuck—"

"Pete, check your phone too," I said and looked down at the tiny, barely visible, device on Miles's fingertip.

I gawked at the open window and wondered what on earth Alice had gotten herself into. It wasn't the first time she was involved with something that put our lives at risk for her own selfish needs. It started with loan sharks, then when she was serious with Martin, mobsters were involved in her investments. I didn't know how it ended, or if it had truly ended. All I knew was that by the time I left, Martin had paid most of her debts off. As kids, we've seen our fair share of collectors breaking into our home to take what was owned to them. It wouldn't have been the first we've had someone sneak into our home at night, and observing our circumstances, it definitely wouldn't be the last.

I pushed the window shut and made sure to secure the latch. Pete returned and shook his head; I bit the inner part of my lip wondering what on earth was really going on, and who the heck had broken into our home.

“Should we tell Mom now?” Pete insisted.

“No, no use in worrying her,” I said, still peering out the window. “Probably nothing, right?”

“Or it’s starting again,” Miles said, placing his phone on his nightstand.

“Let’s hope not,” I finally turned back to my brothers. “C’mon, my bed is big enough for all of us, it’ll be like old times.”

“Yeah,” Miles chuckled. Pete nodded in agreement.

I looked down the darkened staircase; my eyes were playing mean tricks on me as more shadows stretched from below. They crawled up the wall, swaying side to side. I tried to direct my brother’s attentions away from the trickery. My shuddered breathing moved through my ears as we slowly made our way back to my room. I glanced over my shoulder every so often, and the shadows remained.

Miles made sure the windows were locked and I secured the door behind me as I observed my tired brothers tuck themselves into my bed, their eyes growing heavy the moment their heads hit the pillows. I slid in next to Miles and lifted the cover over my shoulder, unable to bring myself to close my eyes. I watched my closed door until I no longer remember the remainder of the night.

- 2

I peeled a banana as I yawned myself awake. Our mother knew nothing of the events from the night prior; she knew nothing and we intended to keep it that way. If we told her, she’d come up with an excuse as to why she had nothing to do with it, why it was solely our imaginations and point fingers at my occasional pot smoking.

Alice cracked a few eggs into a bowl and added milk before she whisked it. I had to admit, I missed those breakfasts...she tried to be a mother at least once a week growing up and would surprise us with breakfast in bed. Her pancakes were always made from scratch, and the fruit was always the freshest. It was her smile that would make us happy; her smile showed she wanted to be there, that she wanted us and wanted

to be a family. Those eyes, on the other hand, they told a completely different story.

On that particular morning, she was cooking scrambled eggs and bacon; the smoky scent blasted throughout the seemingly deserted home. I was too tired to know what her intentions were, if she had any ulterior motives for making us breakfast, that is.

“Did you guys have a late night? You all look exhausted,” Alice said, pouring the egg mix into the hot pan.

“Something like that,” I took a bite out of my banana and adjusted my white crop top.

The doorbell sounded followed by a loud crackling tune that stung our eardrums. It moved through the home like the echoes of a dying animal.

“What the hell is that?” Pete said.

“That would be the doorbell...before you say anything it *is* on the to-do list,” Alice jeered.

“Sounds like something’s dying,” I joked. Miles and Pete chuckled.

“Oh, stop it,” Alice wrinkled her nose. “For that, you go answer it.”

I rolled my eyes and moved more peel down the banana. The doorbell went off again, sending its sonorous tune throughout the home once more.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’m coming,” I said, my slippers dragging through the living room. I opened the solid wood door and two tall, handsome men stood before it with grins appearing on their faces—the same handsome men I saw next door. “Well, damn. And it’s not even my birthday yet.”

“You’re not Alice,” the seemingly older of the two announced, his salt and pepper hair shining in the morning sun.

“I certainly am not,” I tilted my head giving him and the man beside him a once over.

“I’m Colin, and this is my brother Corbin. We live next door, actually.”

“Lucky me,” I smirked. Corbin looked down and smiled.

“Alice told us to be here for eight-thirty to give us a look around,” Colin said, adjusting his button shirt.

I smirked and took a seductive bite out of the banana, licking my lips as I made eye contact with Corbin. His bright blue eyes sparkled as they met mine; his shadowed beard was perfectly coiffed to match his spiked light brown hair. Colin was his opposite, he was slightly taller with sprinkled gray and brown hair, a cleanly shaven face and large square glasses that hid his hazel eyes, though his features were chiselled none the less.

“You guys good at what you do?” I asked.

“I’d say,” Corbin blurted out the same time as Colin.

“You can always take a look at our portfolio,” Colin added.

“Maybe,” I gave Corbin a once over.

“Cassie,” my mother said, opening the door more. “Go watch the food.”

With a satisfied grin, I turned away from them, giving one last glance over my shoulder at Corbin before they were out of sight. A little eye candy never hurt anyone, especially knowing I’d be stuck at home for a while.

“Alice?” Colin chuckled.

“Yes, good morning,” she smiled embarrassingly. “My daughter’s a little firecracker.”

“That’s alright,” Corbin said, their voices growing fainter the further I walked into the house. A smile crept onto my face, a smile I thought I’d lost forever.

“Holy fuck, it’s like Christmas morning,” I said as I entered the kitchen.

“What do you mean?” Miles asked, buttering toast.

“The workers Mom hired...goddamn,” I raised an eyebrow and cocked my head. “One of them will be my next conquest.”

“Finally over Everett?” Pete asked.

“Been over that dick for a while now,” I narrowed my eyes trying to disguise the hatred I had toward my ex, the pain he caused me, and the utter disgust his name brought me.

I made my way closer to the stove and moved the eggs around, readying to take them out of the pan, realizing that yet again, I was taking over making breakfast. For years that had been my role, her daughter as the stand in mother to her kids. It bothered me to my core, but there was nothing I could do about it. I loved those boys more than life itself, and

even though I complained about my own childhood, knowing they were there with me through it all somehow made it better. I pressed onward, leaving the past where it should be left. I came back for a reason and I wouldn't let her draw me into her schemes any more. Even if it meant crushing their little hearts.

Voices moved throughout the home, Alice explaining the rooms they were in, what she wanted done, and how she wanted it done. Colin was doing most of the talking, asking question after question. She informed them that they would get paid half now and half when the job was completed—on her given deadline of just shy of two and a half months. Colin advised her that with his crew, anything was possible.

“Looks like your conquests are coming in,” Pete whispered.

“What—ow!” I snapped as bacon grease splattered from the pan and onto my exposed stomach. “Motherf—”

“Cassie!” Alice's eyes widened. Miles chuckled softly as I flipped the bacon once more. “These are my boys: Miles, and my youngest, Pete.”

“Cool sweater man,” Pete said to Corbin, who sported a black hoodie with a grey print on the front of it, I assumed it was a band of some sort.

“Thanks,” Corbin grinned, giving me a once over.

“You've met Cassie already,” Alice said and the brothers nodded.

“We'll definitely be getting to know each other better,” I winked at Miles and dropped bacon onto a platter. He chuckled, shaking his head.

“Sometimes I wonder what I'm going to do with you,” Alice placed a hand to her head.

“And that's why I'm your favorite,” I chuckled, peering over at Pete who was doing the same. Colin and Corbin smiled and Corbin's blue eyes met mine.

“Alright, we will finish off the tour and then sit down for breakfast,” Alice sighed. There was the ulterior motive I'd suspected about to this breakfast. “The kitchen is more or less staying the same, the cabinets will be sanded and painted an off-white. The counter tops will be removed and black granite will replace it. The floors will remain the same; we'll take a weekend away so all the floors can be sanded and re-varnished...”

She continued through the home explaining her various wants and desires for the home itself. I winked at Corbin once more as he followed Colin out of the kitchen. Corbin smirked, his cheeks turning a light shade of pink.

“Have you chosen one yet?” Miles joked.

“Let things play out,” I shrugged a shoulder, realizing it had been a while since I’d been with someone. After the way my relationship with Everett ended, no sane woman would want another man in her life for a long while. “Probably the blue-eyed one.”

“You’re crazy,” Pete said and picked at the eggs on the platter.

“You love me,” I smiled and tossed more bacon onto the platter. “You heard Mom; they’re having breakfast with us.”

“Lucky you,” Miles chuckled.

“C’mon set the table,” I laughed.

Alice’s heavy footfalls moved toward the staircase and up to the bedrooms. We weren’t messy children, I raised my brothers to keep their room like they keep their bodies, with respect and cleanliness. Every morning they’d make their beds and be sure to toss their clothes into the laundry bin instead of beside it. Pete had the hardest time understanding that. He got his messiness from Martin, that was a given. The amount of times I had to clean up after that scumbag of a step-father was unbelievable. Alice was no different. She lived in homes under renovation just as long as we did, and a little dirt never truly bothered her until it was time to show off her masterpieces, then she became the female equivalent of Mr. Clean.

“Want me to cut up the strawberries?” Miles asked.

“Wash ‘em first,” I said, picking at the bacon.

“Fuck, I’m starving,” Pete groaned.

“You smoke this morning?” I asked, wondering if I should be concerned or not. He had been lighting up more often since moving into the house.

“Kinda,” Pete shrugged. “Didn’t know we’d have company.”

“Guess she really wants to make this our forever home, huh?” I said, gazing at the opening of the kitchen that overlooked part of the corridor and the living room.

Laughter pooled in from the upper floor as they began making their way back to the kitchen, Alice’s fake laugh forced her mouth to be

open wider than humanly possible. I sat at the round table beside Miles and Pete beside him, waiting impatiently for her to bring them in for breakfast.

“The banister is still in fairly good condition” Alice said.

“Nothing a little sanding and staining won’t fix,” Colin grinned.

“Ah, kids,” she said with a smile, then looked back at Corbin and Colin. “Come sit, please.”

“Thanks,” Colin said and sat in one of the chairs. Corbin sat beside him, which happened to be directly next to me.

“Cassie, the orange juice please,” Alice said and sat in between Colin and Pete.

I sighed as I stood and snagged the jug of orange juice from the fridge, placing it directly in front of her. She then went on to tell them about our family, our life...mainly about how she was a working mother and how she raised her kids while also starting her own house flipping business. I picked at my food mostly, trying to bite my tongue as much as I could knowing full well if it weren’t for me, those boys would be in a foster home back in some city we had lived in for mere months.

“We have a couple other guys who work with us,” Colin said. “They’re top of the line, I assure you. We’ve worked as a team for a few years now. Have about half a dozen full home renovations under our belt, and a bunch of specified renos too.”

“Well, I really did enjoy your portfolio,” Alice smiled and looked up at me. “Reason why I hired you over the phone.”

My foot accidentally tapped Corbin’s leg and I mouthed *sorry* to him. He smiled, his eyes drinking me in and mouthed *it’s fine*. His thick eyebrows shaped his face, those soft lips smirked at me and I bit my lower lip, trying to distract myself. I brought a strawberry to my mouth to hide my smile. Something terribly intense was going to begin, and soon.

“I’ll draw up the contracts and we can start whenever you need us to,” Colin said wiping his mouth on a napkin. “Helps we live right next door so there won’t be any delays.”

“Great,” Alice smiled.

“You both live right next door?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Corbin said. “Along with a few other guys.”

“The workers I presume?”

“Mhm,” Corbin nodded trying to hide the smile on his face now. He sure was handsome.

Alice thanked them for coming over, and insisted they start as soon as they were ready. Colin smiled at her and asked if they could bring over their tools that afternoon so they could get a quick start on measuring anything they needed. Lo and behold, they were already bringing their tools and equipment into our new home before lunch hour. We were introduced to the other workers as well, Ethan, Denis, and Zak were the three that also lived with Corbin and Colin. They informed us that from time to time there would be an additional set of workers who would come in that specialized in certain things and they'd be sure to design something Alice would enjoy.

*

“Cassie! Pete! Get down here right now!” Alice yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

Hammering and sawing echoed behind her angered voice; nearly a week had gone by and work in the house was progressing nicely. Corbin, on the other hand, hadn't tried to make a move yet. I had to wonder if he was shy or if I hadn't given him enough openings to do anything, or maybe it was me?

Alice hollered again, causing a deep agony to grow in the pit of my stomach. It could have only meant one thing, either she found my pot or she was going to accuse me of doing something I didn't do. I sighed heavily and I slumped into my bed, ignoring her calls.

I was the blame for everything growing up. In her defence I was the eldest, but that did not mean it was always my fault. A plate broke in the sink, Cassie did it. Water leaked out of the tub I wasn't even bathing in, Cassie's fault for filling it up too much. Dinner is burnt, dinner I never prepared, Cassie's fault for not checking on it...the list goes on.

“Did you hear Mom?” Pete poked his head into my room.

“I did, I'm just choosing to ignore her.”

“What if it's a food run? We can get out of this hell-hole for a little,” Pete stepped into my room and took my hand. “C'mon, Cass.”

“Ugh.”

Pete pulled me off my bed and I followed him down the hallway, watching as he skipped down the steps. I hesitantly made my way down

as well, expecting her to give me an earful in front of the new workers. Just my luck, right?

“What’s up, Ma?” Pete asked as he jumped off the last step.

Her eyes shifted to me as I made my way behind him. Her hands turned into fists, and adjusted on her hips. I exhaled sharply, bracing for impact, as I gawked up at Miles in the living room sanding the wainscoting, and beside him was Corbin doing the same. His blue eyes shifted to mine, and I felt my face burn up, turning a brighter shade of pink.

“Cassie,” Alice started, her tone menacing.

“What’re you accusing me of now?” I exhaled sharply, already tired of the bullshit that seemed to be starting all over again.

“I had files on the counter in the kitchen, I left them there last night and well, they’re not there this morning,” Alice stated.

“And I’m supposed to know where they are?” I folded my arms, shooting a look through her skull.

“I didn’t see any folders, Ma,” Pete said looking to me. I knew that look, he wanted to tell her about the intruder on our first night.

“Are you sure?” Alice demanded, her gaze still on me. Miles brushed his hands on his legs and made his way over to us.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Mom’s accusing me of taking something I didn’t even know existed,” I raised my eyebrows.

“Where is it Cassie?” she demanded.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, enunciating the words as clearly as I could.

“Mom, if she doesn’t know, she doesn’t know,” Miles said.

“You need to stop defending her for everything she does. Actions have consequences,” Alice raised her voice. Everyone nearby glanced up at us, knowing full well there was a show about to start.

“Jesus Christ!” I gritted my teeth. “I’m back for two fuckin’ months, and shit is already back to the way it was.”

“You better watch your mouth—”

“Or what? You’ll wash it out with soap,” I clenched my jaw and made my way back up the stairs.

“Cass—”

“Jeez, she didn’t do it, Ma,” Pete scoffed and followed me.

“Mom, what the hell?” Miles said.

“Watch yourself,” Alice’s nostrils flared.

“What’s in the folder that’s so important you have to cause a scene?” Miles pushed his lips together.

“Mind your business and get back to work,” Alice stormed out the front door.

I stomped into my room, readying myself to slam the door when Pete’s foot stopped me, Miles not too far behind him. I rolled my eyes and fell back onto my bed, taking my phone from beside me as I did. Another missing item blamed on me. Whatever was in that folder was definitely important and I had to find out what it was, yet I was scared. Scared because I knew she got herself into something, some illegal shit that would put one or all of us in danger.

“Hope everyone enjoyed the show,” I sighed, embarrassed that the workers had to see the way she treated me, especially Corbin.

“Don’t worry about it, Cassie, if they say anything, I’ll explain how psychotic our mother has become,” Miles chuckled.

“Become? Fuck, always *was*,” I shook my head. Pete laid down beside me, his arm behind his head while the other tapped on his stomach.

“You think that shadow from the other night took Mom’s things?” Pete asked. Miles sat at the edge of the bed beside me, his hand on my leg, reassuring me everything would be okay. There wasn’t a word for how badly I missed these boys and how much I loved them.

“I still don’t know if we were all just high and imaging it,” Miles said.

“Your screen is cracked, isn’t it?” Pete added, widening his eyes.

“What the fuck has Mom got herself into this time?” I said, my gaze focusing on the stucco ceiling above me.

“Martin’s been around more often lately,” Miles admitted. “A lot more often.”

“God,” I frowned. “I hate that fuckin’ guy.”

Martin never truly liked me. To be honest, I wasn’t the easiest five-year-old to manage and I wouldn’t like myself either if I had met me then. I was very bossy, sassy, overprotective of Miles, and made sure everything had to go my way. Martin did not like that and would constantly tell me off or try to put me in my place. Time and time again,

he'd slap me and throw me in my room. Alice never said anything and agreed with whatever parental rule he put in place, including teaching me how to act around random people she brought into our lives with his own version of discipline. When Pete was born, things changed drastically and he wouldn't let me anywhere near the baby. The only time I ever held him was when he woke up in the middle of the night and both Alice and Martin were too drunk to feed or change him. Even though Alice and Martin separated, he was always in our lives making a mockery of himself and constantly trying to undermine me any way he could.

"Don't we all," Pete chuckled.

"How's the work, by the way?" I asked trying to divert the attention from my anger.

"So far, so good. Everything's on schedule, which helps," Miles shrugged.

"The guys fun to work with?" Pete asked.

"Yeah, actually," Miles chuckled. "You should hear some of the fucked-up stories Denis tells. Real sicko if you ask me."

"What's he say?" I asked curiously.

"Well, he was telling us this one story about this prostitute he picked up in some alley. She had one tooth and a deflated boob. He ended up fucking her over bags of garbage in the same alley," Miles chuckled. "I didn't hear the end of the story because Mom kind of interrupted us with another order."

"Jesus," I laughed.

"Who's the one with all the face tattoos?" Pete asked.

"Zak," Miles said. "Why?"

"He bummed a cigarette off me earlier. Hope Mom doesn't find out," Pete gulped.

"Nah, the guys are pretty chill," Miles tapped Pete's knee as he rose. "Corbin's been asking about you, Cass."

"Really?" I propped up on my elbows and smiled widely. "Asking what?"

"Well, if you had a boyfriend was one of the questions," Miles chuckled, making his way out of the room.

"Hey, not so fast, mister," I said.

"He thinks you're cute," Miles shrugged.

"Give me more than that."

“That’s all I got, sis,” he smiled. “Maybe he’ll make an honest woman out of you yet.”

“Oh, fuck off,” I laughed and fell back beside Pete as Miles moved out of sight.

“You really gonna go out with a worker again? Remember how pissed she was the last time,” Pete said.

“Yeah, well, the last time was a mistake. I know that now, he just used me for another notch in his belt.”

“You didn’t stop him.”

“I was a naïve sixteen-year-old virgin being hit on by someone a couple years older than me. Of course, I didn’t stop him,” I grinned. “God, Josh was really attractive, wasn’t he?”

“Ew, Cass,” Pete groaned and sat up.

“Good ol’ days,” I laughed and sighed. Pete glanced at me; I felt his eyes analyzing my face.

“C’mon, let’s get out of here before Mom barges in and accuses you of something else.”

“Where d’you wanna go?”

“For a drive,” Pete nodded with a smile.

“A drive,” I said.

“Anything to keep you from second guessing your return.”

“I’m not leaving you guys again. I promise you that.”

Pete smiled and helped me off the bed, I draped an arm over his shoulder as we walked down the hallway to the staircase; I knew a drive would help. We’d go in and out of streets, purposefully getting ourselves lost, just so we could sit and talk about everything and anything all at once. The drives we took would remind me of the heartache we experienced in childhood. When things got heavy at home, I would take the boys for a drive, no matter the time of day. We’d listen to music and feel free. Free of the suckling witch who kept us close for her own selfish needs.

- 3

“You think it was a good idea Mom bought this place?” Pete asked, smoke escaping his mouth.

“Are Mom’s ideas ever good?” I said, leaning forward and taking the blunt from his fingers.

We sat in my bay window with his knees to his chest, comfortably sitting on the cushion. I sat with one foot on the cushion and the other planted on the windowsill with my back to the wall and my bottom barely fitting on the windowsill itself. The warm afternoon sun beat down on us through the open window. It was hot for the end of April, not unusually hot that I had to cry about global warming, but warmer than any other given April I've experienced in San Francisco.

We tried our best to blow the smoke out the window, but were too lost in conversation to pay any attention.

"I'm so tired of it, Cassie," Pete said, fiddling with his thumb.

"Tell me about it, kid."

"Y'know, I never really understood why you left...but I get it now."

"I left not because of all the moving and the house work...I left because I was exhausted. Everything was on my plate, and it wasn't fair...God, I hate that I left you guys, but you didn't see what I saw...I'm sorry kiddo," I took another pull and passed him the blunt.

The things I saw weren't things a child should see. The debt collectors alone, with their guns and aggravated tones, were enough to cause psychological damage. Alice did nothing about it and let it happen, Miles was too young to remember any of it and Pete was only born when Alice and Martin started dealing with the mob. To think it all started with Alice needing money for her home flipping business. Martin was the cause of much of the new chaos, I was sure of that. Whatever was in the folder Alice was looking for the other day, I knew Martin had something to do with it. Martin and his smug doctor look, hiding the fact that he fucks teenagers behind Alice's back because he's a fuckin' lunatic and uses them so they can get their next fix. Money speaks volumes, and I knew Alice only kept Martin's sick and twisted self around because of his millions. Martin denies any accusations I may have made about his sexual escapades; he calls me a liar, a fake, and that I'm just looking for attention. Little does he know I saw it with my own eyes. I was just shy of my tenth birthday and I wanted to show my mother what I wanted for a birthday party I knew I was never going to get. Of course, I got something else that day, disgust for my step-father. He was in bed with a young boy, no older than seventeen, maybe even sixteen, all I knew was he barely had any hair on his body to begin with. Martin was snorting cocaine off of

his body when I cracked the door open. To my delight, that smug bastard never saw me, but I sure as hell had seen what he was up to. For months up until he left, different “patients” would enter our home and lock themselves up with Martin in his office. Silent moans and laughter would escape, but nothing more than that. Whenever they left, Martin’s eyes would be bloodshot and a disturbing smirk would always appear on his face. There weren’t enough words to describe how much I hated that man.

Smoke escaped my nostrils and I was feeling my body become less tense, my eyes closing slightly. I missed that feeling, it was the only escape I ever had throughout high school to help deal with all the extra responsibilities thrust upon me. Being a fifteen-year-old and raising two kids that weren’t my own was definitely not easy. I made it work when our mother couldn’t.

“You ever think your dad will come back?” Pete asked.

Miles and I shared the same father whereas Pete did not. Martin was the polar opposite of mine. Martin was a doctor, he worked more than he needed to and was always “on call”. My mother enjoyed his company, she introduced him to us shortly after my father left us...Miles wasn’t even a week old when our dad left...and not even a month after that did good ol’ Martin enter the picture. Not even three years later Pete was born and a year after that, Martin left. She kept him around and he was in and out of our lives for years; my guess was she discovered the trade system he had drugs for sex from teenagers. Throughout the years with Martin around, we didn’t have to live in the flips while Alice renovated them. We got to stay at Martin’s and we had our own rooms, no dust, no tools, no random men walking in and out of the house. Martin’s four-year run was a nice vacation, but it started all over again when he left her and she was stuck on her own once more. That was when our aunt helped when she could, but the further away Alice moved, the harder it was for us to see our aunt.

I didn’t know much about the father Miles and I shared. I barely remembered his face. Even though he was our dad, he wasn’t around much. I’m assuming Alice made sure of that. One distinct memory I do have with him was the day of my fifth birthday. He picked me up from school and brought me to a quaint little ice cream shack where we filled our bellies with extra-large sundaes and drove around the city until the

street lights turned on, listening to nothing but music. I could still smell the sandalwood scent of his aftershave every time I thought of him.

“Nah, I highly doubt that. It’s been twenty-one years since we last saw him...he didn’t even say goodbye for fuck’s sake.”

“Is it sad that I wish Martin would do the same?” Pete said handing me the blunt.

“No, I get it. But be happy he’s here, I guess,” I shrugged taking a long draw from the blunt, the smoke filling my lungs as I held it for a moment, feeling myself gasping for a breath before I exhaled deeply watching the smoke rise from my mouth and escape through the open window. Pete didn’t know Martin’s secret, frankly I didn’t know if anyone knew his secret. It was probably why he never approved of me as his step kid and only saw Miles as his child along with his actual son. I didn’t care, why would I care? Martin was a lying, cheating, manipulating scumbag that cared about no one but his own selfish desires. It was no wonder he and Alice got along.

“He’s picking me up later, I think Miles too,” Pete sniffed. To my delight, I wasn’t invited.

“Ah, get the house to myself,” I grinned.

“And do what? Watch the workers?” he chuckled.

“It wouldn’t be a bad idea,” I joked. “No, I’ll probably unpack, I guess.”

The light tapping on the door startled me. I placed the ashtray on the windowsill and held the blunt out the window in hopes it wasn’t Alice who had returned. The door opened slightly, and Miles’ head poked in with a smile.

“You know I can smell that out here,” Miles chuckled.

“Mom isn’t home ‘til later,” Pete said, leaning forward as I handed him the blunt.

“Come sit,” I said, opening my legs more so Miles could sit in between them.

He strode across the floor and plopped down, leaning into me. I placed my hand to his chest as Pete handed Miles the blunt. Smoke rose from his lips and he tried to blow it out the direction of the window, filing my line of vision instead.

“You gonna be alright here without us all afternoon?” Pete asked with a smirk.

“Oh, I’ll be perfectly fine,” I smiled. “I got me some eye candy walking around.”

“You’re such a weirdo,” Miles laughed.

“Surprised you’re not working today,” I said, patting Miles’ chest.

“Mom gave me the day to spend with Martin,” Miles shrugged.

“What’re you guys doing anyway?” I asked.

“Going for lunch or something,” Pete shrugged, looking down at his phone.

“What’re *you* gonna do?” Miles asked.

“I guess unpack?” I looked at the boxes that lined the wall opposite my bed. I was used to living out of boxes, which was why I kept them as such for the past week since we arrived. I didn’t even notice that I was even doing it. The stale smell of cardboard was always something that lingered, a smell I surely would never forget.

“Better be here when we get back,” Pete said stretching out one of his legs.

“I promise I’ll be here,” I said with a smile, unsure if I believed my own answer or not. “Where’d Mom go anyway?”

“No idea,” Pete inhaled.

“She left before any of us got up this morning,” Miles added.

“Mm,” I said, taking the blunt for one last drag.

“What?” Miles asked turning to look at me. I shook my head slightly. “What was that ‘mm’ about?”

“Nothing...” I lied. My instincts were on alert and I believed she was back to her funny business again.

“Cass—” Miles started but was interrupted by Pete’s phone ringing.

“Dad’s here,” Pete said rising to his feet.

“Alright,” I tousled Miles’ hair and looked up at Pete.

“Do you know something we don’t?” Miles pressed on.

“I don’t,” I smiled. “Love you both, and have fun if you can.”

“We’re not done with this talk,” Miles said.

“Love you,” I said.

I watched as Miles began to walk out of my room, not willingly, but forced to spend a day with Martin. I chuckled softly, taking the blunt from Pete and finishing off the remainder of it. Their faces grew evermore annoyed as they left through my open door. Hammering,

sawing, and music moved its way around the house. I sat back and studied the outside world; fellow neighbours were out doing some gardening, washing their cars, or walking their dogs. It was a wonder they could afford homes as lavish as ours when they clearly weren't working. I flicked the blunt out the open window, smoke escaping me. I gazed at Miles and Pete as they walked across the lawn to a shining black Cadillac, their tired faces forcibly going to a place they certainly did not want to go. Martin couldn't even get out of the damn car. They slumped into the backseat and the car pulled off. A part of me felt empty as I watched the car slowly become a flicker in the sunlight.

Leaning my head back, I let out a deep sigh, and glanced at the boxes along the wall staring at me and egging me on to unpack them. *Open me*, they said. *Unpack me so you can stay*. I knew I had no place to go, I knew that being here was my last chance at building myself up again, and yet the thought of escaping still circled my mind. I rose and walked over to one of the open boxes, looking at the contents inside. *God, I don't want to do this*, I thought to myself and spotted my towel hanging behind the door. I snagged it and undressed as I made my way to the washroom. A good shower was what I needed to calm my excited mind and give me the courage to accept my fate of returning home.

A chill ran through me as I dropped the towel that had been wrapped around me and turned on the shower. The steam filled the small washroom immediately and I stepped into the shower, letting the water cascade over me. Instant relaxation swept through me, though the urge to stuff my face slowly crept in. Cravings for an extra-large pizza with pepperoni and olives stayed pasted at the front of my brain, but other shit continued to arise, hiding my sudden urge for junk food. I wanted to dwell on the past, I wanted to cry about it, but I held my head high and breathed deeply. The inevitable would bubble to the surface and I would have to give my brothers the true reason for my return, but I wasn't ready yet. By God, I wasn't ready for anyone to know how degraded I felt, and sometimes it still ached with scars as a reminder. I closed my eyes and faced the pouring water as it slightly massaged my face. *This too shall pass*, I thought to myself and I knew it would. There wasn't anything I couldn't get through.

Steam poured out of the washroom as I opened the door. Corbin looked up at me from the top of the stairs with a tape measure. I grinned, towel drying my hair.

“Sorry, just gotta take a couple measurements,” he smirked.

“No bother,” I winked, reaching for a brush.

He cleared his throat and lowered his head, but continued to keep his gaze on me out of the corner of his eye. The brush moved smoothly through my long, light brown hair. I felt him watching, felt his eyes drinking me in. He marked down something in his tiny notebook before he made a second measurement. I bit the inner part of my lip as I watched his muscular build draw out a simple design for the railings. I tiptoed my way to my room and fixed the towel around me more securely.

I sighed as I gawked at the boxes beside me, procrastination setting in again. I certainly did not want to unpack them, believing full well that we wouldn't be staying here long and in a few short months we'd be packing our shit up again and moving into another dump. Same old shit, different day. Every box labelled with its contents inside, every box another trip down memory lane, every box another memory of refilling it all over again. For years on end I lived out of boxes; I found it easier than actually unpacking them and repacking them. Everett hated the absurdity of it all, he hated my procrastination at unpacking. He hated a lot, truly, and I put up with it for so long.

I flipped hair from my face and nodded. I knew I had to try and keep an open mind, try to believe in her for once in my life. I picked at the tape on one of the boxes and slowly peeled it off. Books looked up at me, waiting for me to put them up on a shelf and show them off. Hesitation set in again, but all I could think about was Miles and Pete and the letdown they would go through if I decided to leave again. With an unsatisfied sigh, I pulled some books out and I placed them onto the built-in bookshelf beside the bay window, wanting desperately for us to live a normal life.

“Hey,” a voice startled me as I dropped the books onto the shelf.

“Jesus!” I said.

“Sorry...I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you,” Corbin chuckled nervously scratching at the back of his head. His bright blue eyes studied my blue-green ones and a smile crept onto my face.

“It's alright.”

“Um...” he started, looking behind him and pushing his lips together. I grinned and made my way over to him, leaning on the threshold.

“Cat got your tongue,” I chuckled slightly.

“Wondering if you were busy tonight?” His eyebrows rose as if he was impressed with himself for asking.

“That depends.”

“On what?” he smiled. A perfect smile that lit up his whole face.

“On what you have planned.”

“Oh...um...”

“Didn’t think you’d get this far?” I chuckled.

“My brother’s the more...open one,” Corbin smirked.

“Is he joining us on this date?”

“Well, no.”

“Then there’s no need to mention him,” I grinned. “So, what do you want us to do tonight?”

“Dinner and a movie?”

“Cliché, what else you got?” I teased.

“Well, I can show you around town a bit, take you to my favorite spots,” he shrugged.

“Depends.”

“On what exactly?” The corner of his mouth quirked up.

“I’ve seen San Francisco.”

“Maybe you have,” Corbin said with a smile. “I assure you; you haven’t seen this spot.”

“Will ice cream be involved?”

“It can be,” he beamed.

I placed my hand on the door knob and slowly started closing the door. I wanted him, that part was a given, just the way his blue eyes moved around my body, his coiffed beard and purposefully messy spiked hair beamed at me as well. I wet my lips and chuckled as I watched his icy blue eyes scan me again.

“I’ll think about it,” I grinned.

“Do...do you want my number?” he asked, hesitation floating around him.

“Gimme that notebook,” I demanded. He handed it to me and pulled the pencil from behind his ear. I wrote my number down and smiled as I closed the door slowly.

I was kind of excited, but also nervous. The last time I was on a date was with Everett, and he wasn’t the romantic type at all. Every date was usually the same. Dinner and a movie, lunch and a movie, stay home and watch a movie, get a day off and go to a movie...and most of the time he was busy on his phone. It was seriously a wonder why I stayed with him for as long as I did, but in the beginning, when he was still himself, he was good company. As the years passed, things changed, just not for the better. He worked longer at his father’s company and became “one with the boys” so to speak. He started with drugs, his late hours blossomed, and that’s when his fist and me became the best of friends. That relationship wasn’t something I liked to talk about, it wasn’t something I’d dwell on entirely because he ruined me and I believed I stayed because I had no other choice. Or at least, that’s what I liked to tell myself.

I looked over at the open boxes along the wall and made my way to them, working through my excitement for my evening with Corbin as well as my insecurities about my past.

The books piled onto the shelves at record speed and my clothes felt as though they hung themselves as I can’t remember putting half of them up, I was working so fast. One after another I’d fling them out of the box and place them in the closet, continuing until every last box was emptied. Every piece of myself was with me again, and I had hoped I’d be able to keep it that way.

*

Date night. *What to wear?*

I rummaged through my closet—giving kudos to myself for unpacking it that afternoon—and picked out the perfect white lace dress with a pair of blue wedges with black and white patterns. Even if the date didn’t go well, at least I knew I looked good.

“You said yes,” Miles said as he entered my room with a bag of chips in hand and mouth full. “That’s the first thing he told me when I got in.”

“Might as well give the guy a bone,” I smiled as I fixed the dress over my thighs. “He looked so nervous to ask me.”

“Think it’s all an act?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, flipping my hair out of my face.

“He doesn’t look that *innocent* if you know what I mean,” Miles cocked his head and he was right, Corbin probably had a past to him, which certainly didn’t make him Prince Charming, but who was I to judge. We all had pasts, it was what we learned from them that determined our future.

“Maybe not, but I love myself an innocent bad boy,” I smiled.

“What time is he picking you up?”

“Seven, I think...” I sat on the bed and fixed the straps of my wedges.

This was the first date I was going on since Everett, and frankly, I wasn’t entirely sure I would ever be ready to try again. Not because I still wanted to be with Everett, but because of how frightened I was that the pain would creep in all over again. Eight months have passed since I left, eight months of trying to heal myself, eight months of running from a mad man.

“Your date’s here,” Pete yelled from the hallway.

“And off I go,” I grinned at Miles.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Miles chuckled.

“Gross,” I said. “Don’t wait up...well, maybe. I don’t know. Just don’t tell Mom.”

“We won’t,” Miles said and munched on his chips.

I gave myself one last glance in the mirror, my ample bosom leaving nothing to the imagination, and smiled. For the first time in eight months I felt like myself again. I felt happy. With a smile I nodded at Miles and grabbed my purse from beside him. I made my way out of my room as my phone chimed and Corbin’s name popped up with the words, *I’m outside*, flashing in front of my eyes. I tucked my phone into my purse and tried my hardest to minimize the amount of noise I was making as I rushed down the stairs. The front door was just out of reach and I tossed a set of keys in my purse. I barely made it to the front door when my mother called out from the living room, paint brush in hand.

“Where’re you going?”

“I’ve got a hot date,” I smiled.

“Already?” Alice sighed.

“Just some old friends, Mom.”

“Be careful.”

“I’ll be safe, we’re just going for dinner and some sightseeing,” I smiled. “And I promise I won’t get pregnant.”

“Cassie!”

“I’m kidding,” I laughed. “I’ll see you later.”

I rapidly closed the door behind me and I made my way across the lawn to Corbin’s car. He beamed as he saw me, his blue eyes sparkling in the evening glow.

“You look nice,” he said holding the door for me.

“I tried,” I grinned and sat in the passenger’s seat with a smile, watching him run around the front of the car. “So, where to?”

“It’s a surprise,” he smirked, clipping his seatbelt.

“As long as I don’t end up a dead body in some alley, I’m up for a surprise.”

“Wow,” he laughed. “Been on a few horrible dates?”

“You have no idea,” I pursed my lips together as Everett’s angered face flashed through my mind.

“I promise I won’t murder you,” he laughed.

“Spoken like a true serial killer,” I joked.

Corbin laughed and started the car.

The ride was fairly silent, soft rock n’ roll music filled the empty space between us. I kept my gaze out the window watching the city pass by. I rather missed San Francisco, mind you, I had only lived there for about a year before I moved to New York for University. Alice had purchased a small home in the city, and the boys had just transferred to their new school. I had barely a year left before I graduated, and made the most of it. All I wanted to do was better myself and make my brothers proud so that when the time was right, they could come live with me.

I quickly glanced over at Corbin, his sparkling blue eyes did the same and I grinned, his smirk gave me butterflies. He looked different, *clean* was the word I was looking for. He sported a crisp white V-neck and jeans with a sport jacket on top of that. I was the idiot who decided against a jacket for the evening and was already feeling a chill. The silence could be cut with a knife, it grew thicker the more we sat in it. I wasn’t the shy type, but for some reason, the butterflies he gave me made me unsure of what to say.

He pulled onto a dirt road and for one reason or another, I stiffened in my seat; the glare of his headlights ignited our way. The butterflies flew off the instant I couldn't muster where I was or where on earth he was taking me. Flashes of Everett continued to linger as well. God how I despised him, the horrors he put me through, the pain I endured, the vulnerability I experienced...

"Don't worry," Corbin attempted to ease the tension.

"I think it's about time you tell me where you're taking me," I asked, slight nervousness seeped into my tone.

"Look," he pointed. I shifted my gaze and to my delight the beautiful city shone before us. The lights of the Golden Gate Bridge oozed an orange and yellow glow, the cars that sped past looked like little ants zooming home. The black, starless sky above opened like a bottomless abyss as the world below it sparkled to life. "Gorgeous, isn't it?"

"I don't think I've ever seen it at night before," I said in awe.

He brought the car to a stop and I immediately opened the door to get a better look at the bridge. My wedges were not the best choice to walk around in the dirt and rocks, but the view was everything I thought it would be. He stepped out of the car and opened the backdoor, pulling a basket out, and cleared his throat. He placed a basket on the hood of his car, then leaned on the front of it.

"Better than being murdered in some alley?" he teased.

"Yeah, this is beautiful," I leaned beside him, leaving enough room between us to make him move closer if he wanted. He twisted slightly and opened the basket behind him, placing a container of chocolate covered strawberries on the hood of the car, and taking out two champagne flutes. I was impressed, he really did think of a way to impress me. He popped the champagne and tossed the cork into the basket before filling up each glass. He handed me one and smirked. "And I thought you'd woo me over with ice cream."

"We can get some later," he chuckled.

"We better," I laughed.

"Lemme ask you," he asked as I took a sip of the bubbly. "I'm assuming you're not from San Francisco? Where're you from?"

“Ha, that’s a laugh,” I chuckled. “My mom’s been doing this shit for as long as I can remember, so where I’m from is a really damn good question I can’t even answer.”

“How many homes does she flip a year?”

“Let’s just say in the eighteen years I lived with her, we’ve jumped around...I want to say at least forty homes, maybe more. The second I graduated high school I shipped myself off to NYU on a scholarship, and stayed there until just recently. My brothers visited me during their breaks and in the summer...but now I’m back, only to start this shit all over again,” I shrugged.

“What did you study at NYU?” he asked, taking a gulp of his drink.

“Journalism, with the intent on finding a killer job in the city...which I did but, I don’t know...it wasn’t what I thought it would be, so I stuck it out for a few years before I had enough and, well, here I am,” I took a strawberry from the container. I couldn’t tell him the real reason I left, not at that moment. “What about you?”

“What about me?” his icy blue eyes met mine.

“You always worked for your brother?” I took a bite from the fruit. I could tell they were homemade by how fresh they tasted as the sweetness of the uneven chocolate sent a pinch through my jaw.

“Nah, he’s...” Corbin reached for a strawberry as well. “He’s always been the golden boy, ever since we were kids, y’know. I’ve just been in his shadow. He was captain of the football team, prom king, top of his class...I didn’t play sports. I got drunk and high, I didn’t even go to prom, and my grades—I passed high school by the skin of my teeth. Let’s just say, I got mixed in with the wrong crowd, while he went to school and got this awesome job that allows him to own a home and all that shit...he helped me out when times were tough, gave me a place to stay, and a job until I get back on my feet.”

“Guess I chose the wrong brother,” I teased. His contagious laugh moved through the area. I licked my lips and reached for another strawberry, eager to chomp on it. Not eating dinner wasn’t the best of choices. He glanced at me with a grin, his mischievous gleam made me nervous as I tried to hide my smile. “How many girls have you brought up here?”

“Believe it or not, only one,” he nodded. “Aside from right now.”

“Interesting, I pegged you for a bad boy.”

“No,” he chuckled, his cheeks turning a shade of red. “I’m as innocent as they come.”

“Mm, I can change that,” I teased and crinkled my nose.

“Your Mom was right, you are a little firecracker.”

I folded my arms as a cool evening breeze rolled in, sending goosebumps up and down my body. The branches of the tree above us danced slightly, shaking its leaves from side to side as I watched the cars on the bridge. Every person heading to their destination, be it a hot date, an eager ride home from a long day at work, or just passing through on their way to the next town.

“So, what makes me so special?” I asked, turning my attention back to him.

“What do you mean?”

“You said you only brought one other person here, so why me?” I smiled.

“You’re different than any other girl I’ve ever met; you deserve something that is...I don’t know, perfect.”

“Aren’t you a little charmer,” I winked, another chill moving through me.

“Here,” he stood and shimmied out of his sport jacket.

“Oh, no, it’s okay,” I said, trying to come off as though I didn’t want it even though I desperately did.

“I can see your goosebumps from here, Cassie,” he grinned and held open his sport jacket. I accepted, and slid my arms into the jacket, the warmth of his body embracing me, the sweet smell of his cologne lingering ever so gently. I smiled as he brushed a hair from in front of my face, a flicker of heat in his eyes. “Can I kiss you?”

I blushed, biting my lower lip as his blue eyes drank me in. I wrapped my arms around his neck and softly pressed my lips upon his. His prickly beard tickled my chin as our tongues moved about. I felt his hands exploring my body and he took a step back to lean on his car. I stood in between his legs as one hand cupped his face and the other lay on his chest. His hands touched the back of my thighs and rested there, waiting for permission to go further.

“Wanna get out of here?” I asked, pulling myself away from him for a breath of air.

He smiled, his gorgeous pearly whites igniting a fire within me. He planted one last kiss to my lips before he stood and quickly packed the container in the basket and tossed the contents of our glasses onto the ground. He corked the champagne bottle and stuffed it into the basket with the flutes, then hurried into the car. The engine awoke and we pulled out of the spot, dashing down the dark, dirt road...

...we stumbled into his brother's house, not being subtle at all, as Corbin kissed the nape of my neck. I let out a soft moan and his lips met mine once more. My wedges echoed through the silent house and he lifted me into his arms. I wrapped my legs around him as he led us through his brother's home and up the staircase. It was eerily quiet, that I remembered distinctly. It seemed like not a single person was home. He stumbled into his room, tripping over clothes on the floor as the scent of his cologne filled the air. He fell on top of me and I giggled, pulling him closer to kiss him fervently.

"Just let me close the door," he whispered.

He shot up and closed the door quietly as I sat up to unbuckle my wedges. He slipped out of his shoes and knelt down in front of me, slowly spreading my legs. A hot rush went through me before he even had the chance to push me back. I pinched his chin with my index and thumb and pulled his face to mine. He crawled on top of me, meeting my eyes, and tugged at the black thong I sported. I felt every ounce of me ignite, every piece of me wanted to rip his clothes off and force him down while I rode him until he cried for more.

He managed to slide my thong down and pull his shirt over his head, tossing it to the side. I helped him unbutton his jeans and within moments, he was inside of me. I bit down on his lip as I tried my hardest to stay quiet, knowing full well I did not want my mother to find out about this little rendez-vous from the other workers, not after what happened in the past. His body rocked against mine as the light of the moon shone upon us. His eyes sparkled every time he looked at me, as if they could only see me.

- 4

Knock-knock.

"Yo, Corbin. You up?" Colin's voice ran through my sleeping ears. The door to Corbin's room squeaked open. Corbin and I were

asleep, the front of his body pressed to my back as he wrapped his arms around me. He rolled over quickly and snarled at his brother.

“Get out man!”

“Didn’t know you had company,” Colin chuckled, closing the door. “We start work in thirty.”

With a groan, Corbin turned over and lightly kissed my shoulder. I sighed happily, as he nibbled gently, attempting to wake me up. I took his hand that was pressed against my hip and cuddled his arm to my chest, wanting nothing more than to stay in that bed all day.

“C’mon, baby. We have to get up,” he said softly, continuing to plant kisses on my shoulder.

“Do we gotta?” I groaned and rolled onto my back to meet his handsome face.

“Unfortunately, I have a contract to uphold,” he snickered.

“I think I can amend the contract, requiring you to be in your birthday suit with me at least once a day,” I chuckled softly, wanting to go back to sleep.

“That’s something I can go for,” he smiled against my lips. “But you gotta get home before your mom wakes up.”

“Ah, yes...” I sighed. “The she-devil herself.”

“She isn’t all that bad.”

“Believe me, you don’t know anything about Alice Chastain.”

“Not the best childhood?”

“That’s one way of putting it,” I nodded. Childhood, that’s a word I’ll never be able to relate to. Raising my brothers, making sure they were happy and safe, making sure everything was in order and they didn’t touch any of the renovations happening around us. Most importantly, making sure they didn’t get involved with any of Alice’s illegal shenanigans.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” he grinned, empathy in his tone.

“Not a story I’m ready to tell,” I shrugged a shoulder and gave him a lopsided smile.

I sat up and brought my knees to my chest as Corbin stumbled out of bed and searched through his dresser for clothes to wear. I couldn’t help but analyze him, my eyes moving up and down his naked body. He was everything I’ve ever wanted: a man who cared, he was

romantic, an animal in the sack...and for once, I felt like I was happy. I watched as he covered his pale bottom and scratched at the back of his head. His beautiful smile met my wandering eyes.

“You gonna get dressed or stare at me all day,” he joked.

“Yeah, yeah,” I threw the covers off and stood, searching the floor for my clothes. I slid the dress over my head and adjusted my generous breasts into the corset of the lace number. The mirror beside me showed the smudge of my mascara under my eyes, I quickly licked my fingers and fixed the mess before taking a hair tie from my wrist and twisting my hair into a topknot. Even in my messy morning look, he still wanted me. I bit my lip as he nudged me slightly, sliding his feet into his socks. I snagged my purse from the floor and made sure I wasn’t missing anything. “I can’t seem to find my underwear.”

“That’s a good problem to have,” he chuckled.

“I guess you can keep them as a souvenir,” I joked, planting a kiss on his lips.

“Can I see you later?”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps, she says,” he smiled with tired eyes. “Meet me outside at seven again.”

“And what are we gonna do?” I asked as he kissed the tip of my nose.

“Dinner? Dessert? Something fun, I promise.”

“Sounds pleasing,” I chuckled and took a step away from him. He smiled and picked up my wedges. I took them from him and started for the door when he stopped me.

“Here, let me walk you out,” he said pulling a shirt over his head.

“Oh, it’s okay.”

“C’mon, I’m not just going to let you walk out—”

“It’s down the hall to the stairs and then out the door, right?” I laughed. “I can manage.”

He laughed as well, and nodded, tapping my bottom before kissing me once more, his soft lips exploring mine with a growing urgency. I slipped out of his room leaving him wanting more, and tiptoed down the hallway to the staircase. Two of Colin’s workers were in the living area packing their toolboxes as they looked up at me. I pursed my

lips together, unsure if I should feel embarrassed or not as they grinned boyishly.

“So, he snagged you,” Colin said from the top of the stairs.

“Sure,” I inhaled deeply and continued to the front door.

“Maybe you’ll make a real man outta him yet,” Ethan laughed.

Ethan was the pristine looking one out of the bunch, black hair slicked back, perfect blue eyes ocean, face so cleanly shaven it appeared to sparkle. The crinkle around his eyes gave meaning to his age, cracking the doll-like image he wanted to keep. Denis and Zak were the two other workers. Denis was dirty, his facial hair was a monstrosity, and his brown hair was tied messily in a topknot. The bags under his eyes ached for another fix as they glowed red with hunger. Zak, on the other hand, wasn’t any better. He was covered in tattoos, every inch of the naked eye spotted his next piece of art or scripture. The facial tattoos made him look mean and angry, but he was nothing but a nice guy who came off as a creep because he was wrapped in the wrong skin with a mop of curly hair. They joked amongst one another and I turned to Colin as he followed me to the door with a bag in hand.

“None of this gets to my mother,” I widened my eyes.

“Lips are sealed, Firecracker,” Colin winked with a mischievous gleam.

I opened the heavy door and stepped out into the bright morning sun. It was surely a beautiful morning and the neighbours knew that as well. Our front neighbour was a spiteful old woman. Every morning she stepped out of her home and walked slowly to the curb with her Shih Tzu trotting behind her, to grab the morning paper. She’d stand at the curb for minutes on end sipping her coffee and observing those around her. She watched us often, the workers walking in and out of the house, how my mother spoke, and how we acted. She narrowed her eyes at us every time we were near. It was nothing like the gentleman and his wife beside her though, they were truly a treat. Music always escaped their open windows followed by clouds of smoke. I wouldn’t be lying if I said Woodstock had come back for another run.

The miserable old woman was there with her annoying little Shih Tzu, analyzing me. I waved with a smile and moved my bare feet across the lawn, the morning dew sending a shiver through me. I tiptoed onto the rock wall that separated Colin’s home with ours and stepped off it,

hitting our slightly dried grass then continued to my front door. I searched for my keys in the mess I called my purse and before I had the chance to find them, the front door blew open, the scowling face of my mother appearing.

“Where in heaven’s name were you?” Alice growled.

“I was at a friend’s,” I lied, somewhat, quenching a deeper hunger to tell someone about my night.

“I was worried,” Alice sighed in relief moving a strand of hair from my face. *Worried? That’s a first.*

“I’m alright, just in need of a shower. Had a pretty hot and sweaty evening.”

“Cassie,” Alice palmed her forehead for the first time that day. “Just go wake your brothers, please. You’re on breakfast duty this morning.”

“Great,” I sighed, having narrowly escaped it the past few weeks. Breakfast duty consisted of one of us, mostly myself when we were younger, taking the workers’ orders and running out to get them coffee and food. Pete had been doing it, along with my mother, since this renovation started as I tried to make up excuses as to why I couldn’t do it. Lo and behold, avoidance had not been in my favor that day.

I tiptoed my way up the staircase, giddy smile on my face, and pushed Pete’s door open.

“Wake up!”

I continued to Miles’ bedroom door, and pushed it open as well.

“Wake up!”

I chuckled as their groans escaped their rooms. It felt like being in high school all over again, waking them up before they missed their bus and I got stuck driving them.

I glided across the floor and escaped to the washroom where I quickly brushed my teeth and turned the shower on. The look I was sporting was not my best, my hair was a mess on top of my head, and the mascara I thought I cleaned was still caked on in certain places, my natural beauty poking through the lack of makeup on my face. My blue-green eyes shone brighter that morning, perhaps it was because of the happiness I felt for the first time in years, or perhaps it was just the light shining in them from above the mirror.

The hot water touched my pale skin as I stepped in, sending a shiver through me. The events of the evening prior kept flashing through my mind; his sensual touch, his infectious smile, and his intoxicating smell all made me want to scream. I haven't felt that way about someone in ages, it felt good to have that feeling come over me again. I thought I once had it with Everett, but that left very soon after we started dating and for one reason or another, fear kept me going with the flow and continuing with whatever that relationship had blossomed into.

"The fuck you wake me up for?" Pete said, staggering into the washroom and plopping onto the toilet.

"Sorry, Mom asked me to wake you guys," I said, my heart thudding loudly; the shower curtain dividing us.

"I had to wake up anyway," Miles appeared and turned the tap on, assumingly to brush his teeth.

"Ow, fuck!" I yelled as the water grew scolding hot. "Turn off the damn water!"

"Sorry," Miles chuckled with his toothbrush in his mouth. "So, how was your night Cass?"

"A lot better than I expected it to be," I whipped the shower curtain open enough for my face to show, one side of my face redder than the other from the scolding shower mishap. "Like a *really* great ending."

"With a worker, Cassie, really?" Pete said, still sitting on the toilet. "Again."

"He's really good with his hands," I laughed and shut the curtain to rinse the shampoo out of my hair. "And he's different than Josh. I know it."

"You know he's coming over here this morning to work on the house, right?" Miles added, spitting into the sink.

"Oh, I know," I smiled flinching at the scolding water again. "Let's just hope Mom doesn't find out any time soon. She'd fuckin' kill me."

"Maybe screwing Josh wasn't your best moment," Miles chuckled.

"It wasn't," I shook my head.

"That really pissed her off," Miles added.

“Anything I do pisses her off. Fuck, I breathe the wrong way and she yells,” I said.

“When you left Everett, I thought she was gonna have a mental break down!” Miles laughed.

“She still has a hard on for him,” Pete scoffed.

“Money speaks volumes,” I sighed, slight regret and anger building at the thought of Everett. It wasn’t money that made him who he was—arrogant, disrespectful, hurtful, and powerful...Christ, the list goes on. It was his stupidity at obtaining the power that drove him mad. That I was sure of.

“BOYS!” Alice yelled from the first floor.

“We’re up!” Miles and Pete replied. Her total distrust for me had shown more since I returned.

“So, I gotta take the breakfast orders this morning,” I stepped into the running water one last time to make sure I had no soap left on me before I shut it off.

“Yeah, and?” Pete said.

“I want you to come on the run with me,” I smiled, wrapping a towel around me as I opened the curtain.

“Do I gotta?” Pete sighed.

“What the fuck else are you gonna do?” I simpered.

“Alright,” Miles rubbed his eye. “I gotta get ready for this shit today.”

“Remind me why you work for her again?” I narrowed my eyes.

“Better than going to school,” Miles shrugged and dragged his feet out of the washroom toward his room. I shook my head and strained my hair into the sink before turning to Pete.

“You better stay in school!”

“I will,” he said tapping away on his phone and forced slightly.

“You’re disgusting,” I laughed after hearing the disturbing sound that escaped him into the toilet bowl.

“You still love me,” he chuckled and grunted.

“We leave the second I have everyone’s order,” I stepped out of the washroom and slowly closed the door behind me. “So, hurry up.”

*

“Alright boys, what’ll it be?” I announced as I made my way down the staircase in my floral summer dress and partially tied converse. My wavy

hair was tied in a loose pony tail and moved from side to side behind me. I snagged Colin's notepad from his tool belt and pulled the pencil from behind his ear. "What do you want?"

"Which place you going to?" Ethan asked.

"Whichever is closer," I nodded.

"I suggest *Patsy's*, she has the best coffee," Colin shrugged a shoulder.

"Then *Patsy's* it is," I raised my eyebrows. "What'll it be?"

"Coffee, two sugars and a breakfast sandwich," Colin said. "And I'm gonna need those back when you're done."

"Yeah, yeah," I wrote his order and stepped over to Ethan. "And you?"

"Sausage biscuit, and a coffee with two sugars two milk," Ethan smiled and climbed a ladder in the living room.

"I'll have the same but no milk in my coffee and one more sugar," Zak called out.

"Denis?" I asked stepping over supplies on the floor.

"B.L.T. with an iced tea, darling," Denis grinned and continued to measure the wood he was about to cut. I hated when people called me that. Everett used to call me that whenever he tried to manipulate me or demean me. I jotted the order down and continued to Corbin, his cheeks a light shade of pink as our eyes met.

"And what can I get you, baby?" I asked.

"Breakfast biscuit is fine," a playful gleam in his eye as he gave me a once over.

"Nothing to drink?" I bit my lower lip as his eyes drank me in.

"Nah, I got this," he held up an energy drink, and I nodded.

"You should've saved that for later," I whispered as I walked past. I felt his eyes piercing through me, watching every inch as I made my way toward the other two workers Colin hired to fix the windows. I took their orders and tore the paper from the notepad.

"Did you get everyone's order?" Alice asked, making her way toward me.

"Just did," I smiled, peeking over at Corbin once more, his smile giving me butterflies.

“Perfect, get Miles something too, please,” she said and continued through the home ordering the workers around as she did her own children.

I rolled my eyes and retraced my steps back to the hallway where Miles was using the buzz saw. Saw dust escaped the bag that was supposed to be attached to the back of the saw, and covered the floor. He was in the middle of continuing the wainscoting from the living room down the hallway, measuring everything with distinct precision.

“Hey,” I said and waved at him.

“What’s up?” Miles asked, moving his protective glasses from his eyes.

“Mom says I have to ask what you want for breakfast...bagel and cream cheese good?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” he grinned and narrowed his eyes. “Giving you a hard time?”

“Second guessing my return already,” I sighed. “I’ll be back soon.”

I marched out of the living room and winked at Corbin as Pete met me at the bottom of the stairs, ready to pick up orders with me. The house was entirely a different image than it was when we first arrived. Best way to have described it was a zoo, the dirty floors with animals poking and prying their way around the area. Mother hen squawking orders at her flock. While I, the bystander, was silently observing the horrors that were to come.

“You ready?” Pete asked.

“Always,” I nodded. I handed the notepad and pencil back to Colin before sliding my arms into my jean jacket and following Pete out of the home.

A feeling of release spread through me the further away I walked, a sense of relief, I assumed, or freedom some might say. That was the initial feeling I felt when I escaped the horrors all those years ago and moved to New York to obtain my degree. Yet the second I take my eyes off the open road and gaze at the inevitable home we lived in, the overwhelming feeling of being trapped would come over me again. Trapped was all I was. I had been trapped in a loveless, spiteful relationship. Trapped in a home with a mother I hated. Trapped in a life I wish wasn’t my own. Trapped without reason to break free.

We stepped out into the cool of the morning, the sun pouring its heat slowly onto the world below it. Fellow neighbours constantly rubbernecked and tried to see what was going on at our house, they whispered and spoke, spreading their own rumors about who we were. The old woman was sitting on her porch, still sipping at her coffee, which was probably cold at that point. Her annoying Shih Tzu barking the closer we approached the street. Her rumors started the moment we moved in, *single mother of three tried to renovate the old Patterson house, by golly will she ever fail. The single mother sneaking out again, wonder who the next daddy will be. All that work for that little lady, must be some good man behind it.* The annoying words go on...

I slid into the driver's seat and handed Pete the list of orders. The car started and I gazed out at the open road ahead of me, wanting desperately to just drive and never look back. I was tired of being kept in the dark as Alice always had a malicious plan behind every flip. There was a reason someone had broken in, there was also a reason I got blamed for a missing folder...what the reason was, God only knew.

"You alright?" Pete asked, snapping me out of my trance.

"Yeah, I'm good. Let's go, shall we?" I sped off down the road and followed the directions Pete gave me as we made our way to *Patsy's*.

"You seem elsewhere right now," Pete said, lighting up a cigarette.

"Sorry," I sighed. "Sometimes I just...I don't know. I guess being back, it's like literally nothing's changed. She's still her old bossy self. Doing her usual secret things and throwing all her bullshit at me."

"Why did you come back, then?"

"I had to," I said frowning. I didn't want anyone to know the truth, let alone my brothers.

"But why?" he opened the window taking a pull from his cigarette.

"It's..." A flashing of the events poured through me. My cheeks reddened and tears filled my eyes. "It's complicated, let's just leave it at that."

"Does Miles know?" Smoke escaped his nostrils as he glanced at me.

"No...it's just hard to talk about and I don't want to, okay?"

“Alright,” he raised his hands. “You know Miles and I won’t judge—”

“It’s not about being judged,” I sniffed. “Everett is just...he’s not who he portrays himself to be, y’know.”

“Like every rich loser the big apple has to offer,” Pete chuckled, taking a long pull.

“Somewhat,” I sighed, thinking about the years I lost.

“Y’know we love you Cass, right? Everything you do for us, we don’t even know how to say thanks,” Pete shrugged, looking down at his phone.

“I’d do anything for you guys,” I smiled. “I love you.”

“Love you too Cass,” Pete nodded. His phone beeped and he tapped a button. “It’s on the left, here.”

- 5

I lay on my stomach typing away on my phone, answering emails from my old boss begging me to return, texts from friends in New York who wondered where I escaped to, and some from my graduating class in San Francisco wanting to see me. Of course, there are those unopened emails and texts from Everett. At first, they were drunken spam apologies, pleading, begging for me to come back. Then as time went on, the pleading turned to anger, and the anger turned to abuse. Sometimes I would open them, some of them I wouldn’t. The more recent ones I ignored with every fibre of my being. He was the last thing on my mind, and would continue to be so as long as I had the strength to move on.

I lay in Corbin’s room, exposed, seeing the memories of my past try to creep back in. The door softly opened, then closed as Corbin snuck back in. I felt like a teenager again, sneaking around and having sex without getting caught. He slowly crawled onto the bed and gently kissed up the back of my leg, his lips trailing up my body. Every planted kiss sent a shiver through me, a rush of excitement slowly wanting to erupt. He made his way to my cheek and smiled.

“One sandwich at your service,” he handed me a sandwich and took a lavish bite out of another.

“Why thank you, good sir,” I said and tossed my phone onto my clothes. I propped myself up on my elbows and took a bite as well, a plain ham and cheese sandwich with a hint of mustard danced around

my mouth. It was nearly a month since Corbin and I have been sneaking around, and I was happy. For the first time in years, I was happy. I thumbed my lip from the escape of mustard, and glanced at him; the flicker of heat in his eyes as he leaned over to kiss my shoulder, and I tried to hide behind it, shyly. “What?”

“You’re something else, you know that?”

“Stop, you’re gonna make me blush,” I said and took another bite of the sandwich. He took a bite of his sandwich and gazed down the length of me, I felt his eyes on my bottom, taking in every piece of me.

“How’d you get those scars?” he asked.

“Which ones?” I said, knowing he was referring to the scars in between my thighs.

“The ones on your legs,” he ran his hand over the back of my thighs and a tingle swept through me.

“Really long and fucked-up story,” I shrugged.

“I’d like to hear it some time,” he smiled. The innocence in his face made me want to cry.

“It’s not the type of story worth retelling,” I chuckled nervously. His mouth quirked up as he nodded. I wish I knew what he was thinking; those blue eyes explored me with such passion, such ferocity. He took the sandwich from my hands with determination. “Hey, I was gonna eat that.”

“I have a better idea first,” he grinned, his dazzling smile made me crazy.

“Oh really?”

Corbin kissed me hungrily as he guided me on top of him until our bodies fit perfectly together. His fingers exploring every curve and every edge as a rush of adrenaline followed. A moan escaped my mouth, and he shot up turning me onto my back, his body rocking against me. He took my hands and interlocked his fingers with mine, holding them above my head as if they were his lifeline. He let out a soft grunt before our lips met in exhaustion.

“God, you’re amazing,” he said out of breath.

“Some would say,” I giggled, also slightly out of breath.

“Some, she says,” he rolled off me, a serious yet playful gleam in his eyes. “Are we about to have that “ex” talk?”

“Are we serious enough for *that* talk?” I asked licking my dry lips.

“Yes? No...is this a trick question?” he propped onto an elbow and glanced down at me.

“I mean, I’m an open book, baby. Ask away,” I smiled, turning back onto my stomach and reaching for the sandwich I was eating. *Open book until my last chapter.*

“What’s your magic number?” he frowned, unsure if that was the right question to ask. I laughed, wondering if I should tell him how many men I’ve been with or not, and rested my cheek on my shoulder looking at him.

“Not as many as you’d think...what about you?”

“Same.”

“This just got awkward,” I laughed.

“Little bit,” he laughed, mischievous smirk about him.

I took a nibble from the ham and cheese sandwich and nodded as he smirked. Silence grew between us, but a nice silence, the kind of silence that relaxed you but didn’t make things feel like they have to be clouded with words. Corbin sure did know how to excite me and calm me down at the same time.

“How long do you guys have left on the house?” My eyes sparked with curiosity finding a way to break the silence between us.

“About another month,” he grinned. “Maybe less.”

“I wonder what big plans mother dearest has for the reveal.”

“You think you’ll end up moving again?” he asked, taking a bite.

“She says no, but she’s promised us our *forever home* since we were kids. She unfortunately continues to fail on that promise.”

“Are you going to move, too, if that ends up happening?” he cracked a can of soda and took a gulp.

“No other choice, really,” I smiled.

“You could always move in with me,” he beamed.

“In your brother’s house?”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s your brother’s house where he lives with not only you but three other guys,” I laughed, taking the can from him and letting the bubbles explore my taste buds.

“What if we had a place of our own?”

“I’m not even your girlfriend,” I said with a smile as I placed the can on the floor.

“And what if you were...” his face shied away.

“That would change a lot of things. It would definitely be an excuse to stay,” I smiled warmly at his sparkling eyes.

“Then that settles it,” he moved closer to me so that half his body was on mine and his soft lips met my shoulder. My phone chimed in the distance breaking the growing urgency between us.

“Shit, what time is it?”

“Half past eleven,” he rolled to look at the clock on his nightstand. “Why?”

“Goddamn, I gotta go,” I leapt from his bed and quickly threw on my t-shirt and shorts.

“Already?”

“I have to be up by five. Alice is making me join her to pick out granite at some place an hour and a half away. Isn’t that exciting?” I said sarcastically.

“Do you have to go?”

“Unfortunately,” I leaned on the bed and kissed his lips. I grabbed his large black sweater from the floor and pulled it over me. “I’ll see you tomorrow, and I’m taking this with me.”

“See you tomorrow, babe,” he smiled, reaching for his sport shorts. I glanced at the half-eaten sandwich on the plate.

“Oh, and this too,” I wrinkled my nose as he pulled me in for another good night kiss.

“Can I walk you out?” he held my wrist as I tried to stand.

“I’ll be alright; I’ll see you at the house in the morning.”

I opened his door and shut it softly behind me as I took a bite of the sandwich. The house was eerily silent, not even a snore to exude the presence of the men. Colin owned the place, that much I knew, and I knew that Corbin planned to live with him until he had enough saved up to purchase his own home. Though I didn’t know why Denis, Ethan, and Zak lived with Colin...they didn’t seem to like one another much, as they constantly argued while working and disagreed on nearly every instruction Colin gave them.

The soft creaking of the stairs moved through the silence like a dense fog. I wasn’t one to fright very easily, but something about the dull darkness gave me the heebie-jeebies. I felt like I was being watched, on-lookers lurking in the darkness observing and waiting. Silent whispers

moved through the silence, I could've imagined it, hell, it could've been my own mind telling me what to do but I was sure something was there creeping in the shadows. The growing urgency was to leave the home as quickly as I could; I picked up my shoes from the front door and turned the knob, escaping into the dark of the night.

The cluster of homes were mostly dark, with a few that were lit. The lights did nothing, and seemed mocking compared to the moon light as my fear was getting the better of me. The whispers appeared to follow, but I ignored them. *It's all in your head*, I told myself. *It's just your paranoia*.

I snuck into my home and tip-toed to my room, chewing on the last bit of the sandwich. The paranoia left as soon as the door shut behind me and the safety of my room was just out of reach. I tried to be as quiet as I could so not to wake Alice. Pete's music escaped his headphones behind his closed door. I smiled and continued past his room. Miles's door was open and I could see the light of his phone shining onto his face, his screen still cracked. I gently tapped on the door with my index and he shifted his gaze to mine.

"Just getting in?" he whispered.

"Unfortunately," I shrugged. "You ready to man the workers tomorrow?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," he nodded. "I promise to keep it easy on your sex toy."

"He asked me to be his girlfriend tonight," I smiled, my cheeks turning a dark shade of red.

"Wow, that was fast," Miles sat upright. "You sure you're okay getting into a relationship after your breakup?"

"Yes, it's been months since Everett...plus Corbin has this...there's something about him that makes me *wild*," I shrugged my shoulders, butterflies shooting through my insides.

"You're wild enough," Miles joked.

"You know what I mean."

"You ever going to tell Mom?" he asked.

"I don't know...not yet anyway. Still wondering how she'll take it after the fiasco with Josh," I raised an eyebrow.

"I don't blame you one bit," he said, his eyes focused on his phone.

"Alright, well, I'm off to bed. Early morning ahead."

“Night, sis,” he looked up with a smile.

I continued my way into my room and plopped myself on my bed, warmth blossomed inside me as a smile crept on my face. The feelings were new, they were exciting, and much different from the previous relationship from which I had escaped. Anything was better than that, to be honest. Everett was handsome and intelligent, our conversations—when we had them—were incredible...but that was about it. Simply thinking about him made my insides turn and my eyes well with tears. He truly broke me.

My phone chimed as I studied my ceiling and Corbin’s name popped up.

Sleep tight sweetheart, it read. The feelings of agony and regret left me immediately as I read his name once more.

I’m too excited to sleep, I sent with a winking face. The dots popped up then disappeared. I bit my lip wondering what his reply would be.

The mere thought of being with Corbin made me utterly happy, and I hated having to keep our relationship a secret. I couldn’t even imagine what Alice would say if she knew we were together. *Really Cassie, the help? Don’t you think you’re better than that? Can’t you find a guy who can support you? You already slept with one worker; do you really need another on that list?* It was always the same spiel about the same complaints. Perhaps that was why I was never a huge fan of Everett—well it was definitely one of the reasons—my mother absolutely adored him. Not for his witty charm, but for his family’s money and the money they invested in her company. Of course, when Everett and I split, the money stopped coming in. You see, that’s what she did, she found herself investors any way she could so she could keep her company afloat...and I mean any way she could. As stated, we know our fair share of mobsters and collectors. It was a surprise neither of us kicked the bucket yet.

Don’t tease me like that, I will sneak into your house and relieve that excitement, Corbin replied with a winking kiss face.

Too bad you have to wait until tomorrow, I wrote with a smile pasted on my face. I bit my lower lip and adjusted his sweater on me so that the hood was over my head, his intoxicating musk scent enveloping me. I was his, and he was mine; the thought of being with him again excited me to the point where I wanted to cancel all our plans and responsibilities

the next day so we could stay locked in a room with nothing but the two of us.

Please consider moving in? He asked.

You just want me all to yourself, I typed.

Is that a bad thing? He wrote with a winking face.

Maybe, I wrote and sent a tongue emoji. *Now, let me sleep before I punish you.*

Alright, alright. Goodnight babe, he sent with a heart.

Night, I replied with a heart as well. Dare I say this was turning into something I thought I'd never feel again—love.

*

“Wake up, Cassie,” Alice whispered as she nudged me. “We have to leave.”

“Mm, do I have enough time to shower?” I asked rolling over in my bed.

“A quick one, we leave in twenty,” she said and softly walked out of my room.

I grudgingly sat up and picked up Corbin's sweater from the floor, along with a pair of jeans from my closet and a tank top. I tiptoed out of my room with my cellphone in hand and entered the washroom. I immediately sent a message to Corbin, knowing full well he wouldn't reply until he woke up for work.

Being up this early should be a mortal sin, I typed with a face palm emoji. The corner of my mouth quirked up in a grin as I turned the shower on. I was eager to get the morning over with so that I could see his handsome face again...

...I barely had my jeans buttoned when I briskly tiptoed my way down the hallway to meet my mother in the car. I slipped my feet into a pair of ballerina flats and pulled Corbin's sweater over me, my wet hair already leaving stripes in the blackness.

“You'll catch a cold,” my mother sighed. “Why didn't you dry your hair?”

“It's May,” I scoffed. “And you rushed me to leave!”

I quickly spun my hair in a topknot and adjusted the sleeves around my hands as they were far too long. I sat in her car unwillingly and gazed at Colin's house. Corbin was inside and just out of reach. I desperately wanted to jump out of the car and run to him, but I couldn't.

I knew I couldn't. Not then anyway, but soon enough the truth would be revealed.

"That's a new sweater," Alice added, being far too analytical for my liking so early in the morning.

"It's my lover's," I chuckled.

"Will I ever meet this new man of yours that brings you home at all hours of the night?"

"Probably not any time soon," I laughed, but Alice didn't like that response and gave me a look. "I want to make sure we're not just fooling around."

"You're being careful?"

"Of course," I lied, there were times we were in too much of a rush that we'd forgotten to use protection...most of the time we'd forgotten to use protection. Hearing my mother say that brought the realization that perhaps I should run to a pharmacy as soon as I had the chance.

"That sweater looks very familiar," she pressed on, analyzing the simple pattern on the left breast. "Doesn't Corbin have a sweater like that?"

"Could be," I tried to remain oblivious. "I'm sure many people have this sweater. Pete has one too y'know."

"Cassie," she said in her motherly tone. I prepared myself for a speech, her typical speech. I inhaled deeply and braced for impact. "You know you're better than that. You're an educated woman who made a name for herself in New York. You had a beautiful place, a terrific job, and a wonderful man who would do anything for you. Don't throw that all away after your *vacation* here with some worker."

"Mom, I'm not *fucking* a worker," I lied, eagerly ready to attack her but also wanting to remain as calm as I could. "I love you; I do. But you know nothing about my life...absolutely nothing. So please let's just get to this granite place and be done with the "boys" talk we have every time I end a relationship or enter a new one. I'm finally happy—isn't that all that matters?"

I slid down the seat so that my knees were resting on the dashboard in front of me. The sun poked over the homes around us, its rose gold light poured onto the world below, sending the tree tops aglow. I raised my phone and took an artistic photo of the sun rising behind a large tree. Most of my social feeds were artistic photos I took or snaps of

new things I was working on at the office. I studied the photo momentarily before posting it, no caption, no filter, just the photo itself.

Vacation, I'll show you vacation, I thought to myself. I couldn't believe how little she knew about my life. She had no idea what happened in New York, what Everett did, that I quit my job and left that life behind me. She knew nothing.

I waited eagerly for a reply from Corbin that morning, wondering if he still felt the same way as last night. I constantly self-doubted not only myself, but those around me...always wondering if I was enough, if what I was doing was enough. Perhaps it was the relationship I had with Everett that made me self-loathe, perhaps it was the shitty childhood I had. One thing I knew for sure was that no one would know that side of me. To the public I was that bubbly, happy-go-lucky chick with the blue-green eyes. Yet, in reality, I was just as broken as the rest.

Alice's phone began to ring and Martin's name popped up on the dashboard. I knew they were on and off for years, but I was still surprised to see his name on the screen. Alice quickly hit ignore and smiled at me. Something was up, I sensed it but I didn't know exactly what it could be. I folded my arms and readied myself to take a nap when her nagging voice broke through my ears.

"Do you love him?" Alice asked, cutting through the silence like a knife. The embarrassment of seeing Martin's name seeped into her tone.

"Who?"

"The guy you're seeing," she said. I sighed, not wanting to talk about it, solely wanting to take a nap, but I could sense the guilt seeping through.

"I don't know...I like him, a lot. And the sex is great."

"Cassie!"

"You asked," I chuckled.

"What about Everett?" she brought the car to a stop at a light and signaled the direction she was turning. The irritating tick struck my ears every time his name came up. The simple mention of his name sent frightful shivers down my spine. I absolutely hated him, every ounce of his being sent vengeful disgust through every thought I had.

"Can we not talk about *him* anymore," I sighed deeply. "Things did not end well, and I'd rather they stay in the past."

Alice didn't respond, she glanced at me as my phone chimed and focused her attention on the road. Even in my angered, irritated state, the sight of Corbin's name ignited a shining flame within me; a new message and a like on my photo.

If you stayed last night, I would've woken you up a lot better. I promise you that, he replied.

Oh, I don't doubt it, I sent with a winking face. *Also, my mom almost figured us out...she kind of suspected because of your hoodie.*

Does that mean I get to kiss you whenever I want? He asked, I could have seen the smile on his face even though he wasn't in front of me.

Not so fast, Casanova. You definitely don't want an Alice speech thrown your way...we'll keep it the way it is for now. Just between you and me, and once the renos are done, you can fuck me on the kitchen counter for all I care, I replied, realizing how aggressive I sounded. *Well, I do care...you know what I mean.*

I'll have to take you up on that one, he responded. *I gotta get started, your brother is like the military! I'll see you later...I love you.*

I couldn't take my eyes off the screen. I wondered if it was too soon, I wondered whether or not I was good enough for him...I wondered why on earth out of all people, he chose to say that to me. Yet, a larger voice over-took my thoughts and I smiled as it told me to ignore them and let him love me as I did him.

Love you too, I responded, trying to hide the childish smile on my face.

*

"Alright, we'll be home any minute," Alice said. "Do you want to stop for something to eat?"

"Nah, I'm good," I said, adjusting in my seat. "Just wanna get home and take a nap."

It was nearly lunch hour by the time we neared our home, spending the morning analyzing which slab of granite was the right choice was surely something I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. Alice took nearly an hour deciding which color she preferred, and once she chose the beige, she then had to decide which pattern she preferred the cut to be, which vein, I should say, was the nicest. Why on earth she chose me to go with her, was another story all in itself. We didn't talk about anything important either, nothing that would give me an ounce of suspicion.

“Just to let you know, I have an investor coming by this afternoon—more like in an hour—to take a look at the house and see if he’ll invest in me for his new potential projects,” Alice added. There was the reason for making me tag along. “He’s branched out and will be working on his own. Collecting new clients and the like.”

“It’s not the Smiths all over again, is it?” I asked, afraid of the answer.

The Smiths, they were a case all their own. They invested in my mother when we lived in Dallas. Gave her all the money she desired for the renovations of their mansion: eight bedrooms, six bathrooms, a bowling alley in the basement, and an in-ground pool in the backyard—let’s just say, Miles, Pete, and I were in heaven. That was to say, the Smiths were not as easy going as they started out to be. Day in and day out, the plans my mother designed were wrong, they wanted this changed, they wanted that changed. They threatened to call social services if my mother didn’t abide to their needs for the entire seven months we lived in that shithole of a palace. When the renovations were completed, she asked to borrow an absurd amount of money that she had no other means of repaying unless she sold her next flip for triple the price. Social services were called a couple of times, but I managed to get through to them any which way I could. In the end, Alice managed to somehow get them their money. I still do not know how she did it, but somehow that debt was secretly paid.

“Oh, no, no, no,” she shook her head rapidly. “I paid off my debt to them, they are long gone. I assure you.”

For some reason, I suspected something was off with her. Something about the way she gripped the steering wheel tighter when she advised me there would be an investor coming, her knuckles whiter than normal. I felt like I should’ve been worried, like I should’ve asked her more about what was truly going on, but I didn’t. I let the remainder of the ride stay silent, the tension between us grew like a fog. She was hiding something, I knew she was, yet I didn’t care. I was tired of it. I didn’t want to care when I knew I should’ve.

We pulled up to the house as Denis and Zak were sitting on the front step smoking a cigarette. I couldn’t have gotten out of that car faster as I made my way in between the two of them and into the house. Miles saluted me and I dashed up the plastic covered stairs to find Corbin at

the top with Ethan, sanding down the banister. I smiled, and bit my lower lip as Corbin beamed the moment his eyes set upon mine.

“Hey,” Corbin said. “Find the right slab?”

“Something like that,” I grinned.

“Cassie,” Pete poked his head out. “You’re back!”

“Sadly,” I joked.

“How was it?”

“If I have to look at another slab of granite, I might kill somebody,” I chuckled and continued down the hall to my room, glancing back at Corbin.

“Miles ordered us pizza if you want some,” Pete hollered.

“Come get me when it arrives,” I replied.

I slumped onto my bed and took my phone out, eagerly waiting to be connected to Wi-Fi again. I scrolled through my social media endlessly as if expecting something interesting to pop up, glanced at the number of likes I had and caught Everett’s name on the list; a feeling of uneasiness swept through me and I couldn’t stop thinking of how stupid I was for posting something exposing my whereabouts. The last thing I needed was for him to find me. I sighed heavily when a knock on my door startled me. I propped myself on my elbows watching Corbin slowly close the door and lock it behind him. A smile crept on my face as he was peeling off his shirt and smiling down at me.

“Miss me?” his deep voice clouded my ears as he climbed on top of me.

“God, you have no idea,” I bit down on his bottom lip as he growled and helped himself to taking off my clothes. I giggled quietly as we struggled to get his oversized hoodie off of me.

His muscular chest was pressed against mine, guiding himself so that our bodies fit perfectly as one. I knew we were taking a risk; the workers were downstairs, my brothers were in the house, and my mother was somewhere, preparing for her meeting with the investor. Yet, I didn’t care. I wanted Corbin, and he knew it too, just as much as I knew he wanted me.

Corbin bit down on my shoulder, disguising his moan as he stopped rocking. Our lips met and he smiled behind them. My fingers tangled in his hair on the back of his neck while I tried to catch my breath. He rolled off me with a satisfied sigh and sat up.

“I should get back,” he said, disappointment in his tone. I propped myself up on my elbows, my large breasts exposed as he shot glances at them.

“You should, but you could also stay,” I nudged him.

“We’ll go again tonight,” he winked and stood, pulling up his pants.

“Is that all I am to you, a sex toy?” I chuckled, taking his hand and pulling him on top of me again. I wrapped my arms around his neck and he kissed me fervently.

“I’ll take you somewhere special tonight, then,” he smiled against my lips. “*Then* I’ll use you as my sex toy.”

“Fuck off,” I laughed as he stood again, helping me rise with him. He slid his arms into his shirt and watched as I scrambled for my undergarments.

“Hey,” he said softly as I clasped my bra, adjusting my bosom in it. “I meant what I said earlier, you know.”

“And what is that exactly?” I narrowed my eyes with a grin. He stepped toward me and wrapped his arms around my waist.

“That I love you.”

“Yeah, well,” I rose on my tiptoes. “I meant it too, baby.”

“Good,” he smiled and chuckled nervously. “I do have to get back, though.”

“I know,” I kissed his lips once more. “I’ll see you later.”

Corbin opened the door slowly, poking his head out to see if the coast was clear and slipped out. I couldn’t stop smiling as I thought of him. There wasn’t a moment in my life when I felt that utterly full. Where I felt completely engulfed in happiness. Even when I left the chaos all those years ago, that feeling of being trapped remained. When I graduated from NYU, the proud accomplishments still weren’t enough to merit the feeling of being full, but hearing Corbin say those three little words was what made me truly bloom.

I picked up my jeans and slid my legs into them before I chose a different shirt to wear—a loose-fitting spaghetti strap top in magenta, which felt fitting for the beautiful weather the day had brought us. I fixed my hair in my topknot and slid my feet into a pair of ballerina flats before another knock struck my door. I gazed around quickly, thinking Corbin might’ve forgotten something. I tucked in my top and Miles opened it,

raising his eyebrows. There was pure concern and sorrow painted to his face as though something terrible had happened, or was about to.

“Cass...” he started, scratching the back of his neck.

“What’s wrong, Miles?”

“Mom’s investor’s here,” his eyes bored into mine.

“What’s wrong...” I wanted the answer given to me. I stepped toward him and looked down the hallway; only Ethan was working on the banister. He shot a glance at us then turned his attention to Pete as he ran up the staircase, his face red with worry and panic.

“I don’t think she meant to, I swear I don’t think she meant to,” Pete cried.

“Meant to what? What the fuck is going on?” I demanded.

“Everett is in the sunroom with Mom,” Pete said, his worried face frightened as though he was unsure of what I would do or how I would react. I stormed down the hallway to the staircase.

“Everything alright?” Ethan asked.

“Just peachy,” I said.

“Corbin’s in the living room,” Ethan went on.

“It’s not him I’m looking for,” I said reaching the top of the staircase.

“Cassie, think about this,” Miles said following me. “Maybe it was an accident. Please don’t do anything stupid.”

I stopped mid-stairwell, and turned to him.

“Do anything stupid? Me?” I growled. “God, Miles...”

I shook my head and continued down the steps. Colin was working on the banister at the bottom of the stairwell, and Corbin and Denis were painting the mouldings in the living room as I stormed past them, making my way to the only room in the house she didn’t destroy, the sunroom.

“What’s going on?” Corbin asked Miles as I pushed the screen door open.

My heart sank to the bottom of my chest, my stomach was in knots, I wanted to scream, but no sound escaped my mouth. All the air felt stuck, lodged deep in my throat. I wanted to run, but my feet stayed still. Tears welled in my eyes as Everett rose to his feet, interrupting the conversation he and Alice were having. His smug face grinned at me, and I knew it read *I found you*, all over it.

“What in the fuck is he doing here?” my jaw clenched as I looked to my mother, her image blurry as tears filled my eyes and refused to fall.

“Cassie, he is generously investing in the company—”

“Why him?” I snarled.

“His father and I have been in contact for some time now. Everett wanted to venture on his own and insisted he deliver the check to me personally so we can get the ball rolling once our home is complete,” Alice’s ignorant face shifted to mine. “It’s alright sweetheart—”

“Of course, you insisted, you arrogant fuck!” I raised my voice. “How fucking dare you show your face—”

“Cassie!”

“No, Mom,” I sobbed. “You have no fuckin’ idea what he did to me!”

Everett took a step forward with a face like thunder, I knew he didn’t want me telling anyone what he did, and I didn’t. I kept it with me, burning deep inside as it ate at me day in and day out. I kept that monster a secret from everyone.

“Cassie, all break ups have their rough patches. You and Everett have experienced yours—”

“Rough patch!? Oh, you think what he did to me was a rough patch?” I shifted my gaze to Everett. “Are you fuckin’ insane for showing your face here? What the fuck have you told her?!”

“Only the truth, darling,” he jeered.

“You’re such a fuckin’ liar!” I barked.

“Cassie, that’s enough!” Alice yelled. “That’s no way to talk to our guest.”

“Your guest?” I nodded, anger roaring inside me. I took a deep breath and chuckled. “Your guest.”

“Now Cassie,” Everett started. “We’re both to blame for how we ended. I said some things, you said some things. I’m sure we can come to an agreement so that our interactions will run smoothly from here on out.”

“What did he tell you?” I urged my mother as tears fell from my eyes.

“You got into an argument over something petty and you left. Quit your job, didn’t contact any of your friends to tell them where you

were going,” Alice said, turning to Everett as the screen door squeaked open and Miles stepped in with Pete right behind him. “There’s no need to act this way over a silly break up.”

“Exactly, Cassie,” Everett smirked.

“Are you *fucking* for real right now?” I raised my voice.

“I hated how things ended too, darling. But we can each move on from the past,” Everett’s egotistical face continued to smirk. The way he looked at me emoted *I won*. He didn’t win, I surely would not let him win. He broke me, but I was picking myself up and he would not stop me from growing.

“You know what, fuck it. You want to know what he did to me and why it’s taking *everything* in me not to take that fucking butter knife and jam it right into his fuckin’ throat.”

“Cassie!” Alice put a hand to her mouth.

“Things didn’t end the way he said they did,” my face was redder than the accent pillows on the couch.

“Cass,” Miles took a step toward me and placed his hand in mine. “Maybe we should do this another time.”

“Everyone can hear you,” Pete added quietly.

“Good!” I yelled. “Everyone should know he’s a woman beating fuckin’ rapist!”

“What!?” Alice stood shocked and turned to Everett whose laughter echoed in the sunroom.

“I’m gonna fucking kill you,” Pete stepped forward, but Miles put an arm to Pete’s chest.

“I always said you were a great writer, but this is next level,” Everett chuckled.

“Really? I guess the scars on my inner thighs just magically appeared,” I said, my nerves getting the better of me as my hands began to shake. Miles squeezed tighter, but it was no use.

“Is this true?” Alice asked, her face pale and gaze focused on the floor.

“Of course not—”

“My medical records say otherwise,” I barked, interrupting Everett.

“You falsify those, too?” Everett scoffed.

“God, you have some fucking nerve,” I took a step forward but Miles’s grip pulled me back.

“Maybe it was all a misunderstanding?” Alice squeaked.

“A misunderstanding? I can’t believe you, Mom. You of all people...I told you it ended badly. I fuckin’ told you not to contact them anymore, but you did it anyway because you think so little of me and for fuck’s sake you don’t even believe a word I just said.”

I pushed my lips together; the look of shame on Alice’s face wasn’t because of what happened to me, it was because everyone in the other room heard every word of it. She was embarrassed to keep her image pure. Embarrassed at her own daughter’s flaws, her own daughter’s heart ache and abuse. Embarrassed of me. I backed out of the room, pulling my hand from Miles and pushing past my brothers.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Ma?” Pete yelled as he followed me.

I kept my head down as I briskly walked to the stairs, knowing everyone heard everything that happened, the embarrassment I had to endure, the vulnerability I had to experience. I felt their looks burning through me, I felt their thoughts attacking me.

“Cassie,” Corbin said, making his way down the ladder to me but was stopped with a hand to his chest by Colin.

“Know your role,” Colin said to him.

“She’s my girlfriend,” Corbin said, panic filled his husky voice.

“I don’t give a shit if she’s your sister. Remember why we’re here,” Colin added.

The words ran through my ears: *remember why we’re here*. I couldn’t help but to think, was there anyone around me who didn’t hide something from me and try to use it against me when they could. Everett broke me so much I kept myself closed off, I kept myself a locked diary unable to open, and yet there I was blasting my shit to everyone. People I thought I trusted seemed to be hiding something from me as well.

Pete tried to talk to me, I wanted to hear his words, I wanted to explain why I left for so long, but I couldn’t and the more he followed me, the more I tried to do what I did best and close myself off.

“Cassie, please,” Pete grabbed my arm as Miles’s shocked face appeared at the top of the steps. More of his words escaped, but the beating of my heart blocked them out and they didn’t register in my brain.

“Just leave me alone,” I said softly, but they didn’t. They kept on. Their words kept on, and I couldn’t hear a thing.

“We didn’t know,” Miles’s voice came through.

“I said, leave...me...alone.”

I slammed the door in between us and pressed my body to it, sliding down until my bottom hit the floor. Tears streamed down my face, uncontrollable tears that I held in for too long. I tried to put the past behind me, I tried to forget, yet the past always found a way to creep back in and take over every ounce of my being until I felt nothing.

Nine months ago was when everything happened. Everett and I had been together for two and a half years before I decided to call it quits. Much of the time in those years was filled with nothing but hatred toward one another, and coning his way into things I had no idea how to get out of. The beating only started six months into the relationship. The first slap I thought was just a drunken mistake, I didn’t think anything of it and for one reason or another, I forgave him...but the beatings continued. When we first met, there was something about his witty charm and model good looks I couldn’t get enough of, and sure enough he won me over. We hadn’t even been dating two months when we decided to move in together—or should I say, he convinced me it would be better if we lived together, since I couldn’t afford anything in downtown Manhattan and he hated travelling to my place in Brooklyn. Long story short, I moved into his penthouse overlooking Central Park. I had barely a year left of University when that happened, and with my internship at the publishing house, many of my weekdays were long and tedious. I’d leave early in the morning, and only return late at night. He knew that, and accepted that weekends would be our time together...but, as time passed and he changed, he hated how much I worked and how much I was out of the house. Of course, I changed my ways for him, but he was no different, going on business trips, working late, what have you. (The deals with his father were somewhat of a mystery to me, but I knew enough to know that they were illegal, they involved drugs, and sometimes more.) I came home earlier, left home later, and yet, he’d come home night after night hammered after I’d slaved making a dinner he begged me to make. He’d reek of cheap perfume and it lingered constantly the more the months passed. Whenever I commented on it, I’d get a fist to my face. Then, nine months ago, I came home earlier than

expected to surprise him and try to fix whatever was broken between us, only to find him giving it to some blonde on our dining room table. The stench of alcohol and weed engulfed me the more I stood in our place, the remnants of cocaine still lingered on the coffee table. The woman quickly dressed and ran out of the apartment, without a word or explanation. I wanted to cry, I wanted to be angry at him, but a small part of me was relieved I could finally be free. Instead of reasoning with me, he beat me into submission as he clawed at me for yelling at him for cheating on me, for yelling at him for being a bastard. He hit me in the face, the stomach, cracked one of my ribs until he forced himself on top of me to break me even more, scars still decorate my inner thighs to remind me of that horrible night. After he finished, he climbed off me and went to shower, which was when I grabbed what I could and I ran into the cold night. I didn't know what to do, or where to go. My feet moved across the busy streets and I forced myself to go to a hospital. I stayed silent, I didn't tell them anything, solely my name and that I was injured. They fixed up the gashes on my face and gave me Ativan for my panicked state. I hopped on the first bus out of the city, I called a friend, someone I knew I could trust and gave them an address to send my things to the next time Everett went on a business trip. It took me a while to build up enough courage to go home, Miles and Pete were worried about me, but I knew I was going to be fine. For six months I travelled around to different cities, visiting old friends, until I finally came home.

"Cassie, please talk to me," Miles said on the other side of the door.

"There's nothing to discuss," I closed my eyes and tried to relax. "Just get back to work."

"Fuck that," Miles said and turned the knob. "You better move before I accidentally hurt you."

I rose to my feet and slumped at the edge of the bed as they pushed the door open. Pete walked in and wrapped his arms around me instantly. His lower lip quivered against my shoulder.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Pete asked, letting go of me. "I didn't notice anything. All those times we came to visit, you never had a scratch on you."

"It's not something I wanted to scream from the mountain tops," I shrugged. "Makeup does wonders."

“Is that why you were in hiding before coming to us?” Miles asked.

“Pretty much,” I shook my head. “I still don’t know what he’s capable of... I remember him coming home one night with blood all over him, and I knew I should’ve left then. But I was too scared to leave. Fuck, I’m still terrified he’ll do something... I hate living in fear.”

“You’ll always have us to protect you,” Pete said, the innocence he exuded made me smile.

“Love you too, kiddo,” I pulled him in and kissed his forehead. “But I meant what I said, I do want to be alone for a while.”

“At least let us stay with you. We’ll be quiet and just watch movies—”

“Thanks Miles, but really. I’ll be okay.”

*

My phone chimed once more, but I refused to look at it as I soaked in the bathtub. I knew who it was, and I knew what he wanted, but I didn’t want to see him. I was embarrassed, ashamed that he had to know my deepest secret... my most disturbing shame. Yet, Corbin continued, and sent message after message until I answered. I hadn’t, though, nor did I have the courage to.

After the third chime, I gave in to my curiosity and picked my phone up off the floor. A message from Miles asking if I wanted dinner, and Pete asking if I felt like a smoke. All of Corbin’s messages grouped into one and I opened them.

Are you okay?

What the fuck happened? And why didn’t you tell me about that scumbag?

Cassie, please don’t shut me out.

Babe?

Alright, if you’re going to ignore me, know that I’m here for you whenever you need me. You can call me, come to me, and do whatever it is you want to do. I’ll be here. Know that, please. I love you.

I saw the light go on in your room, are you awake?

I’ll take that as a no?

Miles said you’re taking a bath, if I have to sneak in through your window I will. I’ll do anything just to see your face.

Cassie!

I read the messages and locked my screen. I wasn't ready to see him, I felt disgusting, abused even, and Everett hadn't even laid a finger on me since everything happened. I hated him so much and here I was, feeling like I was taking my hatred out on Corbin, the most perfect guy I could have ever met. He loved me for me, not my past and yet, I still couldn't face him.

I unlocked my phone once more and started typing a message to Corbin.

I'm sorry you had to overhear all of that earlier...just please understand I want to be alone.

It sounded harsh, I knew that, but I sent it anyway. Perhaps I was destined to be alone after all. Maybe he'd think less of me because of what happened. I hated how Everett made me feel, I wasn't myself around him. I wasn't myself and I hated it.

Knock-knock.

"Cassie, it's Pete," his voice a muffled whisper on the other side of the door. "I gotta pee."

Without question, I unplugged the bath and fastened the towel around myself; steam rising off my body as I twisted my hair into a topknot. I held my phone to my chest and unlocked the door. With a raise of my eyebrows, he hurried in as I tip-toed out, an overwhelming sense of dread came over me the more I sulked, but I didn't feel like being the cheery-bubbly person I always was. My own mother didn't even want to face me after the day we had. For fuck's sake, she didn't even believe me.

With an unsatisfying click, I locked my bedroom door behind me and tiptoed to my bed where I let myself fall backward into it, staring at the uneven ceiling above me. For a few moments, I studied the stuccoed patterns. How they moved, yet were still frozen; it's funny how easily the naked eye can fool you. Stare at something long enough and it'll come alive.

The scant moonlight was trying to pry its way through the darkened night sky as thunder rolled in the distance. The pitter-patter of rain slowly escaped and fell onto our metal roof. I closed my eyes and listened to the rain and its healing powers of relaxation. On nights like that as kids, I'd take my brothers on long car rides. We'd find a remote spot and park the car to listen to the pouring rain as it hit the roof of the

car. It was so calming to us. Every ounce of trouble, stress, or hatred would always lift off of us and wash away into the stormy nights. My reminiscing stopped as a few taps on my window startled me.

I ignored it at first, believing it was solely moving objects bumping into the window outside as the rain picked up, yet another tap—louder that time—hit, and I rolled over to see Corbin’s face lit up by the strike of lightening. I quickly got out of bed and pried the window open, hurrying him in. The wind blew past as the rain fell hard. The thunder rolled closer with every growl as the rain fell harder with every strike of lightening.

“What’re you doing here?” I whispered.

He didn’t reply, instead he took my face and planted his soft lips upon mine. I felt my eyes well with tears, but I refused to let them fall, I refused to show my weakness.

“Don’t shut me out,” he leaned his forehead to mine. “You and I, we’re a team and we’re in this together.”

“Corbin...” I backed away, but he wouldn’t let me and got down on his knees, taking both my hands.

“We don’t have to acknowledge anything. I just want to be here for you, whenever you need me.”

My eyes moved from one of his eyes to the next as he looked up at me, his thick eyebrows arched high. I nodded, having him around made everything seem better. It made every thought I ever had disappear. I pushed my lips together and got down to his level. A smile crept on his face as I wrapped my arms around his neck, the cold of his wet shirt sending goosebumps through me.

“Let’s get this off you before you get sick,” I said and helped him lift off his shirt.

I slid into my bed and lifted the covers on top of me as Corbin slid in beside me, his cold naked body hugging mine. I looked up at him as my head lay on his chest, his hair tickling my nose. My burden weighed heavily the longer I watched him, taking in his beautiful smile.

“You okay?” he asked. I didn’t want to say anything, but the gleam in his eye, the worry and concern that painted his face made me realize perhaps I wasn’t alone anymore, even though Everett made me feel as such. I pressed my lips to his chest and fixed my head upon it, listening to the thumping of his heart.

“Feels like all these months of trying to forget came pouring back in,” I let out as he tugged at the elastic in my hair and began to run his fingers through it.

“You’re safe now, you know that, right?”

“You don’t know him or what he’s capable of—”

“I promise you, I won’t let anything happen to you,” he kissed the top of my head as I rolled onto my back. “I’m not him, nor will I ever be like him.”

Thunder clapped nearby, and I jumped slightly. A storm hadn’t passed like that in a while, and was never that clear. I felt like I was living the storm, and as it passed all I had to do was lay back heartbroken and exhausted. Defeated almost. Desperately looking for a way to pick myself up all over again. His fingers caressed my arm with such a delicate touch I shivered. I wanted to smile and tell myself he will help me through it, but I knew it was something I had to do for myself.

“How did you even get up here?” I asked, peaking at the window.

“Propped up my ladder,” the corner of his mouth quirked up.

“You better hope it’s still out there after the storm,” I chuckled.

“If it’s not I’ll just buy another,” he grinned. His soft lips met mine as he pulled me close to him and held me, the gentle beating of his heart rhythmic enough to allow my eyes to grow heavy and everything around me fade to black.

- 6

I jerked into wakefulness, the sudden urge of something watching me towered my senses. I looked at my phone beside me, the time read four-thirty-three as well as a goodnight message from Corbin. He hadn’t been with me that night as my mother insisted on having a family dinner that consisted of awkward silences and her talking about her upcoming projects once the home we resided in was complete...still no acknowledgement at what happened a few days prior. Martin was there, such a joy, I had to sit through a dinner of his stupid jokes and drunken accusations pointed at me about how I almost cost them their deal. Miles and Pete both shot him down, but the shame still lingered in Martin’s shooting gazes.

I hung my legs off the edge of my bed, and rose, my feet moving on their own as they made their way down the hallway toward the stairs

for a drink of water. Miles's snores escaped his semi-opened door. I observed his beard, which was less of a shadow and more of a scruff he was growing accustomed to. Pete's music silently blared from his headphones that hung off the side of his bed as drool escaped his open mouth. I smiled slightly and continued my way down the creaking staircase.

A wave of cold air met me at the bottom, something I knew was odd. The front door stood ajar and soft rustling moved through the living room. I clenched my fists in frustration because I had left my phone on my bed, though Colin's toolbox rest at the bottom of the stairs, and if I was fast enough, then perhaps I could snag a tool before whomever was lurking could lunge at me.

I took another soft step off the staircase, keeping my gaze on the dark living room whose sole lighting was the shine of the crescent moon. Shadows stood tall, their forms frozen in the foreground as if waiting for something to happen. The side table lamp stretched up the wall, its shade gave horrifying glimpses of what it would've been like if someone were lurking in the shadows. Its tall, stocky shadow stood menacing against the draped plastic.

I inhaled deeply and leaned down, my fingers grasping the hammer. As I rose, blood pounded in my ears and my hands shook slightly, but I had to be strong for my brothers. I took a step forward and a billowing shadow moved in the distance. It was unmistakably human and it stood there as if challenging me. My shaking hand reached for the light switch beside me, trembling to keep my eyes on the lurker and in search of safety. However, my arms were too far from the switch and I was too frightened to move anymore.

Everything happened so fast, the shadow ran at me, its heavy breathing ringing in my ears. I lifted the hammer and swung, striking directly on the shadow's shoulder. With a dissatisfying grunt, the shadow shoved me into the staircase, my back meeting the solid wood with a thump. I moaned as a shooting pain burned through my leg. Before I had time to counter-attack, the shadow ran out the front door, into the dark of the night.

My heart thundered in my chest as I pushed myself up off the stairs, the sharp pain in my back throbbing. I hit the light switch and followed the shadow out the front door to find nothing but the roaring

street lights guiding my eyes. Mocking me, as if they knew I couldn't see in the darkness.

"Fuck," I sighed, holding the small of my back.

I looked behind me at the darkened hallway, more shadows lurking, giving me false illusions. I clenched the hammer in my hand with such veracity that my nails dug into my palm leaving half-moon ridges. My breathing was quick and hard, and my chest grew tight as though I had just finished a long-distance run. The cool breeze swooped in once more, sending a shiver over me, sending a certainty that someone was still watching as footsteps moved upstairs. I shut the door and made sure to lock and bar it, peaking out the stained glass as if I could see through it.

"He-hello?" Miles' voice rattled.

"It's just me, kid," I said, and adjusted the hammer in my hand.

"What was that noise?"

"I saw something—fuck, someone was in the house," I swallowed, gazing into the living room as darkness bled in from the openings that weren't lit by the light above me.

"What?" his frightened face came clearly into view as he sped down the remainder of the steps.

"I came down for a drink of water and the door was open and I heard something, then it just came at me," I shuddered, trying to calm my nerves as fear crept down my spine like frozen water.

"Are you okay?" he asked, eyeing my hand on my back.

"I'll be alright," I sighed deeply.

"Did you get a look at them?"

"Not in the slightest," I sighed.

"Shit."

"I'm going to check the backdoor, make sure it's locked."

"Yeah, I'll come with you," Miles said, taking the baseball bat from behind the front door.

We tiptoed through the home, turning every light on to ignite our path as the eerie silence moved around us like a fog, enveloping us the more we explored. The backdoor was locked in place, and so were the windows surrounding it. I kept the lights on; if anyone were to return they would know we were somewhat prepared.

As I snagged a glass of water from the kitchen, Miles tossed an icepack at me. I chuckled and wrapped it in a cloth before I followed him up the staircase, stopping at Pete's room to be sure he was alright. Two break-ins we knew of, *two*. Something was brewing and I most certainly wasn't going to sit around and wait to find out what it was.

We continued to my room where I grabbed my phone and then settled into Miles's bed for something of a night's sleep. I knew I shouldn't worry Corbin, but I was still frightened. There had been someone in our home, someone lurking in the darkness waiting to do God-only-knows what.

"Shit," I groaned as I laid down on the opposite side of the bed, the small of my back seizing slightly as pain shot through my body. I placed the icepack on it, trying to lie down with it.

"What happened?"

"Fucker pushed me into the stairs," I grunted making myself as comfortable as I could.

"Should we call the cops?" Miles asked, peering at the closed door.

"No," I groaned again. "We should ask Mom what the fuck she dragged us into this time."

"You really think she's asking for money again?"

"Everett was here the other day, was he not?" I unlocked my phone and hit Corbin's name. "His family is dangerous, and I knew it was only a matter of time until she got tangled into their shit. God, she's so stubbornly selfish."

"Sorry you had to come back to this," Miles said, taping his fingers on his stomach.

"I promised you guys I'd always protect you, and I wasn't lying."

"Love you, sis," Miles said and leaned over to hug me.

"Love you, too," I groaned from the pain in my back. "But you gotta get off me."

"You think something's broken?"

"Hope not," I sighed, staring at the blank message I wanted to send Corbin, but decided against it.

"We gotta find out what Mom is hiding," Miles said. "You know she's gotta be hiding something."

“Yeah, but what exactly, is the question and do we want to be meddling with it is the other,” I pushed my lips together.

I listened to Miles’s heavy breathing as he slowly drifted off to sleep. While I, on the other hand, wouldn’t see another minute of sleep that night.

*

“Cassie!” Alice yelled as I tucked my t-shirt into my skirt. I flinched every time I tried to lift my arms as a bruise had already begun to form on the small of my back, closer to the left than the right.

“Coming,” I replied, taking a deep breath and following it with two pain killers. I made my way out of my room and to the top of the stairs. “What’s up?”

“I have a lunch meeting downtown today and the workers have the day off. You’re in charge, please don’t burn *my* house down,” Alice instructed as she adjusted her purse to her shoulder. I laughed, nodding reassuringly.

“I’ll hold down fort, don’t worry,” I trotted down the staircase and made my way to the kitchen.

“Martin said he may stop by today to see Pete, if he does, be nice,” Alice added.

“He’s not coming to lunch with you?”

“If he stops, by then no, if he doesn’t, then yes,” she said and shut the front door behind her.

I rolled my eyes and entered the kitchen where Miles and Pete were eating cereal. The kitchen was the newest project and all the cabinets were removed, leaving everything bare as plastic draped most of the surface area and our stove was nowhere in sight.

“You hear what Mom said?” I asked Pete and reached for a bowl. “Ow, fucking cunts.”

“What did she say?” Pete asked with his mouth full. Miles poured cereal in the bowl I placed on the counter and slid the milk to me.

“Martin might stop by,” I moaned, holding the ache in my back.

“You okay?” Pete asked.

“Long story,” I sighed as I poured milk atop the cereal in my bowl.

“Miles already filled me in,” Pete replied. “So, we gonna snoop her shit today?”

“Might as well take advantage of her being gone all day,” Miles nodded.

“Just like ol’ times when we snooped for money,” I chuckled.

The doorbell sounded, its ear clenching tune cascading throughout the house. I scooped a spoonful of cereal into my mouth and I brought the bowl with me to the door. Dust motes swirled by the slightly open windows as I entered the threshold and opened the front door. Corbin’s sparkling blue eyes shone brighter in the morning sun as he beamed the moment his face met mine.

“Good morning gorgeous,” he said, stepping forward and planting his lips to mine.

“What’re you doing here?”

“Can’t I stop by to see my girlfriend?” he smiled a smile that melted my heart.

“And risk getting caught?”

“I saw your Mom leave, so the coast is clear,” he scratched the back of his head.

“You didn’t have to come on your day off,” I grinned.

“Of course, I did.”

“We’re just having breakfast,” I said as he placed his hand to my lower back and pulled me close to him, pushing against the newly formed bruise on my spine. “Ow, ow, ow, ow.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked, looking around me.

“You wouldn’t believe me even if I told you,” I said hesitantly meeting his eyes.

“Babe,” concern painted his handsome face. A crash echoed from the kitchen.

“Hang on,” I said.

“I’m coming with you,” he said. I smiled, taking another bite of my cereal.

I led him into the kitchen where Miles was just finishing up his breakfast and Pete was picking up pieces of his broken bowl.

“Morning,” Miles said, rising from his seat and placing his bowl in the sink.

“Hey,” Corbin’s eyes shot to me as I rested the bowl on the island.

“What happened?” I said, reaching to help Pete.

“Butter fingers,” Pete laughed.

“So...” Corbin glanced at me and I looked to Miles. Miles shrugged as Pete finished cleaning and I nodded.

“Someone broke into our house last night, don’t know what they wanted or what they took, but they ended up knocking me onto the stairs, hence the back ache, but not before I wacked them in the shoulder with Colin’s hammer,” I nodded, scooping another spoonful into my mouth.

“Jesus!” Corbin exclaimed. “Are you alright? Let me see your back.”

“I’m alright, baby,” I smiled with my mouth full, thumbing the milk from my lip.

“Did you guys call the cops?” Corbin added.

“No,” Miles and Pete said in unison.

“Don’t think that would be too wise given Mom’s history,” Miles continued.

Corbin helped himself to lifting my shirt revealing a black and blue bruise upon my pale skin. His fingers gently brushed over it and pure anger painted his face.

“I’ll be fine,” I grinned. “I’ve been hurt worse than this.”

“That’s not funny, Cass,” Miles said.

“Point being,” I widened my eyes at Miles then turned to Corbin. “I’m okay.”

“I think we should get this checked out,” Corbin added, looking at my bruise again.

“No, honestly, baby. I’m okay,” I smiled.

“Plus, my dad’s gonna be here soon. We gotta get ready,” Pete said. I could tell he didn’t want to share Alice’s secrets with Corbin, not yet anyway and I didn’t blame Pete. Corbin was still fresh, even for me, and I didn’t want him to know how fucked up our family truly was. How crazy Alice was and how deranged Martin was.

“Alright, alright,” I smiled. “Sorry to cut this short, baby. I’ll walk you out.”

I took Corbin’s hand and led him through the house to the front door. His handsome face darkened, something was bothering him. He brought my hand to his mouth and kissed it softly.

“I thought you hated Martin,” Corbin chuckled.

“I do,” I sighed. “Don’t get me started.”

Corbin nodded, hesitation in his step. I knew he didn't want to go. I didn't want him to leave either, but finding out what our mother was hiding wasn't something he needed to be a part of. I loved him dearly, but the less he knew about my fucked up past, the better.

"Cassie," he started. "Please consider moving in with me. I don't know what bullshit is going on, but you're clearly not safe here...none of you are."

"I can't just move in on a whim...Christ, if I didn't spot the guy, who knows what could've happened—"

"Why didn't you call the cops?" he interrupted.

"There's a lot of shit you don't know about Alice," I said, biting my lower lip.

"All the more reason you need to get away," he cupped my face, his blue eyes drinking me in.

"I can't just leave my brothers," I said softly, highly considering running away again. "Not after Everett knows where we live."

"Do you think it was him last night?"

"I don't know...God, I ran away from one nightmare only to enter the next," I flipped my hair as my eyes glossed over.

"I'll get a guy to come in. He used to work for Colin setting up alarms and such—"

"You really don't know who Everett's family is," I frowned. "Once they put their minds to something, nothing will get in their way of getting what they want. And Everett wants...I don't know what he wants."

"I won't let him touch you," Corbin's nostrils flared. Miles and Pete appeared from behind the draped plastic and made their way to us. I rose on the tips of my toes and gave Corbin a soft, gentle kiss.

"It's not me I'm worried about."

"I love you," Corbin whispered.

"I love you, too."

"I'll see you later, okay? Please call me if you need anything," Corbin said.

"We will," Pete said and jogged up the stairs.

"Later man," Miles added just a few inches behind Pete.

I planted one more kiss to Corbin's soft lips and smiled as I watched him make his way down the steps and over to his property.

*

“Find anything?” Miles groaned as he lifted another box in the attic.

“Nothing but old deeds and contracts for the bullshit houses she made us live in while she worked,” I sighed, believing our snooping was useless.

“I’ll check her room, maybe she’s hiding something in there? There’s that folder she bitched you out about,” Miles said and gently dropped the box beside me before trotting down the steps.

“You really think Mom is hiding something?” Pete asked as my phone chimed in the background.

“Isn’t she always?” I said under my breath as I looked down at Corbin’s name on the screen.

Free for dinner tonight? I made a reservation, Corbin wrote. I could sense the anticipation in his message.

A reservation? Someplace fancy? I replied with a winking face.

It’s a surprise, he wrote.

I smiled at the screen and bit my bottom lip, I couldn’t wait to see him. Frankly, if it was up to me, I would’ve accepted his offer to move in. I was just too frightened to leave my brothers alone knowing Everett had been inside our home and knowing not once, but twice, we caught someone else in here as well.

I do love a surprise, I sent. *I’m sorry we had to cut it short this morning. You must be tired of my family bullshit already.*

I’ll never get tired of you, he replied. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Cassie, once you’re about done gushing over your boyfriend, come look at this,” Miles appeared holding a folder in his hands.

“What’s that?” I asked, rising to my feet.

“Well, she’s definitely up to something,” Miles handed me the folder.

“What the fuck is *this*?” I said confused.

I had no idea what I was looking at. There were numbers and names with red arrows she drew from one name to the next with blue arrows from one name to a number as well as names of—what I believed to be—charities. There was a total number at the bottom of the page which read over eighteen million dollars, and I knew we definitely did not have that kind of money, but the bank slip after it with Alice’s name on it said otherwise. The bank slip stated deposit after deposit of hefty

lump sums from various names. I reached for my phone and found the camera app, taking a couple of shots of the documents. There wasn't anything else in the folder aside from a USB key that was taped to the back of it and another deed to an address I did not recognize.

"I recognize that name," Pete said, pointing to one of the names on the list. "Xavier Pelton is one of Martin's best friends. He owns that giant yacht we went on last Christmas."

"Thank God I missed that," I chuckled. "Wonder what his name is doing here and why five million dollars is attached to it and something called *HelpPets*."

"She's not laundering money, is she?" Miles frowned, also trying to make sense of the document.

"I wouldn't put it past her," I sighed.

"Everett's name is on it too...I wonder what this is about?" Pete said, scanning the document further. I believed I knew what she was doing. Siphoning money through bogus charities was a new low, even for her.

"Nothing good, that's for sure," Miles shook his head. "If he's involved—"

"Bugs could be planted in the house," Pete looked around the attic ceilings. "That's why they keep breaking in here."

"Goddamnit," I gritted my teeth. "This is why I left in the first place, because of all her fuckin' bullshit."

"Please don't go," Miles said, looking slightly defeated.

"I won't, kid," I shook my head. "Not without the two of you at least."

A loud slam echoed through the house, followed by our mother's voice calling from below. I hadn't even realized how long we were up there. Miles scrambled to grab the folder he found in her room and ran down the stairs to put it back in its place. Pete and I hurried to clean the mess we made of the open boxes and followed, acting as calm as we could. Miles stumbled out of Alice's room and joined us at the top of the staircase.

"There you three are," she called. "Come join me in the kitchen."

"That was close," Pete whispered as we slowly made our way down the stairs.

The front door was left open, and a black SUV was parked across the street. I did not like the feeling of that and wanted nothing more than to force my brothers to pack their things and take them away with me. Miles spotted the SUV as well, and fright painted his face. I shook my head and pushed them on to see what our mother wanted.

“My loves,” she started, a hint of her having too much wine at lunch in her tone. “Come, come sit.”

Martin stood beside her, that egotistical look on his face. There wasn’t enough breath to describe how much I despised that man, his manipulation, his usage, his lies and disgusting extracurricular activities...and yet there he was, still acting as though he were part of our lives.

“Hey kiddo,” Martin said with arms wide open, the booze could be smelled coming off him from where we stood.

“We’re good here,” I said as my brothers obeyed and stood beside me.

“I have some great news!” she exclaimed.

“Wonderful news actually,” Martin added.

“Well, given that we have the floor guys coming in tomorrow to refinish everything, Martin was going to be gracious enough and find us a suite downtown,” Alice started.

“Isn’t that generous,” I added coyly.

“One of our investors has *generously* offered us his place to stay instead—”

“No,” I folded my arms, Everett’s name flashing through my mind on that list sending a rush of anger through my veins.

“Excuse me?” Alice looked stunned. “This is perfect; we’ll stay at his—”

“I said no,” the muscle in my jaw twitched.

“This is not your decision, Cassie,” Martin snapped.

“Nor is it yours,” I barked back.

“These are my boys and if I want them to do something, they’ll do it. Understood?” Martin clenched his jaw and took a thundering step toward me, but he didn’t frighten me. Not one bit.

“No, I don’t, because last time I checked, I pretty much raised these boys of yours and they are *not* getting into business affairs with

anyone, let alone Everett. So, no Martin, they will *not* go anywhere with you,” I raised my voice, standing my ground.

“Cassie, that is enough!” Alice interjected.

“Enough of what?” I asked. Pete and Miles took my hands, squeezing tightly. Everett’s face flashed again, that pompous smile I hated so much. “You know what that fuck head did to me, and yet you’re still doing business with him.”

“It’s your word against his,” Martin jeered.

“Are you for real?” I scoffed. “You think I would joke about something like *that*?”

“No, but—” Alice began...just knowing she didn’t believe what had happened, and the real reason why I left New York still boiled within me. It was as good a time as any to let it out. They were my brothers, *my* responsibility.

“But what, Mother? You had no idea, no fuckin’ clue what I went through for almost three years with that bastard. Three fuckin’ years of being beaten, abused, and when push came to shove and I finally got the courage to leave, he degraded me the only way a man can. And you don’t fuckin’ believe *me*?” Tears filled my eyes, but I refused to let them fall.

“You left Cassie, you left and—” Martin interjected.

“And what, Martin? And what? Hm? I deserved it? Is that what you were gonna say? I only left here for a better life for *them* and that literally fucked me over,” I growled. “I did my best with these boys and made sure they were safe, even if I was on the other side of the country, money was always deposited into their accounts, I checked in multiple times a day and when—”

“You raised them yet you left for over six years—” Martin yelled.

“And every chance they got they made their way over to *me*!” I interrupted him.

“And you were with Everett, were you not? If he’s so dangerous why did you allow my sons to stay with him?” Martin yelled.

“Because I had no other choice!” I screamed.

“You know what, I don’t feel like arguing. You want to keep them and care for them? Then do it, I will be in a penthouse downtown with Everett. So, if you’ll excuse us, we have some bags to pack,” Martin said, taking Alice’s arm.

“This is how it’s going to be now?” I asked calmly, narrowing my eyes at Alice.

“Sweetheart—”

“Just go,” I scoffed, moving out of their way so they could leave the kitchen.

I sniffed, trying to keep it together. That was Alice, she followed everyone who “owned” her, and Martin surely did. Any time she asked for money, he threw it at her with a clause and she didn’t refuse. He said jump, she asked how high. Alice’s bickering silently moved through the house as Martin’s deeper growl tried to put her in her place.

“Cassie, you didn’t have to do that,” Miles sighed.

“You don’t know Everett and what he’s capable of,” my eyes welled with tears. The more I said that statement the more real everything became and the more of that night where Everett came home covered in blood blossomed more clearly.

“Why did you stay with him for so long?” Pete asked.

“You saw what happened when I decided to leave,” I sniffed.

Alice’s heavy footfalls stormed down the staircase, the clatter of her trying to get her heels back onto her feet echoed through the house. Martin ordered her around, telling her to hurry it up, to stop, to leave us alone...without a goodbye, or any words exchanged, the front door slammed shut and the clacking of her heels grew more silent.

“She is right, though,” Miles said. “We can’t stay here while the floors are being done.”

“Yeah, well...I’ll figure something out. But neither of you are going anywhere near that bastard,” I sighed. “We’ll leave in the morning as soon as the workers arrive.”

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“You seem like you’re someplace else,” Corbin said, forking his pasta into his mouth.

The echo of utensils hitting plates circled around me along with the muted conversations that mixed into one giant sound. I wanted to focus on us, I wanted to smile and pretend everything was alright, I wanted to get lost in his ocean blue eyes, but I couldn’t. He was right, my mind was elsewhere and the simple thought of being out for dinner instead of home with my brothers made me feel irresponsibly selfish.

“Sorry,” I grinned. “Just have a lot on my mind.”

“You wanna talk about it?” he smirked.

“I don’t even know where to start,” I chuckled.

“Have you given any more thought to moving in?” he asked, keeping his focus on the wine glass he lifted to his lips.

“Maybe,” I teased, swirling spaghetti around my fork. “I just can’t leave Miles and Pete with her and that dickhead Martin. Especially not with her new business venture.”

“What new business venture?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I sighed with a smile. I didn’t want to worry him any more than I was already panicking.

“You sure?” he asked, a look of concern on his face.

“I’m sure, it’s not something we need to get into anyway,” I took a lavish bite of my food. The sweet tomato sauce danced around my taste buds and the salty parmesan cheese coated the roof of my mouth.

“I didn’t see Alice today—”

“Let me stop you there,” I chuckled. “She’s in a penthouse downtown with Martin that Everett had the courtesy of offering while the floors are being redone in the house.”

“So, that’s the new business venture,” he shook his head in disapproval.

“It’s the start of something,” I shook my head still trying to understand the documents my brothers and I came across. “She doesn’t believe me about him either, so something tells me his money speaks louder than his actions.”

“Jesus,” his mouth was set in a hard line.

“It’s fine,” I shook my head and frowned.

“It’s not fine, Cassie,” Corbin reached his hand out, taking mine. “If he’s as dangerous as you say, you’re not safe. Fuck, your mother isn’t even safe.”

“Fuck her,” I growled, retracting my hand. “She made her bed.”

I took a large gulp of red wine, the dry taste seeping down my throat. I tried to avoid looking at him, I wasn’t mad or anything, just the sight of him made me want to agree with everything he said. His eyes made me think clearly, clearer than I had in years, but I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. I couldn’t just leave, I had two people I had to take with me. There was no other option. If I left with Corbin, Miles and Pete were part of that equation.

“We have an extra room in the house,” Corbin broke the silence. “Denis is going away for a couple days if your brothers want to stay while the floors are being done.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“Babe, I’d do anything for you,” he smirked.

“Well, Mr. Salinger,” I narrowed my eyes with a grin.

“Yes, Ms. Chastain,” he chuckled.

“What do you say we take this to go?”

“That, I can get on board with,” he winked and waved down a waiter for the bill.

- 7

Corbin’s warm body was pressed against mine. His soft snores moved through my ears. I inhaled deeply as the moonlight shone through his open windows, blanketing us in its glow as a timid breeze swept in. I kissed the side his face, then his shoulder and slid out from under his draped arm.

I stretched my arms up, wincing silently at the pain in my back. It seemed like it was getting worse by the day, but I was strong, I knew I was and I couldn’t be locked in a hospital over a measly bruise. Snagging Corbin’s shirt off the floor, I fastened some of the buttons. The dryness in my mouth was becoming unbearable, but he had no liquids in his room. I silently slipped out and tiptoed my way down the hallway; my intent was to head to the kitchen and grab a glass of water and come back to bed.

Miles and Pete were here with us in the room by the kitchen. As soon as Corbin and I left the restaurant, he dropped me off at Alice’s house so that I could inform my brothers of our plan to stay at Corbin’s until the floors were finished. Neither Miles nor Pete refused the offer and we packed our bags quickly, and then made our way next door.

I tiptoed down the staircase and continued into the kitchen desperately in need of some water after the night Corbin and I shared. I took a glass from the dish rack, intending on filling it with tap water, when I overheard low murmurs escaping the dining room, causing me to have to listen intently. I barely recognized the voices, they were just on the edge of my perception. I walked cautiously to the opening of the

dining room and peeked my head out...my curiosity taking over my common sense.

Ethan and Colin were silently arguing over documents on the table. Ethan kept pointing at one of the documents, while Colin shrugged and argued over another. I desperately wanted to move closer, to see what they were discussing, yet I knew they were probably arguing over their next project designs or something of the like.

I turned on my heels, readying myself to leave when their argument grew clearer as their voices rose.

"...they're messing up this deal," Ethan said. I frowned and placed my back to the wall.

"No, *Corbin's* messing up the deal," Colin growled. "I knew I shouldn't have taken him back."

"Open house is coming up, if we can make it 'til then, everything should be fine."

"I don't like *them* being *here*," Colin added. "If they find anything—"

"They won't find anything because we won't leave anything for them to find," Ethan urged. "Corbin said that Cassie thinks Alice has a new business venture, which is good. Maybe he'll get that little firecracker to open up some more. She knows more than she lets on."

"Yeah. But every time they're together he can't help but shove his dick in her," Colin scoffed. "We need more proof before this open house. Something is going down, and without proof our only liability goes down with it—we need more time."

"Then maybe one of us should step in, maybe talk to one of the boys? They are staying here for a couple days," Ethan suggested.

"Yeah," he sighed and slid his hand over his face. "But fuck, who knows if they'll even open up. That Pete kid's pretty quiet and Miles doesn't talk about anything that isn't work related."

"Gotta try something."

"What if they don't know anything? Cassie seems protective of them, and if they tell her we're asking questions, they'll shut down for good," Colin continued.

"Then we get her to talk," Ethan folded his arms. "End of story."

"Yeah," Colin sighed, palm sliding down his face. "We should get some sleep, we got floors to refinish in the morning."

“Night, man,” Ethan tapped his shoulder and made his way toward the kitchen. With cat like reflexes, I quickly tiptoed to the opening of the kitchen, and grabbed the glass from the counter. I entered as if I had just gotten there when Ethan stepped in as well. “Cassie?”

“Jesus!” I pretended to be frightened. “You scared the living shit out of me.”

“Sorry, I didn’t know anyone was up,” Ethan added, his face painted with suspicion.

“Yeah, I—” I paused, forcing a yawn. “Sorry, just came in for some water.”

“Alright,” he grinned. I turned the tap on and filled the glass with water nodding at him.

“Nice of Corbin to let you stay a couple days,” Ethan said, folding his arms as he leaned on the threshold.

“Yeah, it is,” I smiled. Colin’s footfalls echoed through the silence as he made his way up the staircase.

“Where’s your mom staying?” he asked.

“Some hotel I think,” I took a sip of the water.

“You guys didn’t want to stay in the hotel?”

“Um...” I started. “I don’t know. This seemed like the better option.”

“Does it have anything to do with that guy who came over the other day?”

“It could—why are you asking about that?”

“Just making conversation,” he smiled.

“Well, he’s not someone I want to discuss,” my mouth set in a hard line. I didn’t like Ethan prying into my personal life any more than I liked him mentioning the event from a few days ago.

“Didn’t mean any offense by mentioning it,” he put his hands up slightly.

“It’s alright.”

“That guy I saw your mom with earlier, that her new boyfriend? He comes around a lot and tries to boss us around,” Ethan chuckled.

“That would be Martin, the scum of the earth,” I chuckled. Ethan’s blue eyes scanned me and I nodded slightly. “I should get to bed.”

“Yeah,” Ethan sighed. “Night, then.”

“Night,” I smiled as he stepped out of the kitchen.

Taking a large gulp, I waited until his footfalls made their way up the staircase and silence filled the home once more. I tiptoed my way into the dining room, looking around cautiously. The dimly lit chandelier than hung over the table gave enough light for me to make my way around. There were files on the table: blue prints, sketches, deeds...nothing of which would make me believe they were anything other than workers. I flipped through some of the paper work and nodded. *I must've misheard them*, I chuckled quietly to myself. *Nothing was going to happen at the open house.*

I lifted one of the blueprints, and that's when I saw it. There were photos of people speaking to one another, taken from inside a car. Alice and Martin were in many of the photos, leaving banquet halls and office buildings. Photos of Miles and Pete, walking down streets, driving the car, Pete walking with his friends at school, Miles working at the last home Alice flipped. There was a single photo of me drinking coffee from a few months back in New York, I was wearing sunglasses to hide the wound on my cheekbone. My heart skipped a beat and I felt my throat collapse. The sole thought that ran through my mind wasn't the secrets I uncovered, it was the lies that spewed from Corbin. Was he in on whatever this was and was I too much of an idiot to even realize it? As scared as I felt, I couldn't look away. Photo after photo of nothing but Alice meeting with Everett, Alice and Martin entering a bank, leaving a restaurant, the images went on. The one photo that struck me the most was Everett speaking with a taller man whom I couldn't make out as his back was to the frame, but I believed it was Colin. I'd recognize those glasses anywhere. I was unable to swallow the lump in my throat, unable to keep my breathing calm. Everett always knew how to find me. He always knew how to fuck me over even when I tried to escape his grasp, he always reeled me back in.

A floorboard creaked and I quickly put everything back in its place. I felt like I didn't know these people any more than I knew my next move. *How could Corbin do this?* I thought to myself. *Maybe he doesn't know. Maybe he's as much in the dark as I am.* I thought of anything and everything to take him out of the equation. To take him out of being the monster Everett was. I tiptoed my way out of the dining room and back

into the kitchen where I grabbed my glass of water and hurried back to the stairwell.

“What’re you doing?” A voice startled me once more.

“Fuck,” I jumped, sloshing some water from the glass onto Corbin’s shirt. Zak was leaning out the front door smoking a cigarette, its ash lit up in the darkness. “Just getting some water.”

“You and Corbin, huh?” Zak continued.

“Yeah,” I nodded, eyeing the staircase before me.

“You being careful?”

“We’re good,” I chuckled, confusion circling my mind.

“I wasn’t asking about that,” smoke escaped his mouth.

As safe as I felt with Corbin, even with the new information I obtained, the people he lived with were a question all in themselves. I didn’t know any of them any more than their names and what they ate for breakfast. Given the conversation I overheard between Colin and Ethan, and the proof I witnessed with my own eyes, Zak poking at my relationship didn’t help the case. There was something they were all hiding, including Corbin.

“I better get back...”

“Alright,” he said, taking a long pull from his cigarette.

I quickly rushed up the staircase and made my way down the hall to Corbin’s room. I closed the door behind me and sighed in relief. I was frightened, there was no denying that. Especially after they all overheard my worst embarrassment, especially after seeing all those photos. I stood there for a moment, watching Corbin. His eyes moved against his eyelids, the soft twist in his mouth as he silently dreamed. Grinning slightly, I was too blinded by love to even begin to think he was hiding something from me, but I couldn’t be too careful. I placed the glass of water on the night stand and took out my phone.

I overheard Colin and Ethan talking about something. I don’t know what it was exactly, but it’s got something to do with Mom’s open house. I saw pictures too, like paparazzi pictures of all of us...even Everett. Something’s up, I don’t know what the fuck it is, but I gotta find out.

I hit send, looking at Miles’s name on the screen, then locked my phone and placed it back on the nightstand, biting my lower lip. I sat at the edge of the bed, my leg tapping restlessly as I waited for my brother to reply. I couldn’t stop seeing it. Those photos, the conversation, and

that folder in my mother's room. I just wanted to know what was happening, what we were stuck in the middle of...Corbin groaned and reached out to me.

"What're you doing?" his groggy voice asked.

"Just went to get some water," I said, pushing my lips together.

"Come here," he pulled me closer to him, kissing the nape of my neck with my back pressed to his chest. My phone lit up and I knew that Miles had replied to my message. The urge to reply was eating at me, but I didn't know what to do.

Corbin's hand explored my thigh, moving up my stomach to my chest. I cocked my head to meet his lips; his hand moving down my stomach again to the heat in between my thighs. My lips met his as his fingers moved in circles. Soft moans escaped my lips, and I grabbed at the hair on the back of his neck, the shine of the moon glossing over his crystal colored eyes. I bit down on his lip as I reached my climax and he lifted my leg, helping himself inside of me as he rocked against me. Pain shot through my back, but I didn't care. His hand remained on my hip as we made love on our side, the moon painting us in its light. We made love knowing there were secrets blooming between us, secrets I had yet to discover.

*

The sun shone brightly upon us as I sat with my knees to my chest, the ache in my back becoming a regular tick for me. The warm summer breeze kissed my ivory skin, sending a shiver through me. *So peaceful and calming*, I thought to myself as I gazed at the Golden Gate Bridge. Pete flicked his cigarette and nodded peering over at me. We left early that morning, before anyone in the house woke up. I wanted to talk to them someplace I thought was safe. Corbin may have brought me here, but it would soon be our little safe haven, my brothers and I. Concern painted Miles's face, his lips moved slightly, wanting to express a thought but stopped and he shot his gaze to the busy traffic. Pete sighed heavily and sat upright on the hood of the car.

"You're sure this is the best plan?" Miles asked, his gaze fixated on the beautiful architecture of the bridge.

"If something happens, I want to make sure the two of you are safe," I said tapping my fingers on my shins.

"What about you?" Pete asked.

“Don’t worry about me,” I studied his reddened eyes. “This is where we’ll meet. With or without me, you come here.”

“I don’t know about this—”

“Miles,” I interrupted. “Mom is doing something, I don’t know what the fuck it is, but it isn’t good. Fuck, what if these workers of hers are in on it too? Or worse, what if they’re just there waiting for the right moment to collect what’s theirs?”

“So we’re just supposed to meet here and what?” Pete started. “What if you’re wrong? What if they follow us? What if one of us gets fucking killed?”

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” I said. “I promise. And yes, God, I hope I’m wrong and nothing happens. I seriously do. But we have to have some sort of meeting point if something does happen. And if something does, I want the two of you to run without looking back.”

“And leave you behind?” Miles scoffed.

“If it comes to that, yes,” I sighed.

My phone chimed and a message from Corbin appeared: *Hey babe, where are you guys?* The corner of my mouth quirked up then disappeared, I wanted to reply but all this shit was getting the better of me.

The echoes of the cars flashing by grew between us and silence seeped in. I wanted to make sure they were safe. That was my only objective.

“What about Corbin?” Miles continued.

“What about him?” I said, ready to defend Corbin any which way I could.

“If you seriously think these guys are in on something, wouldn’t he be in on it, too?” Miles pointed out. I didn’t want to believe it, Christ I hoped he was wrong, but I had to keep all conclusions open until one was finalized.

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

“The photos, Cass, the proof is in their house. Open your eyes, man,” Pete said, sliding off the hood of the car. “Don’t blind yourself because he’s a good lay.”

“It’s not just that,” I sighed. Tears filled my line of vision as I looked from one brother to the next. “I love him, y’know.”

“We’re just asking you to be careful. It’s not always you who has to look out for us, you know,” Miles grinned and sat beside me, leaning his head on my shoulder. Pete mimicked and sat on the opposite side. I turned to plant a kiss on each of their foreheads, nodding slightly.

“Fuck, who knows,” Pete said. “Maybe Corbin is as much in the dark as we are.”

“One can only hope, right?” I chuckled. Hope was all I had at that point. Hope that we would see the light at the end of the tunnel my mother so wrongfully built. Hope that none of us would get hurt, that nothing would happen the night of the party Alice had been planning for months. Hope that in the end, everything would be okay.

“One thing I don’t understand is why she’s doing this?” Miles said, gazing out at the sparkling water.

“And with Everett of all fucking people,” I sighed. “She has no idea how dangerous he is.”

“She’s doing it for the money,” Pete lifted his head from my shoulder.

“That’s a given,” Miles scoffed and lifted his head as well.

“And Martin’s the influence,” I shook my head.

“You think Ethan and Colin work for Everett?” Pete asked.

“Maybe,” I shrugged. “God, I can’t believe I came back to be whisked into this shit.”

“We’re still glad you’re back,” Miles said softly.

A cool morning breeze swept in, brushing hair in front of my face. There was so much to say, so much to discover, but I didn’t want to. I wanted to stay in that moment watching the water glisten under the shining sun, hearing the sound of the traffic moving about the bridge. Being with them made everything better. I just had to convince myself to stop looking at my relationship through a fish-eyed lens and discover what Corbin was truly hiding.

“Why don’t we go to *Patsy*’s? Everyone raves about it and I have yet to try their breakfast,” I suggested.

“Nice little family breakfast would be nice,” Pete said.

“I could go for some bacon,” Miles chuckled. I smiled; this was my happiness, *they* were my happiness. That I knew for sure.

The day had come, Alice had set a due date and made sure everyone finished their tasks on time to meet that date. A cleaning crew had been there all morning cleaning up the last of the dust and dirt that had accumulated during the renovations, making sure everything sparkled. Ethan and Colin were still around doing last minute touch ups before a bus load of people arrived that evening.

Nerves rattled within me, as much as I'd hoped nothing would arise, something told me to keep a lookout and I knew that Miles and Pete would do the same.

"Cassie," Alice said, coming into my room that morning and placing the list on my bed. "Here is a list of items we need for the showing tonight. Just some last-minute stuff like an extra case of champagne, more napkins, and plastic plates, extra forks...you know the drill."

"Sure, I'll get right to it," I said coldly.

"Sweetheart, I know things have been tense around here lately, but I just wanted to let you know things will look up. I promise you, we'll be a family again," she smiled.

"If we're going to be a family again, then why are we having an open house for our forever home?"

"I need more investors for future projects, don't I? How do you expect us to make any money?" she clicked away in her heels and continued to her room.

The mere thought of us being a family again burned a hole inside me, I knew what she meant and I knew that Martin was part of that equation. He was nothing but a manipulator and whatever Alice was into, Martin was definitely to blame.

My phone chimed and Corbin's name popped up. The thought that Miles and Pete could be right still lingered at the back of my mind. I had hoped and prayed they were wrong, but only time would tell and the truth would be revealed.

It's weird waking up and you're not next to me, Corbin wrote. A smile spread on my face and I bit my lower lip.

I have to run some last-minute errands if you want to join? I asked.

I'll meet you out front, he wrote with a heart emoji.

I slipped into a comfortable summer dress and pulled my feet into my Converse. Miles and Pete were laughing as they played a video game in Pete's room, guzzling down sodas and narrowly trying to avoid

Alice as much as possible because they knew she would put them to work on something. I briskly walked down the staircase and out of the house. The hot morning sun beamed upon me as Corbin jogged down his steps and smiled at me. I moved across the lawn and joined him at his car. He tapped my bottom before making his way to the driver's side.

The leather seats were hot to the touch and irritated the skin on the back of my legs, but I ignored it and rolled down the window, needing the fresh air as everything around me felt like it was closing in. The reality of the evening continued to eat away at me. The documents we found, the photos I'd seen, the mere things I had heard continued to haunt me and I wanted desperately to ask Corbin about it, I just didn't know how.

"So, where to?" he asked. I pulled the list out of my purse and nodded.

"Liquor commission for a case of champagne—"

"Didn't she have some delivered this morning?" he asked, confused.

"This is the *just in case* case," I grinned.

"Alright, what else is on the list?"

"Plastic plates, forks, napkins, cups...usual party shit," I sighed.

"I take it you're not excited about this thing?" he asked, taking my hand as we came to a stop.

"Not in the slightest," I gulped.

"I'll be there," he smiled. "Your mom invited all of us tonight."

"Really?" I was shocked. Something was going down that evening. Something I surely did not want to be a part of.

"Don't look so excited," he chuckled.

"Sorry, my mom never usually invites the workers," I said. "She usually just has a table by the door with business cards and whatever."

"Colin asked if it was alright, since it would help with the business and what not. And she said it was fine as long as we didn't make her look bad," he laughed. "If we're being honest, it's Denis's big mouth and Zak she should be worried about. All those rich folks don't want to be around all those face tattoos."

"That fuckin' guy freaks me out," I chuckled nervously, realizing this was probably my in.

"He freaks a lot of people out."

“He asked me something weird the other night when I went to get a glass of water,” I cleared my throat.

“What did he do?”

“It was weird,” I started, readying myself to ask him directly what was going on. “He asked if I was being careful, as if you were—God, this is going to sound fucked up—but he made it sound like you were hiding something. There’s that, mixed in with Everett, and what I overheard Colin and Ethan—”

“What did you hear?” he loosened his fingers from mine and gripped the steering wheel instead.

“They were...um...they were talking about tonight.”

“Cassie, what do you think you heard?” he asked sternly. I had never seen him that serious before.

“I don’t know what I heard is my point,” I said, raising my voice slightly. “What the fuck is going on Corbin?”

He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, moving through traffic at a steady, calming rate. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking, or what I was even thinking. Everything felt blurry. An overwhelming sense of dread swam through me but I had to stay sharp, I needed to stay sharp for the sake of my brothers, for the sake of myself and my sanity. The last thing I needed was to get mixed into the wrong relationship all over again.

“We’re here,” he said, breaking the silence. I quickly grabbed my purse and went to step out of the car, twisting my back in a way I couldn’t tolerate at that moment, and a sharp pain shot directly up my spine. He grabbed my wrist, stopping me from going further. “Colin and Ethan...they’re trying to get Alice to invest in them, or find an investor for them. For the business.”

“For the business?” I scoffed with a chuckle, hiding the pain behind my blue-green eyes. “I’m supposed to believe that?”

“What do you want me to say, Cassie?”

“The truth, for one,” my jaw clenched. “There were photos of me, photos of my brothers, of Alice...you expect me to believe this is about investors?”

“Y-yes,” Corbin’s blue eyes welled with tears. “I wouldn’t lie to you, babe. I can’t lie to you as much as I *can’t* lose you.”

I explored his eyes, wanting desperately to believe him, but I had no other proof to know if he was lying or not. No proof to believe if he was involved in whatever was going on or not. I loved him, oh did I love him, but I was lost, confused, and in an immense amount of pain in that moment. I watched as a tear slid down his cheek and I felt myself giving in. I felt myself believing him, even if he was lying to me, even if my intuition told me to run.

“Give me one reason to stay,” I said my lips set in a hard line.

“I love you,” his lower lip quivered.

“Are you lying to me?”

“Cassie,” he started. “I promise, I would never.”

“Then why don’t I believe you?” A tear slid down my cheek.

“Because everyone in your life always hurts you,” he shrugged, his sparkling eyes meeting mine.

“Okay,” I said shaking my head.

I didn’t believe him at first, but what proof did I have. He was nowhere in any of the photos, Ethan and Colin hadn’t mentioned him during their little talk, of what I heard, that is. Corbin’s fingers interlocked with mine, and I nodded. It was the look in his eyes that lead me to believe I had no other choice than to trust his words, trust his promise.

*

I tried to mingle as much as possible, making conversation with one rich fuck to the next. The older single ones attempted to hit on me every chance they got, I declined as politely as I could without telling them where to shove it. I didn’t blame them though, I looked sexy as hell in my red cocktail dress and shiny black heels. All the women were comparing their designer outfits and which plastic surgeon was the latest hot shot they had to try. My eyes were soon going to be permanently at the back of my head from rolling them too much.

Miles leaned on the threshold between the hallway and the living room, sipping silently from his drink. A waiter walked past—yes, my mother was so high off her ass she hired waiters for this event—and I took two flutes of champagne from his tray. I chugged the first glass of champagne and stepped over to Miles.

“Having fun?” I asked, licking the remnants of the sparkling wine from my lips.

“As much as I can have,” he sighed, looking at the array of people conversing in the living room. “Decent turn out, though.”

“Decent enough,” I chuckled, eyeing Denis who was leaning against the wall and forking at the hors d’oeuvres on his plate. Slight, minimal movement with his right arm made me suspicious. I still didn’t know who had broken into our home a few nights ago.

Ethan was beside him with Colin talking to an elderly gentleman who looked a lot like the Monopoly man. Denis’s minimal arm movement caused me to narrow my eyes as the night replayed in my mind. I had hit someone with a hammer, that I was certain of, who I hit was the question we still needed answered.

“Where’s Corbin?” Miles asked. I blinked rapidly, coming out of my own musing suspicions.

“I don’t know,” I said, gulping down the second champagne. “Working the floor for potential jobs I guess?”

“You believe him?”

“Sure,” I shrugged, second guessing myself. “I mean, so far, so good right? If something were to happen it would’ve by now.”

“Guess you’re right,” Miles took a sip of his drink.

I surveyed the living room where most of the guests resided. Some trailed off to look at the craftsmanship in the kitchen, others snuck into the sunroom for a smoke. Pete stayed on the couch with his phone in hand playing a game, Alice said nothing of it, he was her baby and could do no wrong in her eyes. I felt a warm hand glide down my bottom and I whipped around, thinking it might be some perverted geezer. Corbin smiled gently and scratched at the back of his head.

“Mind if I steal her away for a bit?” he asked Miles.

“Enjoy yourselves,” Miles saluted and took another gulp of his drink.

Corbin took my hand and led me down the hallway, looking behind him, between myself, and the spectators that lurked in the hall. We turned the corner at the end and he cupped my face in his hands, kissing me passionately. I had taken a couple of pain killers earlier and mixing them with alcohol was surely not the smartest idea, but it definitely helped with the physical pain, and the suspicion that lingered at the back of my mind. I took him by the tie and led him to the washroom beside us as he gawked around for potential lurking rich folk.

“Cassie, wait,” he said as I locked the door and pulled him toward me. “We have—”

My lips interrupted him as I unbuckled his belt. He sure did look handsome in a suit. He continued to kiss me, his tongue exploring mine as he lifted me up against the wall. I gripped the hanging light beside me as he tugged my underwear to the side and we made love in secret while everyone around us spoke of their fame and fortune. He was always so gentle, even when he ravished me in the guest bathroom. We climaxed quietly and he kissed my neck sending a rush of ecstasy through me, his heavy breathing warming the nape of my neck. He set me down gently, grabbing a towel from the rack and cleaning himself before handing the towel to me and I did the same.

“What were you gonna say?” I asked, out of breath with a chuckle.

“You are *very* distracting,” he smiled, zipping his trousers. I tossed the towel in the laundry bin and fixed my underwear.

“It’s one thing I’m good at,” I grinned.

“You wanna get out of here?” he asked. “Let’s just leave, me and you. Get in the car and just drive to wherever the car takes us.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah,” he said urgently. “We’ll just go and never look back.”

“Baby...”

“Hasn’t there always been a place you wanted to go? Somewhere you wanted to escape to?” he asked, taking my hand.

“I’ve always wanted to go to Paris,” I smiled.

“Then let’s go to Paris,” he cupped my face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “You’re scaring me.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he smiled, his hands moving to my arms. “I just want to see you happy.”

“I am happy,” I said pressing my lips together.

“Then let’s go.”

“To Paris?”

“Yes.”

“Corbin—” Muffled yells came from the living room. I frowned, searching his eyes. “What was that?”

“Cassie, please,” he continued. “C’mon, let’s just go.”

I opened the door and turned the corner; people were heading for the exit in a hurried fashion as a gunshot went off. Some raised their hands, while others sobbed dramatically, squeezing through the front door. I turned to look at Corbin with utter shock and he tried to tug at my arm to follow him but I kept my gaze on the living room and began to make my way toward it.

More yells were expressed as Denis sucker punched Miles in the face, Miles took a staggered step back, and Denis winced holding his shoulder. I quickened my pace, Corbin just inches behind me. When I entered the living room, my shocked face peered around at who was left. Pete sat on the couch, with Miles and his bloody nose beside him. On the other couch perpendicular to them were Alice and Martin sitting side by side. Martin with his douchebag pompous face, had blood seeping from his leg and Alice was sitting close beside him in tears. In front of them, Colin and Ethan stood holding guns as Denis paced by the coffee table muttering to himself. Zak leaned on the wall at the end of the living room with a gentleman in a light grey suit.

“What the fuck is going on?” I asked, looking over at the guns and then to Miles. Corbin came up behind me and took my face, planting a desperate kiss to my lips.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered as Colin handed him a gun. Corbin made his way to the other side of where Ethan and Colin stood.

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me?” I yelled and took a thundering step toward Corbin. Anger rose to the surface along with tears that streamed down my cheeks. Colin grabbed me by the waist and pulled me back.

“Calm down, Cassie,” he demanded.

“Fuck you,” I barked as he let go of me. I met Corbin’s reddened eyes as they, too, were welling with tears.

“You always were a little firecracker, weren’t you, darling,” a voice I had desperately tried to escape rose to the surface.

The man in the light grey suit slowly turned around, and Everett’s cleanly shaven face smiled at me. A gasp escaped my mouth and I looked to Alice who was clenching Martin’s hand so hard her knuckles were white. My wounded eyes searched hers, desperately wanting all of this to be a dream, a sick, and twisted dream.

“What the fuck did you do?” I asked calmly. Her mascara stained cheeks shook violently and I became furious, my nostrils flared as Colin grabbed me again. “You fuckin’ selfish cunt! What the fuck did you do?!”

“Sit down and calm yourself,” Colin yelled.

I put the back of my hand to my mouth as my eyebrows rose and I knew I was about to cry, to show weakness. I shook my head as I met Corbin’s beautiful eyes once more, he mouthed the words *I’m sorry*, and I felt nothing but hatred. I looked to Alice again, then focused my attention on my brothers. Pete was crying silently beside Miles whose nose was leaking blood down his chin. I snagged napkins from the coffee table in front of him and wiped some of the blood before I pinched the bridge of his nose and held more napkins to his nostrils.

“Now, where was I? Oh yes, Alice, I will ask you again. Where is the money?” Everett asked frustration in his tone.

“I told you what I said this morning,” she started. “I transferred it all to the account *you* gave me.”

“Yeah, well, there’s nothing in that account, Alice,” Everett growled.

“I did everything you asked,” she sobbed.

“Why don’t you ask Cassie? She was snooping around the other day, looking for something,” Martin said, clearly in pain.

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Martin,” I said, letting go of Miles’s nose. I looked up at Colin. “Please do us all a favor and put a bullet in between his fucking eyes. It’ll be a glorious *fuckin’* day when this asshole is gone.”

“Fuck you, Cassie,” Martin yelled. “Leave it to you to sleep with the enemy.”

“At least it’s not fourteen-year-old little boys you sick bastard!” I gritted my teeth and felt Miles grab my hand, urging me to stop.

“Cassie!” Alice said shocked.

“You’re a fucking cunt,” Martin growled.

I turned to Miles again and felt everyone’s eyes on me. I snagged more napkins from the table and switched the bloodstained ones with fresh ones. Miles leaned back and held the fresh napkins to his nose. I touched Pete’s knee and nodded.

“What do you know, Cass?” Everett asked, taking a step toward me.

“Just what I saw,” I sniffed, knowing he was referring to the money and not Martin’s sick and twisted fantasies.

“You saw nothing,” Martin yelled.

“Not about you, you self-centred piece of shit,” I scoffed, turning my attention away from Martin and back to Everett.

“Can we get this moving already?” Colin said. “I’m tired of this family drama.”

“All I know is what I saw and what I saw is that you guys get donations from people for fake charities and then funnel the money into accounts...am I right so far, Mom?” I said bluntly. I was officially done; I didn’t care anymore who I hurt as long as Miles and Pete were safe. In that moment, she was no mother of mine.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” she said putting a hand to her mouth.

“Save it,” I said, keeping my focus on Everett.

“You know a lot more than you let on, darling,” he smirked.

“A little too much,” I shifted my attention to Corbin.

“Do you happen to know where the money is?” Everett continued.

“Not in the slightest,” I swallowed.

“Well then, you’re of no use to me anymore,” Everett said and turned his attention to Martin and Alice. “Martin, you fuck teenagers to get your fix while they get theirs. So tell me something about where my money is before I report you, you delusional pedophilic fuck.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Martin said.

“Yes, I do,” Everett said without skipping a beat. “Where’s my money?”

“I don’t know,” Martin said.

“Where’s my fucking money!?” Everett barked.

“He doesn’t know!” Alice said.

I turned to Miles and checked on his bloody nose. Pete looked frightened; Miles tried to keep his cool but his dark blue eyes said otherwise. I looked over at Colin and his men, none of them were paying any attention to us, aside from Corbin who looked at me from time to time. Denis still paced on the other side of the coffee table as if he was waiting for his next fix. Zak remained calm, leaning against the wall and listening to everything everyone was saying as an unlit cigarette dangled from his mouth.

I knew exactly what Everett was looking for and the folder was sitting in a drawer in Alice's room. The bank statements, the names, the amounts, the fake charities, and that USB key I had a feeling held the answer to where his money was located. I looked to the front door, it was a mere ten feet from us, give or take. They could make it, a simple distraction would help them escape this nightmare. If I could get my hands on that USB and somehow throw the papers at Everett, maybe we'd get out of this alive.

"Okay," I whispered as quietly as I could so that only Miles and Pete could hear me. "On my signal you buck for the door."

"No," Pete mouthed.

"Just go, and meet me where we planned," I smiled reassuringly at them. "I'll be okay."

"I can't leave without you," Miles's lip quivered.

"And you won't, kid," I removed the napkins from his nose. "It'll be alright."

"I love you," Pete said.

"I love you, too," I smiled.

"Be careful," Miles added as I placed the napkins to the table.

I slowly removed my high heels and waited until Denis was at the middle of the coffee table. With a hard shove, I kicked the coffee table into his shins and lifted a silver platter from it, swinging at his head. Pete and Miles rose instantly and ran for the front door. Denis gasped in pain and stumbled backward, holding his nose. I darted for the staircase, everything moving in slow motion. Miles and Pete were outside, that I knew as I ran up the stairs. A gun fired and I felt my side sting, sending a rush of pain through me. Then everything happened so fast. I felt light headed. I saw Zak run out the front door, and fear spread through me. I hit the side of the wall, wincing from the sharp, piercing pain in my side. I forced myself to continue up the staircase as I held my side. Warmth bloomed the more I held the wound, blood seeped between my fingers and started leaking down the side of my leg.

"Cassie!" Corbin yelled. Colin grabbed him and shoved him back.

"Know your fuckin' role," Colin growled.

"She's hurt!" Corbin yelled.

"We have one job in play, focus!"

I made it to the top of the staircase and footfalls echoed behind me. I felt weaker the more I pushed myself. My energy was draining, that much I knew, but I had to get that USB key. Alice was hiding something, and I had to reveal it, even if it was the last thing I did. The thought of following Miles and Pete crashed into me. If I followed them, I wouldn't be hurt, I wouldn't be counting down the minutes until my end...but they're safe, by God I hope they're safe.

My hand hit the wall as blood decorated beneath it. I turned to see Ethan nodding at the top of the stairs. My lower lip trembled as he started for me.

"I'm not here to hurt you, Cassie," he said and raised his hands, gun still held in one of them.

"Don't taunt me, if you're gonna shoot me, just do it already," I said weakly.

"You have to understand something," he said and holstered his gun in the back of his trousers. "We're not here to hurt you, any of you."

"Yeah, from my understanding you're just doing it for the money."

"It's not about the money," he stopped in front of me. "We've been undercover—Colin, Corbin, and I—for four years trying to get Everett."

"You're cops?"

"Yes," Ethan admitted. "Corbin wanted to tell you so many times—"

"You were undercover for four years...so you knew what that fuckin' asshole had done to me?" I cried at the thought of Everett. Corbin knew and did *nothing*, he saw me through all those horrible nightmare driven years and did nothing. I sobbed softly, and looked down at my side.

"I'm sorry. We couldn't blow our cover," Ethan said and stepped past me, opening the linen closet. He took out a hand towel and nodded. "Let me see."

I removed my hand as more blood spilled out. He lifted my dress and turned me to the side, analyzing the wound.

"Ow," I groaned.

"The bullet went right through," Ethan said and lowered my dress, pressing the towel to the wound. "Keep pressure on it, alright."

“There’s a USB key that I think might be helpful,” my weakened voice said.

“Where?”

“In Alice’s top drawer. It’s taped to a manila folder.”

Ethan rose and made his way to Alice’s room, I heard shouts from below as Zak re-entered the house. A smile crept on my face with relief knowing that Miles and Pete were safe. Alice’s sobs and Martin screams followed shortly after. Denis growled at them and Colin tried to control the situation. Though it was Everett’s soft laughter that sent a shiver right through me. A shiver I wanted to escape from.

“Okay, c’mon,” Ethan said, holding the folder in his hand. He opened it and tore the USB from the back of it and tucked it into his pocket. I pushed off the wall and limped slightly, the pain in my back returned, and the pain in my side grew. I was a hospital’s wet dream. Ethan put his arm around me helping me make my way back downstairs.

My walking diminished even more and I slowly limped down the stairs, Ethan guiding me as much as he could. The searing pain that shot through me was indescribable. My dress was stained a darker red as blood continued to pour out of me, painting the side of my leg in a vibrant crimson. I felt the warm blood make its way to my foot, leaving a trail behind me.

“Oh my God,” Alice cried. Ethan and I made it to the bottom of the steps. He helped me to the couch, slowly letting me down.

“Alright, you got it?” Ethan asked as he let go of me.

“Yeah,” I said softly, easing onto the sofa.

Corbin ran over to me. His hands shook as he slowly touched my leg, then hesitated about touching my side. His gaze shifted to the once off-white couch as it was now stained a blood red.

“Babe, are you alright?” he asked.

“Fuck you,” I muttered as my wet eyes met his.

“Now that the theatrics are over,” Everett started as Ethan handed him the folder. “What the fuck is this?”

“Where all the money went,” Ethan said and gawked at me.

“No, no, no!” Everett yelled. “They were supposed to be transferred to a remote account in the Cayman Islands. What the fuck is this shit?”

“Harder for them to track if you split it up,” Colin said, poking over his shoulder.

“No, I’ve been working on these guys for years. All these bogus charities, all those galas, all that money...this was supposed to be my way out,” Everett blurted.

“Way out of what?” I asked.

“Don’t act like you don’t know, Cass,” Everett groaned.

“I don’t, so please,” I winced as I tried to move. “Enlighten me.”

“No,” Everett growled.

“No?” I chuckled weakly. “A word you’re not familiar with, is it?”

“You think you’re so funny, huh? Acting like you have no idea what’s happening.”

“I don’t.”

“Oh, but you do,” Everett smiled. “March 15, two years ago.”

My face went pale, I knew exactly what he was talking about. Everett had come home later than usual that night. I had already tucked myself in and was nearly fully asleep when I heard the front door bang against the accent table beside it. I slowly got out of bed and found Everett in the kitchen chugging a beer; sweat trickled down his forehead, his tie was loose and more sweat soaked into his once crisp white button-down. Red splatter decorated him from his neck to his thighs. That was the first of three nights I caught him coming home covered in blood. I said nothing out of fear I would be next. That night in particular, he had told me everything was fine, nothing had happened, the new intern at the firm had OD’d and was at the hospital. I now realized that was all a lie.

“What’re you talking about?” Alice asked.

“So all this is over some kid?” I interjected, wanting to know what on earth was truly going on.

“He wasn’t some kid, Cassie,” Everett’s eyes grew large. “He was MacFarlane’s kid.”

MacFarlane: the head honcho, the go-to guy...the man with the plan who happened to also be the head of security for the White House. I knew that Everett and his family were well known individuals, the parties I had attended were filled with the most important people the world had to offer. MacFarlane and Everett grew up together, the age difference was significant but they were still close. When MacFarlane’s

kid needed a job, Everett was the first to throw his hand up and offered him an internship at the firm. Little did I know the kid was in deeper than intended. He helped with some of the drug deals by dealing with suppliers for cocaine in remote locations. What I didn't know was that Everett was hiding more than he let on.

"You said he was fine," I gasped.

"Yeah, well, I lied," Everett turned his attention to Alice. "Now, tell me where the *fucking* money is!"

"What did you do, Everett?" I urged. I believed if I got him to confess, perhaps all of this would be over with.

"What do you think, darling?" his pupils grew large and his eyes grew feral.

Corbin placed his hand on mine as I held the towel to my wound. I felt extremely weak, and the pressure I had on the wound grew weaker as well. Corbin's warm hand on mine pushed me back to life as my eyes wanted to force themselves shut, but I wouldn't let them. I had to keep pressing Everett's buttons.

"Did you kill him?" I asked my voice horse. Ethan looked down at me as he took his cellphone out of his pocket and tapped a couple buttons. I chuckled softly, using the last of my strength. "You did, didn't you? And you're trying to blackmail your way out of it, just like you do with everything else in your pathetic life."

"Stop it," Everett gritted his teeth.

"How many people are you going to fuck over for your own good?"

"Shut the *fuck* up," he growled.

"He was seventeen, for fuck's sake! How many have there been since? First you kill him, then rape me...what the fuck else have you done, you son of a bitch?" I raised my voice.

"Stop!" Everett's nostrils flared.

"How many people did you kill to keep your fucking secrets?!"

"He was going to report us!" Everett finally yelled.

"Report you? For what?"

"Everything we've worked for to build our company up and make it what it is today, he was going to tear it right the fuck down," Everett cried. "It was him or me. And by God, I chose myself."

“What did he have on you?” I pressed on. Everett looked defeated. His once strong stature was now hunched over and broken.

“Everything. The money laundering, the sex workers, the fuckin’ drugs,” Everett sobbed. I had him directly where I wanted him and I smiled, eyeing Corbin, then Colin, and Ethan.

“Thank you,” I said softly with a bloodstained smile. Everett looked up at me, puzzled.

“What?” he asked.

The front door blasted open and officers barged into the home, they held their guns and yelled at everyone to put their hands up. Zak dropped the gun to the floor and fell to his knees, his hands behind his head. Denis put his hands up, one higher than the other and I realized why. He was the lurker that snuck into our home, probably looking for the folder Alice had hidden in her room. Ethan chuckled, and cocked his gun at Everett, his eyes blazing. Colin took handcuffs off one of the female officer’s belts and smiled as he stood behind Everett.

“You are under arrest for being a complete and utter tool,” Colin said and tightened the handcuff around one of Everett’s wrists and then the other.

“Cassie?” Alice said and rose from her seat.

“Ma’am, you’re going to have to remain where you are,” another officer said and aimed their gun at Alice.

“Cassie, are you alright?” Alice asked.

“I’m fine,” I said in a whisper with the only strength I had left.

“I gotta get her to a hospital,” Corbin said as Ethan was handcuffing Denis.

“Yeah, go,” Ethan replied.

Corbin lifted me off the couch. As much I didn’t want him to, I obliged, and he carried me out of the house quickly. He jogged to one of the cop cars and helped me into the front seat. The cool night air filled my lungs, and the last thing I remembered was looking into his crystal blue eyes before everything around me faded to black.

- 9

Present Day.

“Sorry it took so long,” Corbin said, interlocking his fingers with mine.

“We’re here now, that’s all that matters,” I smiled, gazing up at the Eiffel Tower before us.

“Are we going to go up?” A young boy asked. I smiled at him as Corbin put his arm around his shoulder.

“Of course we are, big guy,” Corbin said. I squeezed his hand and nodded, a smile pasted to my face.

“I’m hungry,” a toddler in my arms announced.

“You just ate,” the young boy said.

“C’mon, now,” I said admiring the beautiful boys Corbin and I created. “We can grab something to eat and then go up.”

“But, Mom.”

“Enough Luke. If Seth wants to eat, we’ll get him some food. Plus, I gotta feed her too,” I grinned, looking down at my enormous stomach.

Little did I know, I had been a few weeks along when the incident at the house happened. When Corbin rushed me to the hospital, they shoved needles into me, pumping blood in to replace the blood I had lost, and keeping me on an IV until I was strong enough to get out of there. When the nurse told me I was pregnant, I was shocked, scared even. I didn’t want it, I didn’t want the child of a lying son of a bitch, but that baby survived a horrific night. It survived the weakened state I was in, the bullet wound. It survived, and that’s what made me keep it. Cops asked for my statement about what I knew about Alice, Martin, and Everett. I told them what I could, I told them what I saw... Corbin had met Miles and Pete in the spot I told them to wait for me. They sat there all night and much of the morning waiting impatiently for me. When Corbin showed up, they thought the worst but were instantly surprised and not in the slightest angry when Corbin told them the truth. I admired them for that. When I was finally able to go home, Alice was still in custody, as was Martin, and I had no idea how long they would be in for after all the dirt the cops had on both of them, nor did I care. Corbin had cleaned the entire house, he made sure everything was as it used to be, including the once stained couch. Barely a week went by and he had already moved in with us, and not even a week after that he proposed to me. It took a lot for me to forgive him, but he was only doing his job. That I understood. He didn’t intend to fall in love in the process. We had a small, quiet ceremony with only my brothers, Colin, and Ethan. Our

sole focus was the child that was growing inside me. When Luke was born, Miles decided he was going to go to college, to better himself and make his nephew proud. Pete followed shortly after. Miles went into engineering, and Pete studied coding. As the years passed, our little family continued to grow. Miles met a beautiful woman and put a ring on her finger as fast as they met. Pete scored an amazing job in Silicon Valley while still studying, just as Seth came along. Alice and Martin were found guilty, of course, and went to prison. I haven't heard from them in the past ten years. Everett was sentenced to life, something that wasn't so hard to believe and I'm sure he's someone's bitch by now. Zak and Denis were sentenced to five to ten years for being accomplices in siphoning the money through fake charities. They happened to be Everett's goons, so to speak. Everett made sure they were part of the fake renovation crew Colin, Ethan, and Corbin created before going undercover. In the end, they all got what they deserved. When Corbin and my anniversary came along, ten long, loving years with two kids under our belt and another on the way, he surprised me with a trip to Paris.

Corbin took my hand and smiled, bringing his soft lips to mine. Even though I knew it took us longer than expected to get here, I knew we'd be happy no matter what. We had built our perfect little family, and sure I was pissed at him for having started our relationship on a lie, but one thing he never did was lie about how he felt for me. He loved me, that I was certain of, and every time I got lost in his eyes, I knew I felt the same way.

Nelle and Kade



ALYSSA MILANI



CHAPTER SEVEN
NELLE AND KADE

-1-

Senior year should be exciting. It's the last year seeing the same people since, well, some of them since grade school. In a few short months most of them will be off on new adventures, experiencing new cities and learning new things. For Nelle, she won't be going anywhere anytime soon. Growing up, Nelle always looked up to her older brother, Greg. He was the kindest and the funniest person in the world, and the only one who never bothered her about her weight. Nelle had been overweight her whole life. She never had the experience of being gawked at, never had the experience of something fitting her just right either. She was always teased and made fun of, even the friends she thought she had ended up being the worst of them all. Without Greg, Nelle realized how alone she truly was. When her brother died, her whole life turned upside

down. Her mother left her and her father, and moved across the country because seeing her father and Nelle every day was a *constant reminder of Greg*. Her father overindulged in his anti-depressants and gulped them down with bottles of alcohol. Nelle lost all the weight over the summer in the unhealthiest way possible—she starved herself—but she didn't care. All she cared about was seeing her brother again. Of course, that would never happen for her, so she hurt herself the only way she knew how, to be able to feel something other than sadness.

Julie was Nelle's best friend since they were kids, their brothers were friends too, and her older sister and Greg used to date once upon a time. When the news of Greg's passing broke, Julie and her family rushed right over to comfort Nelle and her family anyway they could. Nelle, however, was not the same person she was anymore. She wasn't happy all the time, wasn't cracking jokes or making her usual sarcastic remarks; Nelle was quiet, and kept to herself. Julie, on the other hand, used Nelle's depression to her advantage and started making fun of her to her friends so that Julie could gain her popularity—only causing Nelle to realize that Julie never really cared for Nelle at all.

Though, Nelle knew that their friendship had been over well before Greg's death. It all started when Corey—the first boy to ever truly speak to Nelle without being forced to because of school—took away her virginity last year. Julie was the first person that Nelle ran to and told, only to find out that Julie had been in love with Corey since they hit grade school. Their friendship dwindled from then on, and dwindled even more so when Nelle's depression of her brother's death took over. What didn't help either was Corey telling everyone what they did, and instead of owning up to how he was the one to hit on Nelle, he told everyone that fat chick was checked off his to-do list.

The first day of senior year had a lot in store for Nelle, and as she pulled into a free parking spot, she was sure this year wasn't going to be a smooth ride. She secluded herself over the summer, kept her phone off, never checked her social media. All she did was draw like her brother encouraged her to do so much because she was good at it. She went for walks when she wasn't lying in bed staring at nothing and everything all at the same time, and trying her hardest to keep it together. It would be so easy to end it all, and she thought about it time and time again, she was just too scared to go through with it.

She fixed the hood over her head, being sure to fix her jean jacket on top of it, and adjusted the black dress she wore. A few students glanced at her and whispered to others. She wasn't sure if it was because they knew who she was and were shocked at how much weight she lost, or if they wondered if she was a new girl.

She jogged up the steps, keeping her head down as she did, and briskly walked to her locker. Many students changed over the course of the summer, most of the boys started growing facial hair, their voices were even deeper than before, and many of them sprouted a few inches. A few gawked at her as she rummaged through her locker for the books she needed for her first class of the day, and she did look great. She went from being a double extra-large to nearly a small—really hurting herself in the process, but she truly didn't care. All she cared about was not feeling anymore, and it worked.

"Hey, man," Corey frowned as he nudged Kade's shoulder.

Kade was the first boy to ever smile at Nelle, and she'd never forget that. People constantly made fun of her for her weight, shoving her out of the way, pushing her books out of her hand, yelling profanities at her in the hopes of breaking her down—but when Greg was alive, Nelle had a backbone that no one would break. When Kade first transferred to their school and saw some students push her books down, he immediately went to help her, giving her his dazzling smile as he flashed her those green eyes she'd been in love with ever since.

"What's up?" Kade asked, zipping his backpack.

"Who's the new chick?" Corey asked.

Kade fixed his blond *just got out of bed* hair and glanced over at Nelle. A chuckle escaped him as Corey checked her out, wondering who on earth she was. Her usual shoulder length hair was now much longer, and braided loosely on her shoulder. She wore a tight black dress that flowed out at her hips and stopped half way up her thighs, the jean jacket and hoodie she wore truly hid the drastic transformation she went through over the summer. Kade knew the moment he spotted those almond shaped eyes in the perfect blend of gold and green, and those pouty lips, that this was the woman he'd been trying to talk to all summer.

"Isn't that Nelle's locker?" Kade pointed out.

"Nelle's three times the size of that chick," Corey laughed.

"You're the one who took her virginity," Kade said.

“Fat chick was on my to-do list, and now it’s not,” Corey said. “It’d be nice to have some fresh meat around here—”

Nelle swung her book bag over her shoulder and turned in their direction, interrupting Corey from his constant need of affection from the fairer sex. Kade started blushing as he saw Nelle fix the hood on her head again, locking eyes with her for a quick moment before she kept her head to the ground.

“Holy shit,” Kade exclaimed as she continued down the hall and the two men watched her. “That is Nelle.”

“Goddamn,” Corey chuckled.

Kenny, Ron, and Peter—Julie’s on-again off-again boyfriend—nodded at Kade and Corey, following them to their class. They were the trio who always made fun of Nelle, even after Corey had sex with her, they went from teasing her for her weight, to teasing her for giving it out there for anyone who wants to *sleep with a pig*.

“Dude, did you see the new chick?” Kenny started.

“Saw her this morning coming out of her car. Fucking nice set of tits on her,” Ron said.

“Legs for days, dude,” Kenny continued.

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but the new chick is Nelle,” Corey said.

“Nelle?” Kenny laughed. “Fat-ass Nelle?”

“Must’ve lost the weight over the summer after her brother died,” Kade added, spotting her in the crowd of people waiting outside of the classroom.

“Betcha wish you could’ve waited before fucking her,” Peter snickered at Corey.

“Hey, I needed to knock fat chick off my list, now I can knock depressed skinny chick off my list if I wanted to.” Corey stuck out his tongue and laughed with the guys—Kade being the only one who wasn’t laughing.

“Don’t you think she’s been through enough, you don’t need to do that,” Kade frowned.

“Blondie’s got a crush on fattie?” Kenny laughed and continued down the hall to class.

The teacher, Miss Maxwell, made her way in front of the crowd of students and unlocked the door for them to pile in. Nelle went for the

last row of desks by the window, and snagged the desk at the end of the row so she could keep hidden from the rest of the class. She was great at being the fly on the wall and hoped it stayed that way.

Students glanced at her and whispered to one another as they sat down. She ignored them and kept her head down, placing her book bag onto the top of the desk. Kade made his way to the row beside her, sitting at the desk at the end of the row to ensure he sat next to her. Corey sat in front of him, gawking at Nelle over his shoulder every so often. Julie and her posse happened to be in that class, too, and crowded the seats around them. Julie deliberately sat in front of Nelle so that she could be closer to Corey, in the hope he'd finally notice her even if she was dating Peter.

"Alright, alright, settle down class," Miss Maxwell said. "Welcome back everyone to your senior year!"

"Whoa," most of the students cheered. Nelle remained quiet, slouching into her chair.

"Given that it's the first day back, we can take it easy today with a movie, that sound good?" Miss Maxwell asked.

"Depends what movie," Peter called from in front of Corey with a chuckle, winking at Julie.

"I'm sure you'll all find this one appealing," Miss Maxwell added and started hooking up her laptop to the projector.

Julie spun around in her seat and scoffed as she saw Nelle opening her book bag for her water bottle. Julie gave her a once over and let out a soft chuckle.

"How'd you lose all the weight?" Julie whispered. "Finally do gastric bypass?"

"No," Nelle said and gulped from her water bottle.

"No matter what, you'll still be the loser fat chick everyone hates," Julie said.

"Good to know," Nelle said and Julie turned in her seat.

Nelle rolled her eyes, wondering what happened to Julie for her to hate Nelle so much. All the boys always swooned over Julie and her beauty, and the one time a boy actually noticed Nelle and took away her innocence—something she thought would never happen for her because of how she looked—ruined her friendship with the only person she thought would stick by her forever.

Miss Maxwell started a movie that had come out at the beginning of the summer and a lot of the students were excited, some of which didn't even bother to take out their phones and kept their attention on the screen. Nelle sighed silently, wondering why she decided to come back to school at all. She was turning eighteen next month, and as soon as she did, she was planning on packing her car and driving anywhere the car would take her. Of course, she had no money, but she knew she'd figure something out.

Kade reached over and placed a folded piece of paper in front of Nelle. She glanced at him and he grinned, nodding at the folded paper. She unfolded it to read, *Hey, it's Kade, been trying to get a hold of you all summer! Text me*, with his phone number under it. There it was, the attention she couldn't get before because she was overweight, and now that she was slim, people were starting to notice her. This bothered her more than anything. She crumbled up the piece of paper and placed it on the desk beside her book bag.

A sigh left Kade and he scribbled another note for her, leaning over and placing it in front of her again. The note said nothing but his phone number, and again, she crumbled it and placed it beside her book bag. Kade chuckled and scribbled out a third piece of paper, leaning over and doing the same thing. This time, Nelle decided to take her phone out and write back.

Is there a reason why you want me to text you so badly? she sent.

Someone to talk to during this movie, Kade wrote back immediately.

Why? We've only spoken a couple of times before, she wrote.

Can't I want to talk to the only interesting person this school has? He replied.

Oh, okay, I get it. Just because I'm not the token fat girl at the school anymore, you're interested in speaking to me? Let me save you the trouble and let you know I'm not interested. Do what everyone has always done and just ignore me like I don't even exist, she sent even though he was the one person she wanted attention from and knew she'd never get.

I'll have you know that I'm not like everyone else and have been trying to talk to you for a long time, but you always ignore me, he replied.

You're a popular kid, why the fuck do you want to associate yourself with someone like me? To make fun of me more than I already am? I get enough of that, thank you very much, she wrote.

I would never make fun of you, Nelle, he replied.

She looked down at the message he sent and locked her phone, placing it into her pocket. She crossed one leg over the other to look up at the movie everyone seemed so interested in. She had no time for stupid games from boys who never showed an interest. As soon as lunch hit, Nelle was going to sneak out of the school and go home. She didn't want to be here anymore than most of the teachers did.

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Nelle starved herself, but that didn't stop her from sometimes indulging in a small snack to help curb her hunger. She realized that instead of eating her emotions away, she just wouldn't eat at all and turned to cigarettes to stop her cravings. They helped, but she still was weak and noticed that if she drank Gatorade she wasn't anymore. Most of the summer, she lived off of cigarettes and Gatorade, with the occasional salad or fruit to help steady her hunger pangs.

She entered the cafeteria and grabbed one of the fresh fruit cups from the fridge and waited in line to pay for her snack. Most students gawked at her as they walked past, whispering little remarks and checking her out; Nelle paid no mind to it, she was used to being spoken of behind her back.

"Finally added some fruits to your diet? That why you're so skinny now?" Patricia laughed as she and Julie stood in line behind her.

"She's still a loser with no friends," Julie giggled. "Skinny or fat, no one will ever love her."

For some reason, hearing Julie's words made Nelle's eyes well with tears. She cut the line and dropped a five dollar bill on the counter. She hurried out of the cafeteria, making her way outside and to the back of the school where everyone usually snuck off to for a secret smoke so the teachers wouldn't catch them. Words hurt, and Nelle knew that a part of what Julie said was true. Nelle was still a loser with no friends and no one would ever love her the way she wanted. Being told all her life she wasn't good enough, wasn't pretty enough, that no boy would ever love her because of her weight, stuck with Nelle, and the more of this she was told, the more she believed it.

Julie and Patricia made their way to the table where the guys were sitting and Julie was sure to sit beside Corey, wearing the perfume he said he liked on her nearly four years ago.

“Did you see your friend?” Peter asked Julie, giving her a quick kiss.

“Nelle? We haven’t been friends for a *really* long time,” Julie laughed.

“She’s hot as hell now,” Kenny added.

“Wonder if she’ll let me back in,” Corey snickered.

“Why would you want to get with that loser again?” Julie scoffed.

“Have you seen her? She’s not that fat chick anymore. Goddamn, she’s got a perfect little ass, long legs, and those tits—can’t wait to get her naked this time,” Corey smirked.

“Show a little compassion, she’s going through a lot and that’s probably why she lost all the weight,” Kade added, taking a bite of his sandwich.

“Oh, because her brother died?” Julie scoffed. “Please, he died in April. This whole thing is a cry for attention. Don’t give into her or you’ll end up just as ugly as she is.”

“Ugly is far from what she is,” Corey added.

“What the fuck did she do to you for you to act like a bitch?” Kade asked Julie.

Julie rolled her eyes and opened the salad she and Patricia bought to share. Kade was so turned off by Julie’s actions; he pushed his food aside and gulped from his soda. Patricia and Julie were whispering and giggling the whole time they sat at the table with the guys. The guys spoke of the things they did over the summer, and all Kade could do was scan the cafeteria for any sign of Nelle, but the longer he searched the more he knew she wasn’t there.

Everyone’s phone chimed, and Corey and Kade reached for their phones from their pocket at the same time. Julie sent out a mass text message to everyone in school of a before picture of Nelle in a bathing suit over the summer last year. The photo had the caption that stated *never forget who you really are*. Laughter and cackles escaped everyone in the cafeteria as they looked to their phone, and Kade scoffed again, looking up at Julie with such disgust, he was afraid what he would do if she was a man.

“That’s a little much, Julie,” Corey said and locked his phone.

“Is it?” Julie laughed with Patricia.

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Nelle was sitting on the asphalt at the back of the school, leaning against the brick wall. Smoke was escaping her as she sketched—something she picked up again after her brother passed away. She loved to draw, and would do simple sketches of places and people she'd seen, or characters from the books she read. As she grew older, people would laugh at her at school for her drawings and rip them up, snatch them from her locker, and make fun of her for being talented at something. Greg always told her to do what she loved, and if drawing was that, then she should do it, but she couldn't. Not after the people at school laughed at her for it. Yet when he died, it seemed like all she did was draw until her hand cramped.

She nibbled on a few of the fruits from the cup and hoped that no one would find her before lunch ended so she could get out of there unnoticed.

The second her phone chimed, she glanced over at it to see a mass text message from Julie, and she sadly knew it wasn't going to be good. When Nelle opened the message, tears welled in her eyes again. She never understood why Julie hated her so much, it wasn't Nelle's fault that Corey wasn't interested in her, and there was nothing Nelle could do to change what they did together in the backseat of his car last year. She already felt disgusted and used, wasn't that enough?

Greg always reminded Nelle that she was beautiful, and that whenever someone said something to her about her weight or about her looks, that they were just jealous of her—but right then as she looked at the photo of herself in a bathing suit that was sent out to the entire school, Nelle couldn't help but to see what everyone else saw. She hated herself so much more knowing that she only lost all the weight by starving herself and punishing herself mentally so she wouldn't turn to a piece of cake or a bag of chips to help feed her sadness.

Quiet sobs escaped her as she sat there with her head in her hands; cigarette still held between her fingers. She wondered what she ever did wrong in life to be treated the way she was. She was always so kind to anyone she ever met; she used to volunteer at the old folk's homes, and the animal shelter. She raised money time and time again to donate to those less fortunate, and her parents encouraged her to do what made her happy. Greg was always by her side through all her endeavors, too. Yet every chance anyone at school ever got, they'd make fun of her

until she started to cry, and when she did, the laughter would start and taunt her for days on end.

As Nelle sat there, her tears falling into her lap, the hatred she always had for herself grew even more, and she wondered what the use was anymore. No one would care if she was gone, no one would mourn her or miss her. She would just cease to exist.

She sniffed and started packing her sketchbook and pencils into her book bag, letting the burning cigarette dangle from her mouth. There was no way in hell she was staying in school after that photo of her was going around—and she wasn't even sure if she'd be able to stay in school after any of the bullshit she went through in general. Maybe now was a good time as any to start packing and leave.

"There you are," Kade announced and jogged over to her.

Nelle fixed her hood over her head to hide her crying eyes and took one last puff of her cigarette before she flicked the butt away. She couldn't understand why he was being so nice to her, and she certainly didn't want to be screw over or made part of a joke. She wanted to be left alone as she always was. Life was easier when no one spoke to her.

"Just leave me alone," she said and fixed the strap on her shoulder.

"Where're you going?" he asked and took her hand.

"Please, do us both a favor and leave me alone. I am in no fucking mood to be the butt of anyone's jokes anymore today," she raised her voice and yanked her hand from his grip.

"Nelle?" Kade frowned as he took notice of the tears skimming down her cheeks.

She ignored him and walked away, her goal to get to her car unnoticed—and she was definitely good at being unnoticed.

She fished the keys from her book bag and got into her car, speeding out of the parking lot as quickly as she could without hitting any of the stragglers.

Her tears didn't stop the entire car ride, she thought of her brother, she thought of all the names people have spat at her, she heard their laughter and their snickering remarks—worst of all, she saw the disgust on their faces. They all had that same look when they spotted her, wondering how someone could get that big.

Nelle pulled into the driveway of her house and shut the car off, taking a few deep breaths before she entered the home that brought her so much heartache.

The small bungalow had lost its beauty. The flower beds that used to house bright roses and tulips, were now clouded with dead bushes and mulch. The paint was starting to chip, the windows looked like they could use a good wash, and the grass was clearly not taken care of once over the summer. She tried to mow the lawn the best of her abilities, but she didn't know what she was doing and gave up. The grass grew to her ankles, weeds took over much of the sides of the house, and if she didn't live there, she'd think the home was abandoned.

Unlocking the front door, she found her father still sitting on his La-Z-Boy—as he was the night before—half drunk bottle in his lap, open bottle of pills on the small side table with an ashtray filled with cigarettes. Smoke still rising from one of them.

“Hey, kiddo, back from school already?” Sebastian asked.

“First day back was only a half day,” she lied.

“Did you have lunch?” Sebastian said attempting to get up from his La-Z-Boy, but his head started spinning and he sat back down. “I can make you something.”

“Picked up something on the way,” she lied again. “I'll be in my room.”

Nelle locked herself in her room and stayed there for the next two days, she most certainly wasn't going to go back to school after that photo was circulating. Maybe keeping to herself and staying in her room would be a good thing.

Some of her teachers emailed the homework that needed to be done, and all she had to do was send it back to them when she completed it. Nelle didn't have to leave her room at all, even if Kade kept on sending her messages asking how she was and where she'd been. She wanted to disappear for a while.

-2-

It was now Wednesday, and she decided it to give school a second chance. She needed to regain her backbone and ignore everyone's remarks—even if most of them came from her ex-best friend, Julie. Nelle

waited in her car, smoking cigarette after cigarette and until the bell rang before she had to go to Miss Maxwell's class.

To her luck, Miss Maxwell was not in and a substitute teacher was writing her name on the chalkboard. The students weren't assigned any particular seats, and sat wherever they wanted. Kade and Corey sat side by side at the back of the class, and Julie and her posse sat on the complete opposite end. Nelle made her way to an empty seat by one of the windows, hating that she chose to wear her tight jeans and loose-knitted crop sweater instead of her usual hoodie to hide her face.

"Settle down everyone, settle down," the substitute said—her name was Miss Johnson as it stated on the chalkboard behind her. "Miss Maxwell will not be in today and has assigned me a worksheet for you to work on in groups, if you wish. Be aware that if you work on them in groups that everyone's name is clearly stated on *one* worksheet per group."

The students moved their desks around, their chairs dragged on the floors as they got into groups to work on the assignment. For Nelle, she sat alone as everyone who sat around her scurried off to their friends. She opened her book bag and took out a pen, grinning at Miss Johnson who placed a worksheet in front of her.

Nelle felt people's eyes on her, hearing their quiet laughter and whispers as she worked alone for the millionth time on an assignment. She was used to doing things on her own, which was probably why she leaned on her brother so much when they were home or on weekends when she had no one to hang out with. He was always there and always willing to be her buddy when she needed him.

With the click of her pen, she jotted down her name and read through the two pages of questions from something she missed over the last couple of days. She sighed heavily and clicked her pen a few times, knowing that she wouldn't be able to answer any of these questions. Sadly, a part of her didn't care. School wasn't as important as it once was to her. If she failed, then so be it. She didn't see a use in caring about life or herself after everything she ever loved left her.

Miss Johnson sat at the desk and took out her laptop, typing away at it without so much as a glance up at the students before her. Nelle sat back in her seat and looked out the window, knowing it was a stupid idea to come back to school. Not only did she hate the stupid remarks

everyone whispered and spat at her whenever she past them in the halls, she also felt entirely useless right now and could only imagine what she'd feel like in her other classes—even if some of her teachers sent her the homework, she still felt lost.

A desk scraped and pulled up beside her, startling her out of her daydreaming out the window. Kade's grinning face looked back at her as he pulled up a chair. She let out another sigh and shook her head. He was very persistent and she couldn't understand why.

"What're you doing?" she asked.

"Working on this thing with you," he nodded and took her pen from her desk, writing his name beside hers. "You missed a couple days of school, Nelle, I'm sure you have no idea what this is about."

"It doesn't matter." She shrugged.

"Were you just going to hand it in blank? You'd get a zero on the assignment," he frowned.

"And?"

"Just let me help you out," he said and started answering the first question.

"Why? Why're you so nice to me all of a sudden?" she asked.

"I've always been nice to you," he said and continued on to the next question. "You just never took notice."

Nelle bit down on her bottom lip, she was nervous being this close to Kade and would still never admit how much of a crush she had on him. He was breathtakingly handsome, his green eyes always shined—even on rainy days—his golden hair did something new every day, and she admired how he style it every morning in this dishevelled yet perfect way. Kade was another one of the guys who worked out a lot over the summer, his usual lanky and tall physique, was now built, his biceps budging and flexing as he wrote down the answers.

"Kade? Kade," Kenny called quietly from his group. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Kade ignored him and continued writing down the answers.

"Oink, oink, oink," Peter said, causing the entire class to burst out laughing.

"Quiet, please!" Miss Johnson advised.

"Just ignore them," Kade whispered.

“Easy for you to say. I bet no one has ever made fun of you a day in your life,” she said and tried to hide her red face from him.

Kade looked over at her but didn’t say anything. He saw the hurt and loneliness she experienced, and knew that it wasn’t fair how much these people made fun of someone he thought was so beautiful. He always liked Nelle, from the moment he met her, even when she was overweight, he thought she was gorgeous. He hated how he didn’t try to talk to her more often, but every time he tried to, it seemed like she wasn’t in a good place. She’d be sitting somewhere alone and silently crying, or have her head shoved into a book in the library, or his personal favorite was when he’d find her smiling as she listened to her music. Nelle sure did have a beautiful smile, she just never showed it, even on picture day.

The bell rang before they had the chance to finish the worksheet, and Miss Johnson advised that they could complete the assignment at home and return it next class. Kade didn’t even have the chance to invite Nelle over to complete it, she was already out of the class and onto her next one.

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Throughout the day, he tried his hardest to find her and ask her if she wanted to complete the rest of the assignment at his house—given that he had just moved his room into the garage that was separate from the house. He’d be able to get more privacy and have people over without his parents complaining—of course, the first thing his ex-girlfriend, Emily, said when she found this out was why he didn’t move there when they were dating. He didn’t have the heart to tell her it was because he didn’t like her enough to care.

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When school ended, Kade waited by Nelle’s car and smiled when she jogged out of the school and down the steps. A frown spread to her face as she saw him leaning on her car. The last thing she wanted was attention on her that she didn’t need—she got enough of that over the course of the last couple days.

“Been looking everywhere for you,” Kade said and uncrossed his arms.

“Why would you want to look for me?” she asked.

“We have that assignment to finish,” he said. “You wanna come over and finish it at my place?”

“What?” she chuckled nervously, emitting a small grin.

“I thought maybe I could go over the questions with you so you know what we discussed in class. And I’d feel really shitty if I did all the work and you had no idea what the heck we were talking about.” He shrugged a shoulder.

“I still don’t understand why you’re being so nice to me,” she said and unlocked her car door.

“Follow me, yeah?” he said and jogged to his silver car.

Nelle started her car and debated whether or not she should even bother following him, she truly didn’t care if her A+ average plummeted to the ground. The less time she spent at the school the better, and with everything that happened over the course of the last few months, there was no way her family would be able to afford college. Her hopes and dreams of doing something great with her drawings, was now a useless dream that would get her nowhere in life.

Kade backed out of his spot and waited for her to do the same before he drove off and she decided to follow him. He didn’t live too far from the school compared to her, his house being one of the beautiful suburban homes she used to live in, but when Greg died and her mother left, they had nothing keeping them in that big house they could barely afford anymore.

He pulled into a driveway of a blue panelled home with white shutters and white doors. Pink, fuchsia, and purple flowers decorated the majority of the front yard and circular bushes bordered the rest. He hopped out of his car and grinned at her as she pulled in behind him, still reeling that she was actually going over to a boy’s house.

She followed him to the side door of the separate garage and looked to the house then back to him as he entered.

“We’re not going inside?” she asked.

“I moved my room out here over the summer,” he said and took off his shoes before stepping on the new laid carpet in the garage. “Parents thought it would be a good idea to have more privacy and more room for my weights.”

“Guess you and Emily are back together?” she said and mimicked, taking off her flats and pushing them aside as she closed the door.

“God, no,” he grimaced. “Giving her my virginity and nine months of my time was the biggest mistake I’ve ever made.”

“Only one who didn’t know she was fucking everything that moved?” she said and sat on the couch by the door as he placed his backpack on his bed.

“Pretty much,” he nodded.

Nelle looked down at the newly manicured nails she painted black over the couple of days she stayed home, and started picking at it. She was nervous and expecting the worst to happen—it would be just her luck that the boy she crushed on would set her up for a prank.

“Do you have the assignment? We should finish it right away,” she gulped as he removed his t-shirt and took out a fresh one from his stand-up dresser. She couldn’t help but to stare at him, his toned muscles so perfectly sculpted. The feelings she had for him were growing by the minute and she wasn’t sure what to do about them. He glanced over at her and chuckled, catching her staring. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay,” he said, fixing the shirt on his body.

Nelle felt entirely embarrassed and was half expecting him to shoot out something like *stare all you want, a fat ass like you will never get someone who looks like me*, but he said nothing of the sort. He simply took out the assignment from his backpack and checked to see if the pen he fished from the bottom of his bag was working.

“I, uh, I think I should go,” she said and rose from the couch.

“What? Why? We didn’t even start yet,” he said and hurried over to her as she was putting her shoes on.

“Guys like you are never nice to girls like me, and I can’t help but feel like this is just some fucked up prank I’m walking in on. So, whatever you have planned, just—”

“Nelle? I’m not an asshole like half the school is, I really do want to work on this assignment with you and make sure you pass the class.”

“And yet, whenever you’re around and hear them make fun of me, you do nothing. You may not partake, but you’re just as bad as the rest of them,” she said, her face as red as he’s ever seen it.

The door behind her opened and a woman with long wavy blond hair stood there, her mala beads swaying with her. Sandy, Kade’s mother, grinned. Kade’s green eyes just like hers as she stood in the doorway, her long skirt blowing in the crisp breeze.

“Kade, my love,” Sandy said, eyeing Nelle’s red face and Kade’s worried look. “Hope I didn’t interrupt anything?”

“Not at all,” Nelle said as she fixed the strap of her book bag on her shoulder.

“Just wanted to let you know your father will not be joining us for dinner,” Sandy said and looked to Nelle. “Would you like to join us, dear?”

“Oh, no, no, no—”

“Yeah, she’ll join us,” Kade interrupted Nelle and nodded.

“Great, I’ll come get you when it’s ready,” Sandy smiled and closed the door between them.

“I was just leaving,” Nelle sighed and glanced at Kade.

“And now you’re staying for supper,” he smiled.

“I don’t want to stay for supper,” she scoffed.

“I want you to stay for supper.”

“Why?” she crossed her arms.

“I just do.”

“And I’ll ask again, why are you being so nice to me? No one is ever this nice to me,” she said, watching as his eyes searched her body.

“I like you, Nelle. I’ve liked you for a really long time and I feel like if I don’t let you know now then it might be too late and you’ll never know how I feel,” he admitted with the slow shrug of a shoulder.

Nelle tried her hardest not to show the smile that wanted to creep to her face. She could’ve told him how much she liked him too, but that would be too easy, and she still felt like she was walking into a trap being there.

Letting out a heavy breath, she dropped her book bag on the couch and took off her flats once more. She fixed her jeans around her waist before she sat down again. Kade grinned and made his way beside her, placing the assignment in front of them.

For the next couple of hours they hardly spoke other than when it came to the assignment. He explained to her what they had learned in Miss Maxwell’s class, and helped her finish the assignment so she could be able to pass the assignment without a worry. His mother came in and announced dinner was ready, and Nelle wasn’t entirely sure she would be able to eat, given that she hadn’t had an actual meal since May and it was August.

“Are you sure you want me over for supper?” Nelle said. “I feel like you’re setting me up and I’m in no mood to be ridiculed—”

“You’re having dinner with my mom and little sister, no one is here to ridicule you, I promise. Just a couple friends having some grub and finishing up an assignment for class,” he nodded, truly hating how she viewed people from school given that they were all so mean to her for no apparent reason.

He stood and walked around the coffee table, getting his feet into slides. Nelle followed, sliding her feet into her flats, and making the short walk up to his house. The home was decorated in beautiful hand carved masks from all over the world, there were photos of Kade and his family in Africa, Papua New Guinea, Brazil, Japan, and so many different places. She always wondered why he only started coming to their school when he was fifteen, and she now assumed it was because he was homeschooled in all the beautiful places he lived throughout his life.

“This you?” she asked as she stopped in front of a photo of a little boy, his hair so blond it was nearly white in the sunlight, orange sand surrounding him, and red paint coving his smiling face.

“Yeah, that’s when we lived in Africa, I think Flora was just born or my mom was still pregnant with her,” Kade said.

“Wow, you lived a really crazy childhood,” she said, studying the photos.

“Guess you can say that. It’s nice to be able to call something home for once...come,” he said and took her hand. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

“Hi, sweetheart,” Sandy said as they entered the kitchen and she placed a couple of dishes at the table. She looked to Nelle and grinned. “I never got your name.”

“It’s Nelle,” Nelle smiled and let go of Kade’s hand.

“Oh, *you’re* Nelle...is that short for something?” Sandy asked, taking the last large bowl from the counter.

“N-no,” Nelle chuckled as Kade pulled out a chair for her. She smiled at him, and sat down. “I’m a leftie like my dad, and when he went to fill out the birth certificate, it smudged my first name a little. So, instead of Elle, I’m now Nelle.”

“That’s cute,” Sandy said with a smile.

“Mom, I can’t find my pink bow,” Flora said as she came into the kitchen. Her blond hair was tied in a high ponytail, her school uniform was still on and she had glitter and stickers stuck to the front of her dress.

“We’ll look for it after dinner,” Sandy said.

“Who’re you?” Flora asked.

“This is my friend, Nelle,” Kade said, taking a piece of bread from the basket.

“It’s nice to meet you, Nelle,” Flora smiled. “I have one important question to ask you.”

“Okay?” Nelle chuckled as Flora sat down.

“Do you like to color?” Flora asked, narrowing her eyes.

“I’m actually really good at drawing, so I guess you can say that I do,” Nelle smiled.

“Then we will get along just fine,” Flora said and started serving herself.

Kade chuckled, and picked up one of the serving dishes, adding the contents to his plate.

“You’re probably wondering what on earth half of this stuff is, aren’t you?” Sandy said.

“I’m not going to lie,” Nelle said.

“David and I are vegans, but I let Kade and Flora make that decision on their own. Flora eats fish and the occasional chicken, and Kade sticks with the vegetarian lifestyle. Much of the food here is still high in protein, but plant based, and, of course, lots of vegetables,” Sandy smiled. “What Kade’s handing you is quinoa, it’s much like rice or couscous.”

“I’ve had couscous before,” Nelle said and took a small helping.

“You might like this then. I have a tomato and vegan bocconcini salad, there’s mini avocado quiches—”

“These are really good,” Kade said and took a few out of the plate, placing one in Nelle’s.

“If you’re feeling up for it, I made a tofu stirfry,” Sandy said. “But don’t feel obligated to try it, I also made some lemon salmon, and a rapini and garlic pasta.”

“Thank you for having me over,” Nelle said.

“It’s our pleasure, dear,” Sandy smiled.

Little did she know, Kade and his family were vegetarians. She tried quinoa and avocados for the first time, having herself a small helping of dinner versus her usual bottle of Gatorade and few cigarettes. She tried to make it look like she was enjoying the food, which she was, but she also didn't want to show the little portions she was taking because of her secret to how she lost the weight.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" Flora asked, taking a bite from her rapini pasta.

"I had a brother, but he passed away earlier this year," Nelle said.

"Oh," Flora said, looking at Sandy.

"Kade told me about that," Sandy said. "I've met your brother a couple of times when he and my son would train. He seemed like a really nice man."

"Yeah, he was," Nelle nodded.

"How did he pass?" Sandy asked. "If you don't mind me asking?"

"Mom," Kade snapped quietly.

"It's okay," Nelle nodded. "He, uh, he thought it would be a good idea to drink and drive—he wasn't much of a drinker, but that night just so happened that he had one too many. Only one out of his two friends that didn't walk out of that one."

"Oh, dear, I'm so sorry," Sandy said.

"Yeah, me, too," Nelle nodded.

"That's why I'm happy Kade doesn't drink any funny juice," Flora said.

"You shouldn't either, that stuff will make you go crazy," Nelle chuckled and wrinkled her nose at Flora.

"Oh, no, I don't want to ever go crazy. My brother already says I'm nuts," Flora said.

Nelle let out a laugh and looked at Kade, his smile so genuine, her heart fluttered as his arm grazed hers.

"It's because you are nuts," Kade teased.

"I am not," Flora said and stuck her tongue out at Kade.

"See, only a crazy person would stick their tongue out at the dinner table," Kade said, leaning into Nelle as he draped his arm to the back of her chair.

"That's not true," Nelle chuckled and stuck her tongue out at Kade.

“Hey, you’re supposed to be on my side,” he laughed.

Sandy smiled at them, happy to see her son in such high spirits with someone who seemed to fit in with the family. Kade took another avocado quiche and popped it into his mouth, keeping his arm draped behind Nelle as he did. As much as Nelle started to tense up when he did it, something about the way he was around her, how he looked at her, made her believe that a part of him might actually be telling the truth when he said he liked her. Even through her paranoia, it was nice to feel wanted for a moment.

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“I didn’t know you were a vegetarian,” Nelle said as they made their way back into his room.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but my parents were once hippies—Dad runs his own business now and Mom teaches yoga from time to time and officiates weddings,” Kade chuckled.

“Your sister’s cute,” she nodded.

“Annoying is more like it,” he said and sat at the end of his bed. Nelle scratched at the back of her neck and flipped her hair over her head, looking around his room as the setting sun cast a glow through the few windows behind the couch. “You can come sit, y’know.”

“Um, yeah.” She cleared her throat and made her way beside him, hesitantly sitting at opposite end of his bed.

“Thank you for staying for dinner,” he grinned, leaning back on his hands and staring at her.

“Th-thank you for having me,” she nodded, looking down at her hands in her lap. “I was just thinking I should head home before it gets too dark out.”

“Do you need to head home?” he asked.

“Well, not really. My dad doesn’t really give a shit when I come and go,” she said, picking at her nail polish once again.

“You didn’t say anything after I told you I like you,” Kade said and moved closer to her.

“What do you want me to say? Thanks? No one has ever really said that to me so I don’t know how I’m supposed to react,” she said eyeing him move closer to her once again.

“What about Corey?”

“He offered me a lift home after school last year and brought me to *Make Out Point*, next thing I know he’s telling me how pretty he thinks I am, and how much he’s always wanted me, and he was the first boy to ever show that kind of interest in me, so I did what I thought would make him like me. Nothing more than that,” she said.

“If I would’ve known, I would’ve stopped him,” Kade admitted.

“Yeah, well, like I said, I’m used to being the butt of every joke and he just used me for a little more than just that,” she nodded. “But it’s fine, at least I got the awkward *first time* out of the way.”

“Still a shitty thing to do,” he said.

“Now you see why I don’t believe you or trust you for being so nice to me.”

Kade moved closer to her again, his leg grazing against hers. Her breathing shuddered when he placed his hand to her leg, slowly moving it higher. She knew what was about to happen and she wanted it just as badly as he did, but she was scared because she felt like maybe this was just some way for Kade to check her off his to-do list like Corey did. She looked at his hand and stood up, crossing her arms and glancing at the door.

“I didn’t mean to freak you out,” he said and stood with her.

“I think I should go,” she said softly as he took her hands away from her chest and cupped her face.

“Don’t go,” he whispered, his lips slowly touching hers.

Nelle didn’t know what came over her, but for once she felt entirely wanted and entirely beautiful. She kissed him back, letting his hands explore her body the way she was supposed to be explored. He tugged at his shirt, and lifted it over his head, coming back to her lips as fast as he could only to pull her sweater over her head and toss it to the side. Her nerves struck her, but it certainly did feel great for someone at their school to be nice to her, and hearing Kade admit his crush, made her heart flutter—even if she wasn’t sure if he was telling the truth or not.

His tongue met hers and he started undoing her jeans, only to feel her doing the same to him. He moaned softly against her lips, having not been touched since his breakup with Emily in March of that year. He helped Nelle out by moving away from her and pulling off his jeans, giving her the chance to do the same. As he stood there completely

naked, he grinned at her and pulled at the thong she wore. Her breathing shuddered once more as her thong hit the ground, and his fingers moved up her back and removed her bra. Nelle had never been naked in front of anyone before, not even Corey—he pulled her underwear to the side as he thumped on top of her in the backseat of his car letting her know they didn't need to get naked to have sex.

Kade met her lips again and lifted her onto the bed, feeling his body against hers sent shivers through her and as his tongue swept through her mouth, she felt like they should stop. They hardly knew each other and yet there she was having dinner with his family and kissing him intensely as they were just about to have sex. The more he kissed her, the more her hesitation uplifted. He reached down, kissing along her neck, and helped himself inside her. A soft moan left his lips as he rocked gently, hoping she was okay even though he was holding back how badly he wanted to ravish her. She gripped his back as he thumped, feeling the size of his shaft as he forced in deeper. A moan left her and as soon as he heard it leave her lips, he quickened his pace.

She left scratches down his back as he suckled at her breasts, making her feel entirely as gorgeous as she always was. He bit down on her neck gently and left her with a large hickey there was no way she could hide nor did he want her to. A soft moan struck her ear as he bucked on top of her, his rocking slowed down to a stop.

“That was, um, unexpected?” she said, out of breath.

“Are you okay with that?” he asked.

“It's a little too late to say no now,” she chuckled.

Kade beamed as he saw the simple grin on her face, wondering just as she did, why so many people chose to hurt her deliberately. Once he was able to break through the barrier she put up, he saw how kind and loving he knew she could be—and boy did he ever want her to smile every single day.

“You're really beautiful, Nelle,” he said, softly. His thumb grazed her cheek and he planted a kiss to her lips.

“You're just saying that because you got laid,” she said.

“No, I'm saying it because I mean it.”

“Why?” she whispered as he pulled out of her but remained on top.

“You just are,” he smirked.

He rolled off her and got comfortable beside her. She sat up and grabbed his t-shirt from the edge of the bed and put it on, she may not have been as overweight as she was, but she was still extremely shy of her body.

“I think I should head out.” She pushed her lips together.

“After we just had sex?” he chuckled. “Just using me for my knowledge and free food, huh?”

“No, I just—”

“I want you to stay, Nelle,” he grinned. “I’d prefer if you stayed naked the whole time, too, but you look cute in my shirt.”

“I don’t have any clothes or a toothbrush,” she mentioned.

“We’ll stop by your house before school in the morning,” he said with a grin and got to his feet, pulling on his boxers. “Let’s watch a movie or something.”

“Yeah, sure,” she nodded.

“Do you play videogames?” he asked and took her hand, leading her to the couch.

“No,” she admitted.

“Alright, well, this one’s fun,” he smiled and started sifting through the various games he had. “If Flora and I can play this, you certainly can, too.”

Nelle smiled slightly, hiding her blushing face from him as he stared at her. He leaned over and kissed her shoulder, letting her get lost in those emerald eyes for a fraction of a second. There they were, butterflies fluttered about in her stomach. She never had them before and was so scared she would get lost in them if she allowed herself to love. She wouldn’t do it though, this much she believed was true. There was only so much heart ache she could muster, and if this were to become something more than just a one night thing, then she was doomed. Her mental state could only handle so much.

*

Night rolled in so quickly, Nelle and Kade didn’t notice it was already past midnight when they fell asleep in his bed. They spent the night watching movies and playing videogames. She wore nothing but his t-shirt, and he really liked that, being able to stare at her long legs and nipples poking through his shirt. For once, Nelle felt what it would be like to be in a relationship—but of course, as she woke up in the middle

of the night from his soft snores, she realized that nothing good lasts forever. Even as he slept he was utterly handsome, and she continued to wonder why would someone like him be attracted to her?

She quietly clothed herself and picked up her things, having a hard time to find her sweater that he took off her and stayed in his t-shirt. As soon as she stepped out into the cool night, she knew leaving wasn't the best idea. He was nothing but nice to her all night, and so was his mother and sister, but the last thing Nelle wanted was a broken heart.

-3-

Nelle tried to avoid Kade at all costs during the rest of the week. Being sure to hide out in the library or smoke her cigarettes in her usual spot. She didn't hate herself for what happened, but she certainly wasn't expecting him to want to talk to her as much as he was trying to by all the text messages he was sending her—which went ignored because she truly didn't know what to say, for things like that didn't happen to her. She was embarrassed that she let her guard down so easily with him, and believed this was what scared her more than anything. Attention like this never came easy for Nelle, and with Kade, the attention never stopped.

Miss Maxwell's class was the last class of the day, and the last class of the week. This was when they would hand in their assignments and hopefully review what they learned.

Nelle sat by the window again, walking into class right as Miss Maxwell was about to shut the door. Kade grinned at her and left her a little wave as she sat at a desk. He frowned, wondering what on earth he did so wrong for her to continue to ignore him the way she did. He hoped having sex with her didn't ruin the potential friendship he wanted to build, yet by the looks of things, it certainly felt that way.

"Alright, class, your assignment that was given on Wednesday from Miss Johnson is due today, please hand them in and get into the same groups for the second part of the assignment, which will be due in one week's time," Miss Maxwell said as the students rose from their seats and started handing in the papers.

Nelle sighed, knowing she'd have to work with Kade all week on the next assignment. She was partially excited, but also extremely nervous. She knew that if they were alone together, the same actions would repeat themselves. The more time she spent with him, the more

she would grow fond of him, and this scared her because nothing good ever happened to Nelle.

“Couldn’t avoid me forever, y’know,” Kade said as he brought only a chair beside her.

“Thought I was doing a pretty good job at it,” she joked.

“Why have you been avoiding me anyway?” he asked as Miss Maxwell handed the two of them one sheet of paper with two questions on it. “You don’t think what we did was a mistake do you?”

“No, but I know that you’re probably regretting it.”

“I’m not,” he said, his arm draped to the back of her chair. “Didn’t you get my texts?”

“I did, but I didn’t read them.”

“Ouch,” he chuckled. “Come over again tonight? But stay the night this time and not sneak out after I fall asleep.”

“You know that the more you’re seen with me, the more people are going to start calling you names, right? It’s easier if we just let this be a one-time thing so nobody gets hurt,” she said and fished for a pen from her bag.

“What if I don’t want this to be a one-time thing?”

“Why would you want to be with me?”

“Like I said before, I like you,” he grinned. “And I really don’t give a shit what people say. Let ‘em talk. If I want to be happy with someone I like, then so be it. I just hope you like me, too.”

“Even if I did, I don’t like unwanted attention. There’s already half the class looking at us because your arm is on the back of my chair. I could only imagine what they’re saying to each other, and I could only imagine what they’ll say if we start dating. Believe me, I’m saving you the embarrassment of—”

Kade interrupted her and kissed her lips, setting off gasps throughout the class. Nelle pulled away quickly and touched her lips as he smirked at her. The chatter among students rose and Miss Maxwell stood from her seat at the desk and quieted everyone down.

“Dude?” Kenny whispered loudly. “Why didn’t you tell us you were porking—porky?”

Another string of laughter emanated from the back of the class and Miss Maxwell clapped her hands loudly for everyone to settle down.

“I told you,” Nelle sighed and looked down at the paper in front of her as her face grew red.

“And I told you I don’t care,” Kade said.

“Can we just work on this assignment and forget all this bullshit?” she asked.

“Whatever you want,” he said and removed his arm from around her.

*

After school, Nelle lit a cigarette and made her way to her car. It wasn’t the best car, but it was Greg’s and she couldn’t get rid of it, even if it ran poorly. She got into the driver’s seat and attempted to start the engine, but it kept stalling. After her third try, smoke rose out from under the hood and she hit the steering wheel a few times with an aggravated sigh.

The walk to her home wasn’t that far, but it was still a good forty-five minutes, and she wasn’t wearing the best shoes for a long walk. Regardless, Nelle grabbed her book bag and locked her doors, starting for the street.

“Need a lift?” Kade asked as he pulled up beside her.

“Always in the right place at the right time, aren’t you?” she said and took a drag of her cigarette.

“Well, I did ask you to come over tonight,” he smirked and leaned over to open the door for her. “You have to pick up your sweater anyway.”

“Kade—”

“Before you say anything, I really don’t give a shit what people think. I like you and you *hopefully* like me, too. What’s the harm in seeing where this goes? If it doesn’t work out, at least we’ll have a few good orgasms under our belt, yeah?”

“A few?” she chuckled.

“See, I always make you smile. We’re perfect together.”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Just come over so we can work on this assignment, and you can stay the night this time. We’ll have breakfast in the morning and I promise to drive you home after that,” he said.

“We have a week to work on this assignment,” she said.

“So, I’ll have you over every day until then,” he smiled.

“You’re trouble, you know that?” she said, flicking her cigarette and getting into his car.

“You don’t like trouble?” he said and put his hand to her leg.

“I don’t like this attention on me, I’m really not used to it,” she said. “Like at all.”

“You deserve it, though,” he nodded.

“Why’s that?”

“Because you’re gorgeous, you always were, too,” he smiled.

“Mhm,” She rolled her eyes.

“Did you know, your brother and I used to go to the same gym? I started going there the beginning of the year—call it my New Year’s resolution to get fit. He ended up training with me most days I was there and helped me set up my little gym in my garage when I wasn’t. He spoke about you a lot, too. All the volunteering you did, the money you’d raise. He always said if it wasn’t for you always having his back and being his shoulder to cry on, he’d be addicted to drugs like half his friends,” Kade admitted. Nelle wiped a tear from her cheek and nodded, looking down at her badly chipped nail polish she kept picking at. “The more he talked about you, the more the feelings I had for you grew, and I knew I had to do something about it. That’s why I broke up with Emily—was going to make a move on you earlier, but he passed away and I didn’t think it was right.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” she sniffed.

“Thought you deserved to know.”

Corey flagged down Kade as they neared the exit of the school and tapped his hood a couple times to bring the car to a stop. Nelle quickly wiped away her tears, keeping her head down, as she always did, and Kade rolled down his window.

“Hey, man, can you give me a lift? Peter ditched me for Julie and I don’t wanna take the bus home,” Corey asked.

“Yeah, ‘course. Get in,” Kade said and looked to Nelle.

Corey tossed his backpack into the backseat and hopped in behind Kade. She could feel Corey’s gaze on her as Kade pulled out of the parking lot and sped down the road. He turned up the music slightly to fill in the awkward silence that soaked into the car. Nelle was never the nervous type, but it seemed the more attention Kade gave her, the more her nerves were out of whack.

“You and Kade a thing now?” Corey asked and leaned forward, eyeing the faded hickey on her neck.

“What?” she chuckled awkwardly and glanced at Kade. “No, we, um, we’re just working on the assignment together.”

“Uh huh,” Corey chuckled. “And you’re going to work on it on a Friday night?”

“My car won’t start, he’s just giving me a ride home, same as you,” she nodded. Corey smirked, giving Nelle a quick once over and eyeing the hickey once more.

“You look really good, Nelle. Losing all this weight did you wonders, and if you’re up for it, we can go out again some time,” Corey asked, a genuineness about him.

“No,” Kade interjected.

“Ah, so you *are* a thing,” Corey said and looked to Kade.

“I don’t know, but you’re not going out with her,” Kade added.

“I think I can make my own decisions,” she said.

“So, you wanna go out with him?” Kade asked and glanced at her.

“No, but I don’t want you answering for me,” she said.

“Cute seeing you two bicker,” Corey chuckled and sat back. “How’d you lose all the weight? I didn’t see you at the gym at all or the pool all summer.”

“I just stopped eating like a pig,” she lied with a shrug.

“That’ll do it,” Corey said.

Kade grinned at her and placed his hand to her leg again, causing Corey to chuckle. They didn’t say anything else during the ride, only listened to music. Corey was texting someone in the backseat, his phone kept chiming every now and again, and a few nasal chuckles left him. Nelle didn’t mind Kade keeping his hand to her leg either, she kept thinking about what he said and that maybe they should try them out—test the waters and see where it takes them. If they didn’t work out, then, as he stated, they’d have just shared a few orgasm together over their last year of high school.

As soon as Kade pulled into his driveway, she followed him to the garage and he slammed his lips to hers before she was even fully in his room.

She chuckled against his lips, and wrapped her arms around his neck, allowing him to kiss her deeply, making the decision on the spot to see where this leads. She was tired of being alone, tired of being the butt of every joke. It was her turn to be happy for once.

“Can I take this as you wanting to give us a chance?” he asked.

“I haven’t decided yet,” she said and bore into his eyes, letting him work for it a bit more. “A part of me still thinks you’re doing this as some prank or part of some dare or bet.”

“I would never do that,” he said and grazed his nose on hers.

“And how am I supposed to believe you?”

“I think the calls and texts you keep ignoring proves that I’m not trying to fuck you over. I like you, Nelle. I’ve liked you for a really long time. From the first time we met and you smiled at me. I was smitten,” he grinned.

“And yet you only decided to make a move when I’m skinny,” she said.

“If I made a move earlier, we’d be fifteen, and losing our virginities that young doesn’t seem right, plus I’ve been with Emily the last nine months.” He shrugged a shoulder. “Not an excuse, I know. But if I’m being honest, every time I tried to talk to you, it just didn’t feel like the right time. You were either focusing on some book, or hiding out somewhere, or what really made me too scared to come to you was when I’d find you crying because of the fucking assholes at our school. Emily showed an interest in me and I thought with my dick over my heart. If I’m being brutally honest, your brother was actually the first person I told about how I felt about you, and he said if I ever hurt you he’ll chop my balls off and wear them as a necklace...I broke up with Emily not even a week later, but I didn’t do anything with you because of what happened.”

Nelle let out a laugh, remembering all the times her brother said he’d threaten any guy who ever tried to come into her life—she constantly reassured him that no man would ever want someone like her, especially someone overweight. Little did she know, the one person she actually had a crush on and thought would never notice her, felt the same way she did.

“Better late than never, I guess,” she said.

“You have a beautiful smile and you should show it off more often,” he added.

“What’s the use of smiling when people always call you names and your life is complete shit without the one person that made it worth living,” she said and dragged her tongue along her back molars.

“You have me now,” he said and kissed her lips softly.

He hated seeing how hurt she was and realized that even though she was bullied at school, she had her brother to go home to and turn her sadness into the beauty Kade was looking at before him. He would never be able to replace the connection she had with her brother, but Kade would surely do everything in his power to make sure she was happy again.

He took the strap of her book bag off her shoulder and kissed her passionately. His shoes left next, as did hers and he lifted her, leading her to his unmade bed. A smile spread to her lips, and even though she thought they should take a step back and become friends before they continued to cross the line of intimacy, she realized that she hadn’t felt this alive in months. Maybe it was okay to be happy.

She peeled off her jean jacket and helped him out of his sweater. She ran her hands along his perfect abs, rippling his muscles under her touch. He kissed along her neck as he gently tugged at her underwear. The beautiful white dress she wore left next and a small growl left him as he groped her breasts, lifting her again. Their kisses intensified the more he explored her body, and he pushed his pants down enough to ease into her.

A soft moan left her lips as he rocked, truly making her feel like she was beautiful for once in her life. She never felt wanted like she did when she was with Kade, never felt needed, or loved. There was something different about the way he looked at her and she was starting to believe that maybe, just maybe, she could finally smile.

He grunted softly as his lips were leaving another mark on her neck and sighed. She kissed his cheek and moved his head to hers. A smile spread to his lips as they kissed, his heavy breaths caressing her face.

“And to think, just last week we didn’t even speak,” she chuckled as he got off her.

“Hey, I’ve been trying to talk to you all damn summer, but you ignored all my messages on social media. And no one I know has your number aside from Julie, and I can’t fucking stand her,” he said and took off his pants, attempting to catch his breath.

He laid back beside her, tucking one hand behind his head and tapping his chest with his other so she could rest her head on him. She’d never cuddled with anyone before, and felt very nervous to do so. She hesitantly put her head to his chest, curling her arm around her and her other under her chin. Kade’s free arm wrapped around her and his fingertips moved delicately up and down the side of her body.

Taking a deep breath, she studied his chest as he exhaled, seeing small scars along his pectorals and ribcage. She untucked her hand from under her chin and moved the tips of her fingers along the small incisions, wondering what they could be from.

“What happened here?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said and cleared his throat.

“Nothing?” she repeated and looked up at him. “You’ve been inside me, I think I can get a better explanation than *nothing*.”

“I’ll tell you if you tell me how you really lost the weight,” he said and met her gaze.

“Does it matter?”

“Do these scars matter?”

She let out a sigh and fixed her head to his chest as she looked back at the scars. They probably didn’t matter as much as she thought they did—or maybe they mattered a lot and he didn’t want to say anything to her—they had only hung out twice the entire time they knew each other, aside from the group work that teachers would assign throughout the years of school.

“After Greg died, I didn’t know what to do with myself. I ate less because eating didn’t feel important anymore and I started walking a lot to clear my head, the more I walked the more my muscles hurt and it felt good to feel something other than sadness. Then I started to notice clothes were getting loose and if I skipped a meal or two, I figured I’d lose it faster. Skipping breakfast turned into skipping breakfast *and* lunch, and then it just turned into not eating at all. I picked up smoking to stop my cravings and to ignore the hunger pangs...I kept on walking, and continued to starve myself in the hopes that maybe if I looked a certain

way, maybe I'd be happy again. When my mom left us, she thought I was sick and couldn't deal with losing, not one, but both of her children, that's when I started drinking Gatorade to at least give me something...every time I see food, I just see myself mentally losing it again and going back to how I was. So, the less I eat, the better I feel."

"Starving yourself isn't the solution, you know this, right?" he said and shook his head. "When's the last time you ate something?"

"Does it matter?" she scoffed.

"It does to me."

"When you had me for dinner," she admitted.

"Jesus," he sighed. "You barely even ate anything that night, too."

"This is why I didn't want to say anything," she said and pushed herself off his chest.

"No, wait," he said and pulled her back. "I don't care that you don't eat much, but you're not starving yourself anymore. It's not healthy for you, and you have to think of your health."

"I don't want to put the weight back on," she said.

"Then we'll find a way that you won't, but you have to eat, Nelle." He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head.

It felt good to be able to get her secret off her chest, and if he meant everything he ever said to her, then maybe she'd be able to be happy with, not only herself, but her life as well.

"I hate that you're so nice to me all the time," she said.

"I really like you," he said and chuckled. "Plus, I promise to keep all the mean stuff in the bedroom. Engage in a little spanking, maybe tying you up—just to hear you call my name—"

"I don't want to do any freaky thing you and Emily did," she interrupted.

"Emily and I didn't do anything other than missionary or her on top," he said. "She was too preoccupied with her looks and other guys to really do anything more than that."

"I get to be the guinea pig in all your sexual fantasies?"

"It'd be fun to try new things, admit it," he chuckled.

"This is definitely something new," she smirked.

"And do you like it?"

The door to his room opened and Sandy barged in, dainty smile on her face as she spotted Kade and Nelle lying horizontally on his bed completely nude.

“Oh my god,” Nelle said and covered her face.

“What the fuck, Mom?” Kade yelled and pulled the covers over them as he turned into Nelle. His face just as red as hers was.

“Oh, there’s nothing to be ashamed of. Sex is a natural thing,” Sandy said and stepped into his room.

“Mom, please,” Kade said and raised the covers higher over Nelle.

“I just wanted to remind you that your father and I will be at the Mackenzie’s this evening to go over any last minute adjustments for their wedding tomorrow. You’re watching your sister,” Sandy said.

“Yeah, I remember, now can you please get out,” Kade said, completely embarrassed.

“Is that Nelle?” Sandy asked.

“Hi, Sandy,” Nelle said and left a small wave.

“Good, I like this one, Kade,” Sandy said and started out the door. “Dinner is in the fridge, all you have to do is warm it up. Bed time no later than nine for Flora.”

“I know, Mom,” Kade nodded.

“Have fun you two,” Sandy chuckled and closed the door.

“Fuck, I’m so sorry,” he said and laid back as he palmed his face.

“There’s a lock on your door?” Nelle asked.

“You see me unlock it every time we come in here,” he said as she propped herself up on her elbow.

“Then if you’re going to have me over and naked in your bed, I suggest you start using it,” she chuckled and grabbed his t-shirt from beside her.

“Don’t cover up,” he said and pulled at the t-shirt.

“You’re the only boy who has ever seen me naked—only person really. So, I think I’d feel more comfortable clothed so no one else gets a free show,” she said and continued putting on his shirt. “And I really hate my stretch marks.”

“Didn’t you and Corey have sex?”

“Yeah, but he just tugged my underwear to the side so he didn’t have to get me undressed,” she said. “Not the most romantic of stories,

but what did I expect, right? I was just some goal of his to *sleep with a fat chick.*”

“God, he’s an asshole when it comes to women,” Kade said and sat upright.

“Could be a lot worse. I mean, he could’ve recorded it and sent it all around school, but he didn’t.” She shrugged.

“No, instead he just announced to everyone that he took away your virginity, which caused the entire school to make fun of you and not him.”

“I’m used to it. Been teased my whole fucking life, I just ignore it now until I can’t take it and break down. One reason why I still don’t know if we should do this thing. I don’t think I can handle any more of the teasing I’m already used to.”

“Do you want this?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said and bit her bottom lip nervously.

“Take the assholes at our school out of the mix, and it’s just you and me. Is this something you’d want?” he asked again.

“I’ve never had a boyfriend before,” she said.

“Neither have I,” he joked.

“Shut up,” she said and tossed a pillow at him.

“If you read any of my texts from Wednesday until today, you’d see that I already asked you to be my girlfriend,” he smirked. “All you gotta do is say yes.”

Nelle blushed and looked down at her hands, picking at her nail polish as she did when she was anxious—only this time, she wasn’t anxious at all, she was surprisingly happy, yet shy. Things like this never happened for her before, and she couldn’t understand why they were happening now.

As she looked back up, Kade was still staring at her, his gorgeous green eyes studying her like she was some painting he had to memorize, his dishevelled hair was a mess atop his head, but he was still as handsome as ever.

Without even thinking twice about it, she leaned forward and kissed him, all her fear toward getting hurt was still eminent, and she wasn’t sure if it would ever go away no matter how he made her feel. Nelle was used to being hurt and teased, but something about Kade made her put that wall down and invite him in.

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Kade's parents arrived home around eleven that night and Nelle was introduced to his father, David. Kade looked so much like his father it was astounding—apart from Kade's eyes, they were all Sandy's. It certainly explained where he got his height from as well. Their night with Flora was something Nelle never experienced before. She felt like she was playing house as they served dinner, made dessert, played an infinite amount of videogames with Flora until it was bedtime, and even then, Nelle felt like she and Kade were a couple putting their child to bed. It felt nice to be happy, she certainly didn't want this feeling to ever end.

Kade and Nelle fell asleep in the middle of a movie he put on, after going at it again. He truly couldn't keep his hands off her and she was growing to enjoy it quite a bit. For once, it really felt nice to be wanted by someone she wanted just as badly.

It was barely four in the morning when her phone started ringing. She tried to ignore it as Kade was spooning her and held her tightly, but after the first set of rings stopped and another set began, she knew she had to answer it for it was the only person who ever called her.

She slowly moved out of Kade's grasp and took her phone from the nightstand, seeing her father's name pop up on screen.

"He-hello?" she said barely able to open her eyes and speak.

"Nelle, where the fuck are you? I can't find my pills! I need my pills!" Sebastian screamed on the other end.

"They're in the medicine cabinet, Dad," she replied calmly, trying to get him to do the same.

"No, they're not! I checked there, I can't find them, Nelle! And you're not here? Where are you?" Sebastian continued screaming.

"I'm at a friend's," she said, trying to remember where she hid his pills so he wouldn't gobble them all up.

"Friend's? You have no friends! I need my goddamn pills!" Sebastian yelled.

Kade inhaled sharply, overhearing the screaming fits her father was setting off. Kade sat up and kissed her shoulder gently, rubbing his hand up and down her arm.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming home, alright? It might take me a minute, the car broke down at school. Um, I’ll call a cab and be right over,” she said.

“Hurry the fuck up,” Sebastian said and hung up.

Nelle sighed and dropped her phone in her lap. The last thing she wanted was for him to see that side of her family. No one needed to see that, they should remember Sebastian for the loving and funny man he always was, not the drunken and drug addicted person he turned into.

“Sorry you had to hear that,” she said.

“Is everything alright?” Kade asked, kissing her shoulder again.

“I just, um, I have to go home,” she nodded.

“Okay, I’m coming with you,” he said and got out of bed.

“No, no, it’s okay,” she said and gave his naked body a once over. “I’m just going to call a cab or walk over or something.”

“Are you insane? I’m not letting you walk home.” He pulled on a pair of basketball shorts and took his sweater from earlier and put that on as well. “Now, c’mon, I’ll crash at your place for the rest of the night.”

“I don’t know,” she said and got out of bed, in search for her clothes that were scattered across his room. Kade took his phone and typed out a message quickly before sliding it into his pocket.

“I just texted my mom that I’d be at yours, now get dressed,” he said.

“Yeah,” she nodded.

Nelle pulled her underwear on and adjusted her breasts in the white dress she wore that day, eager to get home and into something a little more comfortable. He picked up her book bag and grabbed his toothbrush from the washroom they had built for him when he asked to move his room to the garage, and placed it in her bag along with a small bottle of pills he tried to hide from her.

They didn’t say anything as they left his room and got into his car, they were both still half asleep and in dire need of a bed to get back into. Nelle rested her head against her arm and leant it on the window, hoping the short ride to her house wouldn’t cause her to fall asleep. She gave Kade her address and he was following the GPS on his phone.

“Hey,” he said and placed his hand to her leg. “What’s going to happen to your car? You never called anyone to pick it up.”

“The guy who owns the towing company in the area is a friend of my dad’s, when he sees that it’s my car, he’s just going to bring it to the shop and call us when it’s ready. It used to be Greg’s car and that happened a lot—thing’s a piece of crap but I can’t seem to let it go,” she said and sat up straight.

“I don’t mind giving you lifts until your car is fixed,” he said. “Be nice to see you every morning and have you to myself after school.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said. “It’s not that far of a walk.”

“You’re my girlfriend,” he smirked. “And even if you weren’t, I’d hate to see you walk to and from school knowing you have someone who is perfectly able to drive you.”

She bit her lip softly, and placed her hand on his as he turned onto her street. Nerves finally struck her and she had no idea how her father was going to react when he saw Kade. There was absolutely no telling what he could do.

Kade pulled into her driveway and shut the engine, taking her book bag from the back seat. Nelle sat there a moment, eyeing the dim light of the living room casting a shadow through the blinds. After being in Kade’s house and remembering what it was like to live so lavishly, she was embarrassed to have him come over. He didn’t need to see this side of her, nor would she ever want anyone to ever have to experience it.

“This, um, don’t judge me based on *this*,” she said, looking at her house.

“I won’t,” he said and stepped out of the car.

Nelle fished her keys from her book bag that was draped to his shoulder and took a breath as she unlocked her door. Cupboards were slamming, drawers pushed and pulled, chairs in the kitchen were knocked over—the home looked like it had been attacked.

“Dad?” Nelle called.

A lit cigarette was still sitting in the ashtray in the living room, smoke was rising from it and clouding the air. Kade didn’t say anything, even though a slight cough from the smoke in the air bothered him. She put out the cigarette and picked up a couple of the empty bottle of vodka from the La-Z-Boy.

Sebastian barged out of the kitchen, his white shirt was stained with tomato sauce and the remnants of whatever alcohol he was drinking

all day. His sweatpants were also stained and riddled with mustard. Nelle felt so embarrassed to even have allowed Kade to witness any of this.

“Where the fuck are my pills, Nelle?” Sebastian yelled.

“It’s okay, they’re right here,” she said and made her way farther into the living room, taking them out of a drawer in the coffee table. “See?”

“Who the fuck are you?” Sebastian barked at Kade.

“Kade, sir,” Kade said and looked to Nelle then back to Sebastian. “I’m her boyfriend.”

“That’s a laugh,” Sebastian said and grabbed the pill bottle from her hand.

“I’m going to bed, do you need anything else?” she asked, fighting off the tears that were shimmering in her eyes.

“No,” Sebastian said and plopped himself down on his La-Z-Boy.

Nelle continued down the hallway and Kade followed her into the room at the end of it. Her room was so different from the home itself, it was clean and crisp. Her twin bed was against the wall in the corner of the room and her dresser was in front of it with a few framed photos of her and her brother. She had a pink carpet in the middle of the room, some of her sketches pasted on her closet door, and a couple posters of her favorite bands hung on the walls, but she didn’t have anything more than that. Compared to his room, this looked like no one ever lived in it.

She tossed her jacket onto the accent chair in the corner of the room and peeled her dress off with it, taking one of her old shirts from when she was overweight out of her dresser and using it as her pyjamas. Kade placed her bag on the accent chair as well and pulled his sweater off. Before he even had the chance to take his arms out of his sleeves, she sat on the bed and started crying.

“Hey,” he said and came to her side.

“This isn’t how he usually is,” she sniffed.

“It’s okay,” he said and kissed the side of her head as he held her close.

“You don’t have to stay, you can go. I’d completely understand if you wanted to leave.”

"I'm not going anywhere." He lifted her chin and planted a kiss to her lips. "You guys have had a rough year, I get it."

"He never drank before, aside from a beer or two, here and there, and now he can't function without it. And the doctors just keep prescribing him pills in the hopes he'll get better but he's only getting worse," she sniffed as he wiped a tear from her cheek.

"Why don't you get him help?" he asked.

"I need my mother to sign off on the rehab nearby, but she hasn't answered my phone calls. If I wanted, I turn eighteen next month and when that happens I'll be able to sign off myself. Only problem is, if he goes to rehab, the money he gets every month to pay for this shitty house and our bills, won't be coming in anymore. I don't have the money to support myself, and I don't think a part time job after school will be enough for what this place needs...I have an Aunt who lives an hour out of town and if push comes to shove, I might just have to move there and sell this place."

"What about school?" he asked.

"I'd switch schools, I'd have no choice," she said. "But I haven't made that decision yet, figure I have time to decide what I want to do."

"I can talk to my parents, have you stay with us?" Kade offered.

"No, no, I can't do that. Don't worry about me, I'll figure this out," she sniffed.

She got in bed and Kade got in behind her, pulling her close to him as he kissed the side of her face a couple of times. She knew what she had to do, and the best option was sending her father to rehab. Her happiness would have to be ignored once again, no matter the offer Kade gave her, she wouldn't be able to put him out like that. This was her mess to clean up, not his.

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The smell of bacon and burnt toast filled the room, along with the hints of cigarettes in the air. Nelle turned onto her back, feeling Kade's heavy breathing caress her face as he slept beside her. Even as he slept he was breathtaking, she still couldn't understand why he liked her of all people. He may not have been the popular guy in school, but he sure did hang out with them, and if they're seen together, holding hands or kissing, then his reputation would surely be ruined.

A knock rapped her door and it opened momentarily to her father holding a spatula and wearing something completely different than the night prior. He grinned, eyeing Kade asleep beside her with his arm draped over her stomach, and she rubbed her eyes.

“Morning, sweetheart,” Sebastian said. She didn’t even have to stand beside him to smell the liquor on his breath. “I made breakfast, if you and your friend want some?”

“No, it’s okay,” she said, not in the mood to explain to her father that Kade didn’t eat meat. “We have a project to work on today, so I won’t be home much.”

“Okay, be sure to have something to eat, you’re looking rather pale,” Sebastian said and closed her door.

Kade let out a soft chuckle and pulled her close.

“You know I can eat, right?” Kade said with his eyes closed, a faint smile spreading to his lips.

“He probably made bacon with toast and butter for a BLT, aren’t you a vegetarian?” she said and he nestled closer to her.

“I am, but I still eat eggs,” he said and finally opened his eyes to her.

“We don’t have eggs,” she said. “Greg was allergic, so we just never buy them anymore.”

“Then I’m treating you to breakfast this morning,” he said and kissed her face.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Liar, I can hear your stomach growling,” he chuckled and rubbed his eyes.

“Doesn’t mean I have to eat,” she said.

“Nelle,” he sighed and propped himself up on his elbow to look at her.

“Kade,” she mocked.

“Guess you’re coming back to my place after all?” he asked.

“Well, we do have that assignment to work on we didn’t get to yesterday,” she said.

“I was too busy making you moan for me,” he chuckled. “Bring clothes with you, I want you to actually stay the full night.”

“Your parents won’t mind?”

“Nah, they seem to like you, and like that you like their food,” he said. “The two times I had Emily over she made my vegan parents cook her meat. That didn’t go over so well, so I just never had Emily over in our nine month stint.”

“You sure talk about her a lot,” Nelle mentioned and rose from her bed to lock her door so she could change.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to.”

“Are there any feelings left for her?” she asked, wondering why she was jealous all of a sudden.

“No, none at all,” Kade said with the shake of his head. “I wouldn’t be starting something with you if I still did. I just have nothing else to compare this to.”

Nelle nodded and undressed, clothing herself in her jeans and a tank top. She didn’t have many options to dress her new body, given that whatever money came in for them was put toward bills. She was lucky enough to find most of her clothes on the sale rack at the local mall.

Kade rose from her bed, in attempts to get to her and give her a hug so that she knew he meant what he said—he never truly liked Emily, he only got with her because she showed him attention and he was excited that a girl wanted to touch him rather than only flirt with him.

As his feet touched the floor, he felt lightheaded and sat back down, putting his head in his hands and taking a few quick breaths. This happened to him quite often, he just wasn’t ready to tell Nelle about it, given that the only people that knew were his parents and maybe Flora.

“Are you okay?” she asked as he started wheezing.

“I just,” he wheezed. “In your bag—my pills.”

Nelle grabbed her bag from the accent chair and got to her knees in front of him, taking out a bottle of pills with his name on them. She had no idea what they were for, and tear started welling in her eyes as her hands shook trying to open the bottle.

“H-how many do you need?” she asked as the bottle of pills shook above her palm.

“Two,” he wheezed with a cough.

She grabbed the glass of water that was on her nightstand, holding it to his lips, he took a sip of the water and she pushed the pills into his mouth. He gulped them down, and put his head back into his

hands as his wheezing slowly subsided and he was able to breathe normally again.

“What was that?” she asked panicked.

“I don’t wanna scare you,” he said and took a breath.

“Well, it’s too late now,” she said with a sniff.

“The little scars on my chest, um, they’re for the scans they had to do on my heart,” he nodded, keeping his focus on her pink carpet his feet were resting on.

“What do you mean? What’s wrong with your heart?”

“I guess you can say it’s defected. I’ve been on a waiting list since I was fifteen for a transplant. But it’s not as bad as the people ahead of me and as long as I keep taking the pills, I should be okay,” he nodded and finally met her eyes. “I think I got so wrapped up in having sex with you last night, I forgot to take them before I passed out.”

“Jesus Christ, Kade,” she gasped. “Why didn’t you tell me? I would’ve made sure you took them.”

“It’s not something I go around telling people—sorry to bring her up again, but not even Emily knew,” he said. “Or Corey and he’s my best friend.”

“Are we even allowed to have sex?”

“Have you seen me complain?” he chuckled.

“I see how out of breath you are when we finish,” she said.

“I’ll be fine, baby, I promise,” he said and pulled her face to his.

She kissed his lips and nodded, fright was setting in that if they were to start something here, then she could potentially lose him, and the last thing she wanted was to lose someone close to her again. Tear streamed down her cheeks and he said nothing but wiped them away, grinning at her calmly.

“When’s your next doctor’s appointment?” she asked.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” he said.

“If you want me to be your girlfriend then you’re going to have to let me come with you to all your appointments. I want to hear what the doctors have to say,” she sniffed.

“You’d do that for me?” he asked with a frown.

“I like you, Kade, and I want to see where this goes.”

He chuckled, happy to hear those words come off her lips. He kissed her again, and wiped the escaping tear from her cheek. Nelle was

used to being treated poorly by everyone she ever knew aside from Greg, and before Julie got popular. Seeing how kind Kade had always been to her, and how much he showed his affection toward her in the past week, there was no stopping her from accepting him into her life. Perhaps things would finally change and go her way, maybe the teasing and name calling would finally end as well. Only time would tell.

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People were somewhat shocked at first when they saw them arrive at school on Monday together, especially when they saw his arm draped over her shoulders and kiss her every chance he had. Some of the teasing was pointed at her for being so desperate for attention after she lost the weight, but as soon as Kade told them to *shut the fuck up*, the name calling and teasing slowly diminished. It felt nice for Nelle to finally walk through the halls at school and hear nothing directed at her. Their relationship bloomed a lot quicker than they expected it to. She felt things for him she never thought she'd ever feel, and Kade was falling head over heels for her, he just didn't know how to tell her.

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Nelle rushed out of class to meet Kade in the cafeteria for lunch, they had been going steady for a couple of weeks now and she absolutely loved having a boyfriend. He was everything she could have ever imagined; kind, caring, he always made her laugh, and together, they were amazing in bed. For the first time since she created her social media account, and would only post once in a blue moon, she had something to share. Of course, Kade felt the same way and did everything for Nelle, calling her every morning to let her know he was on his way to her, calling her every night to hear her voice before he fell asleep—and that didn't include the countless messages they sent to one another during the day. Kade was her person, and she couldn't wait to finally have the courage to tell him.

She draped her book bag over her shoulder and made her way to the cafeteria. A crowd of students were slowly making their way in, chatting and gossiping about some hit new television show Nelle continued to procrastinate about starting. She wasn't much of a television buff, she preferred a good book or the likes of her sketchbook. Although

the more time she spent with Kade, the more movies she watched she'd never heard of before.

As soon as the crowd cleared, she swore her heart broke in half. Kade sat at one of the round tables with Corey, Kenny, Peter, Patricia, and what hurt Nelle the most, Emily. She sat right next to Kade in the seat Nelle assumed he saved for her, since his sweater was hanging off the back of it. Emily was speaking to Kade, whispering something in his ear as he unravelled his sandwich. A laugh rose from within him, a laugh Nelle had never heard before. Emily said something again and placed her hand on his arm. Kade nodded with a grin and looked at her, saying something Nelle couldn't hear, but by the looks of how Emily was giggling, Nelle knew it wasn't something she would like.

"You thought someone like him would actually fall for an ex-fat girl? You're a nobody, Nelle, and nobodies don't get the guy—especially guys like Kade," Julie said as she nudged past Nelle, making her way to the table.

Nelle looked up at Kade one more time and put her head down as she made her way out of the cafeteria. She didn't want to hear what he had to say, she didn't want to know why they were talking or why they were sitting beside one another—he spoke about her enough, and compared the two of them enough for Nelle to believe that there were unsettled feelings, and by the looks of his laughs, she was right.

She rushed to her locker, taking out the necessary books she needed to study, and grabbed the pack of smokes she promised him she'd quick. Nelle hoped that things would be different, she wished that maybe this time it was her turn to finally have a happy ending—only problem was, she was wrong. All her life she had nobody to shoulder on aside from Greg, she thought she had Julie, yet as Nelle looked back on things, she never truly had any real friends. All she had was herself to hold her head high and make herself believe she was worth it, it was just never enough, and Nelle was starting to believe life wasn't worth it anymore.

As she made her way to her usual spot behind the school, there were a few students already sitting there and she didn't want to hear it from anyone. From time to time, if Kade wasn't around, the fat jokes would spin her way. They'd remind her of what she would always be, no matter how much weight she lost, she would always be that overweight girl everyone made fun of.

She spun on her heels and made her way to the bleachers knowing there would be no one there to bother her. She lay on her back on the top row, shaking her head as his laugh echoed around in her mind. Tears were skimming down the sides of her face, tickling her ears but she didn't think a boy was worth crying over, especially a boy who was just like everyone else who ever entered her life. She felt used, giving him everything she had to give. Letting him in on so many of the dark thoughts that clouded her mind, and revealing to him her biggest secret of all, how she lost all her weight.

Nelle lay there staring at the clear blue sky, single cloud floating by and making her feel the same singled out aloneness as she smoked her cigarette. Whenever Nelle felt down or hurt, she would always turn to food, stuffing her face until she felt better and worse all at the same time. Nothing ever worked, even when she had her brother and told him how she felt, she pretended she was better when he would console her, but she would be lying if she ever said she was happy.

Her phone vibrated a few times, but she ignored it. She wasn't going to become one of those women who accepted her boyfriend being chummy with his exes. After the fifth time her phone vibrated due to a phone call, she decided to grab it from her pocket and see who it was. Kade sent her a couple of messages and called her five times, obviously oblivious to his own stupidity.

Where are you? We're at the second table by the entrance.

Baby?

If you're in a meeting with a teacher right now, I'm sorry for bothering you.

Nelle? Lunch is almost over, I checked your usual spot, my car, and the library. Is everything okay?

Nelle inhaled sharply and lit her second cigarette, rereading the messages again. It sadly bothered her that Kade was worried about her, but how naïve he was to why she didn't join him, trumped any remorse towards ditching him.

Went home. Not feeling well, she sent. She wasn't entirely lying either. She was waiting for the bell to ring so she could sneak off once class started.

Let me drive you home! He wrote almost immediately.

No, she sent.

What's wrong? He replied.

Why don't you ask, Emily? You two looked pretty chummy at the table today, she sent and picked up her book bag as she jogged down the bleachers and started making her long walk home.

What're you talking about? He sent.

There it was, Nelle feeling played and she wasn't in the mood to have to explain her insecurities to him when the answer was right at his fingertips. She locked her phone and turned her music on, preparing herself for a walk she dreaded—her dizziness wasn't helping her either. She didn't have any Gatorade left at home for her to have some form of energy for the day, and it was certainly taking its toll. She took her water from her book bag and chugged some of it, adjusting her headphones as she did and fighting the shimmering tears in her eyes.

*

“What's up, man?” Corey asked as they sat in class.

“Nelle's fucking pissed at me,” Kade scoffed and dropped his phone on the top of the desk.

“Why?” Corey frowned. Kade opened his messages and showed the last one that Nelle sent and Corey let out a chuckle. “You guys were pretty *chummy* today.”

“What? How?” Kade asked, his face growing red as Corey gave Kade his phone back.

“Laughing at her jokes, letting her touch your arm, um, giving her the seat you saved for, Nelle, your girlfriend...what else? Oh, the fact that Emily is your ex and you already know how low Nelle's self-esteem is, what the fuck did you think she would say when she saw you and Emily together? Be okay with it?” Corey shrugged as the teacher walked into class.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do?” Kade whispered.

“Fix it?” Corey replied quietly. “Or you'll probably lose her.”

“Fuck,” Kade sighed and took his phone out again, hiding it under the desk.

Baby, I didn't mean to upset you or hurt you in any way. I promise nothing is going on with Emily, she sat with us because she was part of our group for so long. If it bothers you then I won't sit with them anymore. I don't care about them, and I especially don't care about her! I'm sorry, okay? Please, Nelle, please forgive my stupidity, Kade sent and waited for Nelle to reply.

Whatever, I know what I saw and you seemed pretty happy to have her there. I've never heard you laugh like that, and how you let her grab your arm...I need some

space. When I'm ready, I'll reach out to you, Nelle replied as she stepped into a gas station. As quickly as she walked in, she paid for her fruit punch Gatorade and walked out, still thirty minutes away from home.

Nelle, please don't do this! Have I shown you throughout our relationship that you shouldn't trust me? Have I ever hurt you? Betrayed you in any way? I didn't realize what was going on, and Corey also pointed out how stupid I was for not seeing it. Please, please don't give us space, he sent.

Just leave me alone, she wrote.

Nelle, come on! He replied.

Nelle refused to reply. She gulped from the bottle and put her phone on silent, she most certainly didn't want to hear from him or his bogus excuses. It was just her luck, wasn't it? As soon as she let herself be happy and put her guard down, she got hurt again.

She finished the bottle of Gatorade when she turned onto her street and placed it into her book bag. It took a lot for her not to look at her messages, but she did it anyway as she turned up her driveway.

Baby, I can't lose you, was all he wrote.

Nelle rolled her eyes and unlocked her front door to find her father passed out on his La-Z-Boy. She continued to her room, wanting nothing more than to wake up six months ago when her life was so different—yes, she was still made fun of, and severely overweight, but at least she had her brother to confide in.

Kicking her flats off she dropped onto her bed and buried herself into her covers, eager for this day to end. Her phone continued to receive messages from Kade, only this time she didn't ignore them, she looked at every single one and allowed herself to hurt for that was the only real feeling she ever felt.

Please don't ignore me. Class ends in ten minutes; promise me you'll answer your phone.

Pick up the phone!

Are you seriously that mad? We hang out with Corey all the time and I don't say anything when you laugh at his jokes? I didn't do anything wrong here!

Nelle, please!

She means nothing to me, can't you see that? You have to wake the fuck up for once and let people love you.

Baby, answer me for fuck's sake.

Nelle threw the covers over her head, wanting to fall into a restless sleep, crying as quietly as she could so her father wouldn't disturb

her. She was beginning to regret her decision to let Kade in at all, and when Nelle was sad, she liked to find ways to hurt herself. Since starving herself could only go on for so long, maybe taking a page from her father's book wouldn't be that bad of an idea.

Kade rushed over to Nelle's house after school, barely remembering to turn off the car when he jumped out and ran to her front door. He rang the bell twice, waiting for an answer, and knocked a couple of times. Sebastian groaned, tossing the blanket off him and making his way to the noise coming from the front door. He swung it open, giving Kade a once over as he waited for him to speak.

"H-Hi, is, uh, Nelle home?" Kade asked.

"Nope, still hasn't come home from school yet. Aren't you the boy she's seeing? Shouldn't you know where she is?" Sebastian said.

"We, uh, got into a disagreement and she left before I could give her a lift," Kade admitted.

"If she's not here then she's at the graveyard," Sebastian said and closed the door. Kade let out a sigh and sat on the front step. He took his phone from his pocket and looked at Nelle's name with the heart emoji beside it.

I'm on your front porch, your dad said you weren't home. I'm going to visit your brother's grave and I hope you're there. If not then I'll come back here and sit on your porch all night until you speak to me. Please, baby, I'm so sorry. I'm not the guy you think I am and you know this! He sent and took a deep breath.

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A loud rapping struck her door, startling her from the cat nap she fell into. She frowned under her covers, wanting to desperately shut the day out.

"Yeah?" she called.

"There's that boy sitting on our front step looking for you," Sebastian said.

"Kay," she said and nestled into her pillow in the hopes she'll fall back asleep.

Great, she thought.

Sebastian made his way back down the hallway, taking one of his bottles off the kitchen table and gulping it. A heavy sigh escaped him, knowing that telling Kade she was there would make her happy, and also get that boy off his porch. He placed the bottle back on the kitchen table and opened the front door to Kade sitting there staring at his phone.

“She’s in her room,” Sebastian said.

Kade shot upright and nodded quickly, rushing into the house. He exhaled sharply and opened the door to Nelle’s room to find her under her covers, her rhythmic breathing calmed him. He closed the door and took off his shoes, wanting nothing more than to hold her and tell her how much he truly likes her—frankly, he wanted to tell her what he truly felt for her, but he was scared she wouldn’t feel the same.

He unzipped his sweater and got in behind her, kissing the back of her head as he spooned her and pulled her close to his chest. Just being able to hold her again also calmed him, he felt like he could’ve lost her over something as idiotic as laughing at his ex-girlfriend’s jokes, and letting her be close with him. Of course, he now realized how hurtful it must’ve looked, but he meant nothing by it, and would never mean anything by it because Emily was old news. It was Nelle he felt so many different things for, and Nelle alone.

“Leave me alone,” she whispered as quiet sobs escaped her.

“No,” he whispered.

“Why?” she sniffed.

“Because I’m yours, Nelle.”

She had nothing to reply to this, except let out a few more sobs as he held her. Kade felt awful about how she must’ve felt, he didn’t know how to fix it and if holding her closely worked, then he would hold her for as long as she needed.

“I just want to know why,” she whispered.

“I don’t have an answer for you. Just know I really didn’t mean for that to happen. I don’t like her, at all. I’m sure she never really liked me either—and I know that doesn’t matter, but it’s true...I’ve never felt this way about anyone before, Nelle. You have to believe me. I’ve never wanted to hold someone, kiss someone, and touch someone as much as I want to touch you. I’ve been trying to get you to be mine for months, why would I ruin it once I have you? If I didn’t like you, I wouldn’t have partnered up with you in class, I wouldn’t have kissed you the way I did and fucked you the way I did. It’s always been you, baby. Believe me,” he said and kissed the back of her neck. “I’m sorry.”

Nelle let out a shuddered breath and slowly turned in his grip to look at those emerald eyes she always had a crush on. They smiled at her as she faced him, and he immediately wiped the tears from her under her eyes.

“Seeing that made me believe what everyone’s been saying. That someone like you, who’s popular and handsome and perfect, would never really be with the fat chick,” she whispered. “That it’s just a phase.”

“They’re just jealous,” he chuckled softly. “Because you’re the perfect and gorgeous one, and if anyone ever tells you you’re not gorgeous, they’re fucking blind...and I just hang out with the popular people, doesn’t mean I’m popular.”

“If I’m so perfect and gorgeous why don’t I have any friends? Why does everything bad always happen to me? Why have people made fun of me all my life and the only person who never did was taken away from me?” she cried. “Seeing you with Emily made me realize that even *you* can be taken away so easily and it just proves that everyone was right.”

Kade didn’t say anything and studied her crying face. He leaned forward and kissed her lips softly, wiping her tears once more. He knew the hurtful things people said about her, and never understood why. Even when she was overweight she was beautiful, people were just masked by her insecurities to realize it.

“I’m never leaving you,” he whispered. “I promise you this, baby. I’m here forever.”

“Then why did you hurt me,” she said as quiet as can be.

“I didn’t mean to, believe that,” he said.

“Don’t hurt me again.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

He kissed her lips tenderly, feeling her turn into him. He didn’t want to waste any time, and wanted to prove to her that he wanted her, always and forever. He quickly undid his jeans and maneuvered himself on top of her. She wanted this as badly as he did, because without him, she felt completely empty—as did he. She pulled down her underwear as he pushed down his pants some more.

A smirk left his lips as she pulled his face to hers, their tongues dancing together. He hated seeing her cry, hated seeing the pain she had to go through because of the spoiled snobs at the school they went to. He vowed to keep her happy, no matter what, all he wanted was to look at her smiling face for as long as she’d let him.

A soft moan left him the moment they were one and he rocked steadily, seeing how hard she was trying to stay quiet. The ecstasy flowing through her had to be masked, they weren’t in his garage where she could

be as loud as she wanted, and he was getting more excited just seeing her struggle.

“Oh, god.” She bit her lip as he kissed up her neck, leaving his mark on her once more.

The hickeys he left were starting to get out of hand. There wasn’t a day where her neck wasn’t marked from one end to the other, decorated in the suckles of the boy she loved showing off. She mimicked and bit down on his neck, leaving her mark on him for the first time since their relationship started.

“Ou, fuck,” he moaned softly and shuddered. His thumping slowed as his heavy breathing caressed her neck. He chuckled softly, trying to catch his breath. “I couldn’t hold it in when you kissed my neck.”

“Sorry?” she giggled.

A chuckle escaped him again and as his lips met hers. Even though she was hurt by what she saw earlier, the forgiveness oozed out of him, and the certainty that he wasn’t going anywhere was all she needed to hear to let his little mishap slide.

Heavy footfalls moved down the hallway toward her room.

“Nelle? Is your friend staying for dinner?” Sebastian called on the other side of the door.

“Um,” she panicked as Kade covered them with the comforter, still remaining on top and inside her. “He’s doesn’t eat meat, it depends what you’re making.”

“I was going to order a pizza,” Sebastian said.

“Do you want to stay for pizza?” Nelle whispered.

“More time with you the better,” he grinned.

“Okay,” Nelle replied to her father. “Make sure one of the pizzas has no meat on it.”

“Yeah,” Sebastian called and retreated down the hallway.

She put her hands to her face as Kade started chuckling and got off her.

“That’s twice now someone catches us?” she said as he fixed himself into his pants.

“This barley counts, your dad didn’t even come in, my mom, on the other hand.” He adjusted his arm under her head as she leaned into his chest. “They’re *pro free love*, so I’m pretty sure if we were in the middle of it, she’d still walk in, unfazed by the whole experience.”

“I think my mom would give you the birds and the bees talk, and my dad, well, he’d sit there quietly and judge you,” she chuckled.

“I’m really sorry, baby, for everything you saw. I don’t know why I thought it was okay. I know it’s not, at all. I don’t like her or care for her in any way, okay?” Kade said taking a breath, quickly changing the subject.

“I didn’t like that,” she said.

“I know,” he kissed the top of her head. “I know we’re still new to this relationship, but I’m not a cheater. You’re my girlfriend and I don’t want you to think I would be *that* guy. Like I said, you’re it for me and I hope you feel the same.”

A small smile touched her lips and she looked up at him, his beautiful eyes grinning at her already. She pushed off his chest and kissed him, his hand tangling in her hair. He was right, everything was new for her, too, and maybe even for him. There would be ups and downs, but in some way, they were going to make it work.

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Over the course of the next few weeks, Nelle and Kade were even more inseparable. Nelle spent her weekends at Kade’s, and most of her school nights at home. It was easier to look after her father that way and make sure nothing terrible happened when she left at the end of the week. Even though she wasn’t living with Kade, he already cleared a couple of drawers for her things, and made room in his stand up closet as well. She left a few items there, but nothing to signify that she was living with him. School life improved drastically, no one said anything to her and accepted her and Kade as a couple. For once, Nelle was accepted and real happiness was blossoming.

Kade arrived at her house early on her birthday, put balloons in her driveway and walkway, making sure this would be a memorable one. He held a large bouquet of blue roses—her favorite color—and was going to give her the present he picked out for her later on today, something he put a lot of thought into and hoped she loved it just as much as he did picking it out.

Nelle woke up that morning to her father passed out in the hallway, vomit had escaped his mouth sometime after he fell. Usually, she would wake him up and get him into the shower so he could clean

himself, but today was her eighteenth birthday, for once, she was going to think of herself. She stepped over her father, ensuring that he was still breathing, and made her way out of her house. She packed herself an overnight bag, in the hopes that Kade would invite her to stay the night and truly make her birthday a special one.

When she opened the front door, Kade stood there with a smile on his face, holding a beautiful bouquet of blue flowers. She was so happy and surprised she thought she would cry as she saw all the balloons he tied to her walkway.

“Kade,” she said, fighting back tears. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Happy birthday, baby,” he chuckled and made his way to her.

A gentle kiss was left to her lips as he lifted her off the top step of her front porch and put her down. He held out the bouquet for her and she smelt the roses, looking up at his beautiful green eyes as they sparkled in the morning sun.

“You really didn’t have to do all this,” she said.

“Yes, I did,” he grinned. “Wait until you see what I did to my room—which is where you’ll find your present, my love.”

“Oh, so we’re skipping school and having nothing but birthday sex all day?”

“As tempting as that sounds, we have to hand in our assignment today,” he said and took her hand.

He led her to the passenger’s side and opened the door for her, more balloons were in the car as well as a handmade birthday card for her with glitter and stickers all over it. She took the card from the cup holder and smiled as she read the message inside.

To my darling, Nelle, we may not have been together a long time, but I’m in it for a life time. Today is all about you and I hope you can one day see what I see when I say how absolutely gorgeous you are. Happy birthday, baby. This one is going to be a good one. I love you, Kade.

She looked over at him as he sat there scratching at the back of his neck, seemingly nervous for her to read the card he made her.

“Flora help you make this?” she asked.

“I completely forgot to get you a card last night, and everything was closed when I realized it, so I used her arts and crafts stuff,” he nodded. “Do you like it?”

“I do,” she said.

“I mean it, you know. I’m not just saying it because that’s what you’re supposed to say in relationships. And I know it’s superfast, but, I don’t know, it feels right.” He took her hand and kissed her knuckles before starting the car.

“If I said it back, does that make us social media official?” she chuckled.

“Everybody already knows we’re a couple, but yeah, I guess we can make it social media official, too,” he smirked. “Can I hear you say it?”

“Mm, not yet,” she teased. “I want to be able to do something about it after we say it.”

“Like where your mind’s at,” he chuckled and pulled out of her driveway.

*

They spent most of the day going to class, giving each other quick kisses in the halls, and spending their lunch together. He even got her to eat a small salad for lunch with half of a fresh fruit cup the cafeteria sold. Not a single person said anything to her today, nor did they try to when she wasn’t with Kade. A few of his friends wished her a happy birthday, and some of the acquaintances she had before hitting high school also wished her a happy birthday. Life was surely taking a turn for Nelle, and she couldn’t be happier about it.

As soon as the bell rang, Kade got up from his seat and took Nelle’s book bag for her as they handed in their assignment and already had a third one to do, though this one had to be a five thousand word essay they also had a week to work on.

“Hey, man, you hitting up the party at Patricia’s tonight?” Corey asked.

“When do you ever see me going to these parties?” Kade asked, putting an arm around Nelle’s shoulders.

“Figured since you two are dating, you’d wanna go out together? I know it’s your birthday, Nelle, don’t you wanna celebrate?” Corey stated.

“I don’t drink,” Kade said then glanced at Nelle. “But if you wanna go, we can?”

“No, not really,” she said. “I can’t stand half the people there, so it’s kind of pointless.”

“Fair enough,” Corey chuckled. “Still on for tomorrow?”

“Yeah, ‘round eleven good?” Kade asked.

“See you then, man,” Corey said and clapped Kade on the shoulder. “And happy birthday again, Nelle.”

Nelle smiled as she wrapped her arm around Kade’s waist. He led them out of the class and to her locker where she had to pick up a couple books for homework over the weekend.

“What’s going on tomorrow?” she asked.

“We were supposed to get together during the week to play this video game he bought, but I kept pushing him off because I wanted to spend time with you—and well, he accused me of being one of those guys who ditches his friends for his girl, and I’m not like that even though I would choose spending every waking hour with you over him. He’s coming over tomorrow to play a videogame for a bit. I hope that’s okay? I did have this whole day planned but—”

“It’s fine, really. You don’t have to do anything for me just because it’s my birthday,” she said.

“I do it because I want to, not because I have to, remember that,” he grinned. “Plus, I saw you packed a bag, so, that means you’re staying all weekend again, and I can wine and dine you tonight, tomorrow night after Corey leaves, and all day Sunday.”

“Again, you don’t have to do that,” she said and closed her locker.

“And again, I want to,” he said and gave her a peck. “Now, c’mon, I’m really excited to give you your birthday present.”

“I wonder what it is,” she chuckled.

He wrapped his arms around her and nibbled on her neck, kissing over the five hickeys he made. She giggled and took his hand so he could walk beside her and they hurried to his car, eager to get to his garage and have their way with one another.

He placed her book bag and his backpack in the backseat, being sure not to harm the flowers he bought her—in which a vase was already waiting for them on his coffee table—and he hopped in the driver’s seat.

“What’s the scoop on your car, by the way?” he asked and pulled out of the spot.

“My dad says that the work to be done on the car is higher than what the car is worth, so, he’s selling the car for scraps. I just have to pass by and pick up whatever was in the car when I have a chance,” she said.

“What’re you gonna do without a car?” he asked.

“Well, I doubt he’ll give me any of the money he’s getting for the parts, so, I’ll just take the bus. There’s a stop right outside my house—mind you, it’s mostly the middle schoolers who take it, but it’s something until I find myself a job,” she said.

“And here I thought you were gonna ask me to pick you up every day,” he chuckled.

“I wouldn’t want to put you out,” she said.

“But you know I’m gonna pick you up whether you ask me to or not, right?”

“That’s because you’re too nice to me,” she blushed.

“I can be mean to you if you want,” he teased and stuck his tongue out.

Nelle laughed, and studied him for a moment as he drove. That’s what she always did, she observed, she watched, and she analyzed. One thing she loved doing was nitpicking the faults on everyone, especially those who made fun of her, but with Kade, there was absolutely nothing to nitpick. He was perfect, and she sometimes hated how much he liked her and treated her so perfectly, because she honestly believed she didn’t deserve it. A life time of being told she wasn’t good enough, she was too fat for someone to love her, too fat to be pretty, and too weird for friends; she finally had her person and he accepted her for all her quirks. All she had to do was open her own eyes and see that overweight or slim, Nelle had always been a beautiful woman.

He pulled into his driveway and arched his eyebrows at her, before stepping out of the car. She followed suit and opened the backdoor to take her things and flowers before he had the chance to, giving the roses one more sniff. He got to his door and stopped, turning to her with a mischievous grin.

“What?”

“Close your eyes,” he smirked.

“No, open the door,” she said, unable to hide her smile.

“Please?”

She licked her lips and closed her eyes as he unlocked the door and took her hand. He led her into his room and took the flower from her, immediately putting them in the vase on the coffee table. For the first time since she'd been there, it smelt clean in his room. There wasn't his lingering body spray in the air, or the smell of old food. He must've spent the evening after she left and cleaned.

"Kade," she said and put her hand out.

"I'm right here, just a sec," he said as she could hear him shuffling in the distance.

Dropping her book bag and overnight bag to the floor, she kept her eyes closed and took off her shoes, stepping farther into his room. When she was younger, her parents always made sure that every birthday was special. Greg's birthday fell on Christmas Day, and he never truly experienced what it was like to have friends over for a birthday party. One year, their parents threw him a surprise party a month before his birthday giving him everything he wanted—a bounce house, a clown, a magician, and his personal favorite, the petting zoo. Nelle was easy to please, her birthday every year was the same, the four of them would go to her favorite restaurant and order whatever she wanted on the menu. This year, she knew it wouldn't be the same, and from the lack of phone calls or messages from either of her parents, she knew it wasn't going to feel special. Kade, on the other hand, was surely making it out to be one heck of a birthday.

"Hey, I really gotta pee," she lied with a chuckle, wanting to open her eyes.

"Okay, okay, come, come, come," he said and took her hand leading her to his bed. He stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing the nape of her neck. "Open your eyes."

There were balloons and flowers decorating his entire room, and a large heart in the middle of his bed out of rose petals. A small mauve box rested in the middle of the rose petals and a crisp white ribbon was fastened around it in a dainty little bow.

She looked up at him and smiled, reaching for the box and opening it delicately. She imagined it to be a pair of earrings, or even a cute little necklace, but instead, it was a beautiful Claddagh ring in white gold with his name engraved on the inside of it.

"Kade, this is too much," she said.

“There’s three ways of wearing them, but I want you to choose one of the two ways. There’s either on your right hand with the heart facing in, which means in a relationship, or on your left hand with the heart facing out.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, that’s the step after getting into a relationship with someone,” he said and took the ring from the box.

“Like a marriage?” she asked as he took her left hand. “Don’t you think we’re a little young for that?”

“When you know, you know.”

She looked down at the ring he slid onto her left hand that faced outward, and smiled, truly her favorite gift she ever received—that included the Malibu Barbie playhouse her parents gave her for her fifth birthday.

Nelle bit her bottom lip and got to the tips of her toes to wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him. He lifted her and put her down on the bed. He kissed down her neck, then chest, and looked up at her with a smirk as he lifted her dress. Her breathing shuddered at the feeling of her underwear being pulled off her. She immediately closed her legs, shy at what he was about to do. He kissed her knee with a mischievous grin, and opened her legs, kissing down the inside of her thigh. He kissed at the wetness between her legs and looked up at her as she let out a soft moan.

A growl left him as he licked her, feeling her body buck and stiffen under his touch. She let out moans he never heard from her before, and tasted her as he’d been dying to do all week. He slid a finger inside her, emitting a loud moan from her and that caused him to growl even more, quickening his licking and inserting a second finger to get her there quickly.

“Oh, Kade!” she moaned. “I’m going to cum, I’m going to cum.”

She grabbed at the hair on top of his head and squeezed her legs shut, moaning so loudly, it sounded like she screamed. Kade didn’t stop pleasing her, even as he pulled her legs apart. He was enjoying the taste of her too much.

When she forced him away from her, he yanked his shirt over his head and wiped his mouth, pulling out his manhood so he could please her even more. He moaned softly as he entered her and didn’t last more

than a couple thrusts before he came as well, forcing himself deep within her as he sighed.

“That was really quick and I’m sorry. I was trying my hardest not to cream my pants while going down on you,” he chuckled.

“That’s okay,” she said and bit her lip.

“Sounded like you liked it though,” he winked and thrust once more before rolling off her. “Don’t think I’ve heard you moan like that before.”

“That was really intense,” she said and let out a breath.

“Glad I could be of assistance,” he said. “Take it you like my gift?”

“I do,” she said. “But I don’t think I can wear it on my left hand—not yet anyway.”

“Can you leave it there for me? Just for today?”

“Sure,” she said and turned to him, resting her head on his chest as they lay there in a bed of roses.

“Have I ever told you I really dig how you shave it all off down there,” he smirked, running his fingers through her hair. “Especially being up close and personal with it.”

“Corey said the same thing,” she chuckled.

“I didn’t need to know that.” He wrinkled his nose and lifted his pants without buttoning them to cover himself up in case anyone came home.

“I didn’t need to know a lot of things about you and Emily, yet here we are,” she said.

“Think we should draw the line and not mention them at all anymore,” he said and turned her onto her back so he could get a better look at her.

“I don’t mind, but don’t you think that’s going to be hard since you and Corey are best friends?”

“I mean, yeah—I’ll stop comparing our shit to Emily ever again and you’ll never mention what you and Corey did,” he chuckled softly. “That seem fair?”

“I’m not the jealous type, I don’t know if you realized. I’m used to things not going my way,” she said.

“I’m here to stay,” he said and kissed her lips. “And I *am* the jealous type—you don’t know how much I wanted to kick Corey’s ass

for taking your virginity. If only I could've said something sooner...I think that's probably why I just gave it to the first girl to hit on me after I found out."

"That would've been something if we got together earlier," she said and touched his face. He kissed her wrist and grinned.

"We definitely would've lost our virginities at a ridiculously young age," he said.

"Yeah? You would've preferred the fat version of me to have sex with rather than this?"

"I started liking you when you were big, y'know. I had no problem with how you looked," he said and leaned his head to his hand.

"But you like me a lot more like this?" she smirked. "Stretch marks and all?"

"You seem happier like this, and actually talk to me instead of runaway every time I try to talk to you," he added and licked his lips. "And you keep mentioning stretch marks, I see the little white ones on your hips, but every girl has those. You're perfect, baby. I promise you that."

"I did run away from you a lot, didn't I?" she said. "I always just thought you were coming to say something mean to my face instead of behind my back like everyone else did."

"People are sure keeping their mouths shut now, huh?" he said and scratched his arm.

"Mm," she smiled and licked her lips again. "You sure you don't want to be with your friends at the party tonight? I really don't mind if you want to go."

"Are you crazy? No, I don't want to go nor have I ever gone to those parties because I don't drink. It's my girl's birthday. I have nowhere else I need or have to be other than right here with you...maybe a little less clothes, but this will do for now," he winked.

"You're too nice to me."

"You say that a lot," he said, moving a piece of hair from in front of her face.

"But you are," she said.

"I can be mean," he said and groped her breast roughly.

"Stop," she laughed.

Kade grinned, admiring the beauty before him. He so badly wanted her to live with him so he could wake up to her every morning and go to bed with her every night.

Kissing the tip of her nose, he adjusted his head on his hand and thumbed the ring on her finger. He meant what he said in the card, and meant what he implied when he put the ring on her finger, hoping she would feel the same. Especially with his condition, he wanted to start his life with the only person to make him feel so many different emotions all at once.

“I meant to ask...did you make a decision about what you’re doing with your dad?”

“Not yet,” she said, unsure whether she should tell him what happened last night after she tried to hide the pills on him again. Tears welled in her eyes and she put her hands to her face.

“Baby, hey?” Kade said and moved her hands away. “You know it’ll be so much better for him if he gets help. He’s killing himself the more he drinks and the more he drowns the pills with booze. Drunks are known to get violent, and if he ever lays a hand on you—your father or not—”

“Too late for that,” she sniffed.

“What?”

“I-it’s nothing.” She shook her head. “It was my fault anyway for taking his pills away...I didn’t want to say anything to you, because it doesn’t fucking matter and you have enough on your plate—”

“Nelle, what the fuck happened?” he raised his voice.

“Nothing, nothing.”

She sat up and wiped the tears from her cheeks, taking her underwear from the floor to disappear in the washroom. He followed her, hoping she’d open up, but she stayed quiet and looked up at him as he leaned on the doorframe.

“I’m not leaving you alone until you tell me,” he said.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” she sighed and pulled toilet paper from the roll.

“Nelle.” He wiped a hand down his face. “I don’t want to argue with you on your birthday, but you have to understand that I’m not going to hurt you. I’m not going to use what you say against you. I said it this morning—yes, not to your face, but I meant what I wrote in that card.

It's you, Nelle, and I hate that you don't see it. You don't want to talk to me about your family shit, fine, but don't come crying to me when something terrible happens and you're fucking stuck—no, I didn't mean... I'm here for you, but I'm getting tired of you not trusting me.”

With a scoff, he stepped away from the washroom, fixing his pants as he did. Nelle sat there and started silently crying. She understood where he was coming from, but he also had to understand that she'd never been in a relationship before, and wasn't quite sure how it worked. All her life every time she opened up to someone who said they were her friend, whatever she said came back to hurt her. All Nelle knew was hurt and sadness; this newfound happiness she had was certainly frightening to her to say the least.

One of the drawers to his dresser opened and slammed shut, another scoff left him as he dropped himself on his couch and started playing on his phone. Nelle cleaned herself and fixed her underwear around her—in dire need of a smoke to curb her craving of digging into a tub of ice cream.

She made her way out of the washroom, tears still falling from her eyes and grabbed her book bag then shoes before she stormed out of his room. She slid her feet into her flats and started walking down his driveway. She didn't know what else to do and leaving seemed like the best option.

Tears kept falling as she walked to the end of the driveway and sat on the curb. She had only two cigarettes left, but they would do until she was able to buy another pack in the morning. At the moment, she didn't care what she promised him, she needed these smokes.

After lighting one, footfalls sounded behind her, clouded by her sniffs. Kade didn't say anything, and sat beside her, looking down at his bare feet on the cool asphalt. Smoke escaped her nostrils and she flicked some of the ashes away from him. She wasn't sure what to say and felt entirely embarrassed for crying in front of him, and still crying now but attempting to keep her cool.

“Sorry, Nelle. I didn't mean to be rude before.” He broke the silence. “I just worry.”

“It's fine, I'm used to people acting like assholes toward me,” she nodded and took a drag.

“I thought you were going to quit?” he asked.

“I was.” She shrugged.

“Can you look at me?” he asked and touched her shoulder.

“I think I want to go home,” she said and flicked the ashes again.

“Nelle,” he sighed. “I said I was sorry. You don’t have to leave.”

“No, but I should,” she sniffed.

“Please don’t go,” he said. “I reacted without thinking and, again, I’m sorry. I just don’t like you being in that toxic house when you deserve to be in a house that makes you happy.”

“So, losing my house, my things, and moving in with you is that solution?” she asked and finally looked at him.

“Yes.”

She stayed quiet and looked to the homes around her. Everything seemed so peaceful, so suburban. Sprinklers went on everyday across the street at the exact same time. The gentleman who lived directly beside Kade and his family, always walked his dog at precisely the same time they got home from school. It was certainly peaceful there, and she had thought about moving in a couple of times when things at home were bad, it just didn’t feel right to leave her father when he wasn’t himself and needed help.

She took the last drag of her cigarette and flicked the butt to the side, blowing the smoke away from Kade. Everything inside her wanted to get up and walk away, keeping her horrid life a secret from him, but when she looked over at him and he was already staring at her, she couldn’t help but feel safe.

“He punched me in the gut last night after you dropped me off. Yelled and screamed as usual for his fucking pills I tried to hide from him when I got home. That’s what happened, and it isn’t the first time he’s attacked me for them,” she sighed and wipe a tear from her cheek. “He’s shoved me into walls, hit my head on doors, grabbed me until I gave him his meds...I don’t know what you want me to tell you. If I said anything to the cops, they would’ve shoved me into some group home or shipped me off to my Aunt since my mother is MIA. So, I kept my mouth shut and just took it day by day until—well, until I won’t be able to handle it anymore. I just hate that I know this isn’t him. He wasn’t like this before.”

Kade shook his head, his hands that hung over his knees turned to fists. She never told this to anyone before, and her voice tremored as she got it out. He listened as he always did, but there was that look in his

eyes that hated every word coming out of her mouth. A part of her admired him for this, admired him for how much he cared about her, then the other part was scared what he would do, and scared how much his heart could handle her situation.

“You—please move in, please,” he said and wiped angrily at the tears falling from his eyes.

“You don’t have to feel bad for me,” she said.

“You’re the only person I care about,” he scoffed.

He put his arm around her and kissed her shoulder, leaning his chin to it as she nodded and put her hand to his leg. There it was, that feeling again, that ever growing feeling she thought she’d never have.

“If I promise to think about moving in, can we start this birthday over and go back to the two of us lying in your bed out of breath?” she asked.

He chuckled and pulled her closer to him with a kiss, absolutely in love with her and wanting nothing more than to make her feel as beautiful and as loved as she was. He felt obligated to save her from her broken home, a home he knew wasn’t like this when Greg was alive. Kade vowed to take care of her, he got her to smile every day and that wasn’t ever going to go away.

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Sandy and David cooked a vegan dinner for Nelle, including a vegan chocolate cake she quite enjoyed. Flora made her a beautiful card with the painting of a rainbow on the front of it and coupons on the inside for things she and Flora could do together. Sandy bought Nelle her very own mala necklace and promised to teach her its meaning. David decided to just give her a fifty dollar bill to do with as she pleased. Nelle thoroughly enjoyed her birthday, and felt like she had a new family to be able to share her experiences with again. Kade and Nelle made love as many times as they could, before she worried he couldn’t handle it by how out of breath he was. He held her tightly as they lay nude in his bed, speaking and laughing well into the night. She couldn’t have asked for a better birthday than this.

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Loud knocks struck Kade’s door Saturday morning, constant rapping with his name being called on the other side. She inhaled sharply, nestling

her head into his pillow and trying her hardest to ignore the knocking. Kade turned onto his side and draped his arm across her back, his heavy breathing commencing once more.

“Mm,” Nelle groaned, laying on her stomach. “Answer the door.”

“What time is it?” he asked and kissed her back a few times, leaning his head to it.

She reached over for his phone on the nightstand, opening one of her eyes and the time read just past eleven with a few missed messages from Corey.

“It’s Corey banging on the door,” she said.

“Ugh, fuck, I forgot again,” he chuckled, sleepily. “Go back to sleep, I’ll tell him to be quiet.”

He kissed her back again and slowly made his way out of bed, taking his bottle of pills. He popped two into his mouth and took out a fresh pair of boxers. Corey continued to rap on the window and grinned when Kade unlocked the door.

“Took you a while, were you two fucking or something?” Corey said and barged into the garage.

“No, we were sleeping,” Kade yawned. “So, keep it down, she’s still asleep.”

Corey placed a brown paper bag on the coffee table with a tray of coffees and smirked as he looked up at Nelle’s bare back asleep in bed.

“Good night last night?” Corey asked.

“What do you think?” Kade chuckled.

“You end up giving her your *other* birthday gift?” Corey asked and stuck his tongue out.

“Yeah,” Kade blushed.

“You did what I told you to do?” Corey smirked.

“Well, I tried, and I think it worked,” Kade said, his face a dark shade of red. “Not like she complained when I was down there or anything.”

“My man,” Corey winked.

“Start the download, I gotta take a piss,” Kade said and made his way to the washroom.

He stood above the toilet and cracked the bones in his neck, relieving himself. When he stood in front of the mirror, he chuckled, eyeing the hickeys on his neck and shoulder, along with the scratches and

bite marks she must've also had on her body. He quickly brushed his teeth and fixed his hair the best he could. Her birthday or not, he truly enjoyed their night together last night. Hearing her laugh, seeing her smile, the way she wrinkled her nose when he called her beautiful, and certainly the way she moaned when he touched her just right—there wasn't a doubt in his mind he would marry this girl one day.

Nelle had fallen into a half awake, half asleep state and breathed calmly as he past her. A grin left his lips and he kissed her shoulder softly, eyeing the scratches he left on her back as well before taking his t-shirt from the ground. The more time he spent with her, the more he realized that she was absolute perfection. He never understood why people made fun of her just because she was overweight; she was gorgeous and he hated that she couldn't see it.

"Couple minutes before the download is done," Corey said with his mouthful as he munched on a bagel and cream cheese. "Got you and Nelle one, and coffees."

"Thanks, man." Kade sat down and took one of the bagels from the bag. "How was the party last night?"

"Pretty good," Corey chuckled. "Julie and Pete broke up again."

"What happened this time?" Kade rolled his eyes.

"He was fucking Nikki in the hot tub," Corey said with a laugh.

"What an idiot," Kade said.

"Julie then tried to hit on me," Corey grimaced. "Don't know how to tell her she's not my type without being mean about it."

"Aren't you the whole reason her and Nelle don't talk anymore?" Kade asked, taking one of the coffees.

"Who knows with chicks, man, they could be wearing the same damn shirt and stop being friends," Corey said.

He picked up the paddle and started the game. Kade looked up at Nelle as she pulled the covers over her and sat up, dangling her legs off the bed. They didn't drink last night—frankly, she never touched the stuff because of what she saw her father become, and Kade couldn't drink because of his heart. Yet she felt severely hungover from lack of sleep.

Kade grinned, his relationship with Nelle far surpassed what he and Emily had. Emily barely ever wanted to have sex with him, and when they did, she never seemed into it toward the end. Opening up to Greg was one of the best things Kade ever did, because he was finally happy

and with someone he actually had feelings for. When he and Nelle had sex, it was an out of body experience, and every time he came, the intensity was indescribable.

“Morning, baby,” Kade called.

“Mm,” she said and fixed the comforter around her.

Kade took another bite of his bagel and made his way to her, handing her the overnight bag she brought. He kissed her lips softly as she pulled on a pair of underwear, being sure to hide her body from Corey the best she could.

“Morning, Nelle,” Corey chuckled.

“Morning,” she said and looked over her shoulder with a grin.

As she fastened her bra, Corey looked up at her, attempting to catch a glimpse of her breasts. Kade punched his shoulder, and Corey chuckled, looking back at the game as they created their characters. Corey wasn’t lying when he said one of the reasons he slept with Nelle was to knock something off his to-do list, but there was a part of Corey that saw her the way Kade did. She may have been overweight, but she was still very beautiful, and Corey still saw it.

“It’s crazy how hot she got,” Corey said after she disappeared into the washroom.

“She was always hot, people just didn’t take notice because they were too focused on her weight,” Kade said and munched on his bagel.

“So, you liked her even when she was fat?” Corey asked.

“Yeah,” Kade nodded. “Took everything in me not to hurt you when you told me you took her virginity.”

“Well, if I would’ve known, I wouldn’t have tried anything with her,” Corey said.

“You only tried something to knock fat chick off your to-do list, right?” Kade scoffed.

“Not entirely, she was always nice to me, and—yeah, I guess I was an asshole,” Corey said. “You got with Emily anyway, so what does it matter?”

“Because I thought you were going to start dating Nelle. Only reason I got with Emily,” Kade said. “Anyway, I guess you’re right, it doesn’t matter now because Nelle’s mine. So, watch yourself.”

“Can’t blame a man for trying to sneak a peek,” Corey snickered.

“She is really sexy,” Kade blushed.

“Still fucking without condoms?” Corey asked.

“Yeah, nothing seems to have happened so far, and I really don’t care if she gets knocked up. I’ll take care of that kid,” Kade admitted, still wondering if they should start using protection since the subject never truly came up. “Plus, I don’t think I’ll be able to go back to wearing condoms after feeling what it’s like not to use them.”

“Never tried it with Emily?” Corey asked.

“No, she was with two guys before me, so I always got creeped out I’d catch something,” Kade said and took a bite of his bagel. “Never even went down on Emily because of it.”

“Nelle was with me before you,” Corey stated.

“Yeah, one time and you used protection,” Kade said.

“I tried to go after her again, because I genuinely liked her company, but hearing how Pete and Kenny went on after finding out, I just decided not to.” Corey shrugged.

“Really glad you didn’t,” Kade said.

Nelle prepared herself for the day and stretched as she stepped out of the washroom. Kade and Corey were laughing on the couch as their characters fought each other. She never understood the constant hours Kade spent playing videogames, but they made him happy, and whenever she showed an interest in something he liked, he had this look about him as he explained the game that she was so in love with, it was hard to look away.

“Coffee for me?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Corey said. “Didn’t know what you liked in it so they’re all black. Sugar and milk is in the bag. There’s a bagel, cream cheese in there for you, too.”

“No, thanks,” she said and took one of the coffees, adding two milks to it.

“Sweet, more for me,” Corey said and took her bagel.

Nelle still had a hard time eating around people—or eating at all. The more time she spent with Kade, the more he was forcing her to eat, even if it was small meals, at least he knew she ate something.

Kade moved over so that Nelle could sit beside him and leaned over for a kiss. She watched as they played their videogame, laughing and cursing at one another. She let out a couple of chuckles as she sipped at her coffee, debating whether or not she should go home and pack a few more clothes for the weekend or not. She thought about moving in with Kade a lot last night, wondering if it was truly the right thing to do or

not. She had no money to help pay for things, and she certainly would feel bad to leave her father home alone. It would take one phone call to get him into rehab, she just wasn't sure what good it would do. When he got out, he would be more than capable of going back to the drinking and more than capable of getting pills from a doctor. The more she thought of it, the more she realized that not only did she lose her brother, she lost her parents as well. There wasn't a single message or phone call from them to wish her a happy birthday. She was on her own, and would be for a really long time.

"This coffee's going right through me," Kade chuckled. "Wanna play for me, Nelle?"

"God, no," she chuckled. "I don't know how to play these games."

"It's not that hard," Corey said as Kade handed her the paddle. She let out a soft chuckle and placed her coffee on the side table, looking down at the paddle. "Alright, so these are obviously to move around, but if you combine them with one of these buttons, they make special moves. This is to jump, this one is to kick, and the rest do moves your character is designed for."

"What about these buttons?" she asked looking at the top of the paddle.

"Also other moves your character is designed for," Corey said.

Kade felt somewhat dizzy as he stood above the toilet and released the coffee he chugged that morning. He paid no mind to it and figured it was the rush of caffeine flowing through his system. As he started making his way to the couch, seeing Corey show Nelle how to play, her seated body appeared double to Kade. The words circulating his room were muffled and sounded distant. He stumbled on his footing and before he could even call out to her, everything around him went black.

"Oh my god, Kade!" Nelle jumped to her feet and ran over to him.

"What the fuck? Is he okay?" Corey panicked.

"Kade?" Nelle called and tapped his face a couple times. Out of instinct, she felt his pulse. It's beating was there, but not as rhythmic as expected. "Call 9-1-1."

Corey fished for his phone and quickly dialed, waiting a ring before someone answered. Nelle took Kade's limp hand and kissed it, as

tears fell from her eyes. Corey explained to the operator what had happened and they advised him that an ambulance was on its way.

“They should be here in less than five minutes,” Corey said. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Go to the house and tell his parents what happened,” Nelle ordered.

“Yeah,” Corey said and ran out of the garage.

Nelle sobbed silently as she squeezed Kade’s hand, looking at his perfect face as he lay there before her. She knew she had to make a decision soon, because the last thing she wanted was to lose him before she even had to chance to tell him how she felt.

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Nelle paced the waiting room for hours, waiting for someone to say something to them. Sandy and David sat there with her, Sandy watched as Nelle paced the waiting room, and David flipped through the magazines that were left on the side tables. Flora was brought to a neighbour’s house for the day, her parents wanting to keep her away from Kade’s condition. Corey came to the hospital as well, and sat beside Kade’s father, blankly staring at his phone. No one explained anything to him yet, they were all too worried to even begin to describe Kade’s situation.

“Kade Murphy?” A tall dark skinned doctor announced.

Everyone jumped to their feet and Nelle stayed where she was, listening intently at what news the doctor would announce. She had come to all of Kade’s doctor’s appointments when she found out, and every time she went she always came with so many questions the doctor was always so surprised at how knowledgeable she was on the subject. Frankly, she was just frightened she could lose Kade and needed any and all questions answered. Right now, she feared she may have lost him and she didn’t even get to tell him how much she loved him.

“That’s my son,” Sandy sniffed.

“I’m Doctor Michaels, I was advised that Kade usually has his checkups with Doctor Simone, and I have reviewed his file and done the necessary scans for his condition—”

“Is he okay?” Nelle interrupted.

“We may need to do the transplant much sooner rather than later,” Doctor Michaels said.

Corey glanced at Nelle and frowned, ridiculously confused at what the doctor was telling them. Kade wasn't lying when he said no one knew about his condition aside from his parents, and Nelle. She was hoping that Corey wouldn't say anything to anyone, the last thing Kade needed was unwanted attention on him.

"What happened this morning?" David asked.

"The murmur in his heart caused an uneven rhythmic beating, which didn't allow enough blood to be pumped through his body which caused a lack of oxygen to his brain. We adjusted his medication and if you would like to see him, he's awake now. Asking for a Nelle," Doctor Michaels said.

"Oh?" Nelle said and looked to Sandy and David.

"It's okay, dear. Go ahead, we need to speak with the doctor anyway," Sandy smiled.

Nelle nodded and looked to Corey who followed her down the hall to the room they weren't allowed to enter all afternoon. She felt nervous as they neared the room, wondering what the likes of Kade would be. Corey rubbed her back as she stopped at the closed door to Kade's room and squeezed her shoulder.

"I'll wait out here, just want to see him before I head out," Corey said.

"Yeah, okay. I'll let him know," Nelle said and took a breath before she pushed open the door.

Kade was tapping his fingers to his stomach and looking at the ceiling when she entered. His whole face lit up and he smiled, removing the oxygen from his nostrils.

"Hey," he said, his voice hoarse.

"Are you okay?" she asked through falling tears.

"I'll be fine," he said.

"You really scared me," she sniffed. "I was so scared I was going to lose you."

"Hey," he said and took her hand. "I'm not going anywhere."

"If you don't get a new heart, you could," she sniffed.

He studied her crying eyes, hating himself for hiding more of his condition from her than he let on—advising his doctor to do the same. He didn't want her to worry about him, she had enough to worry about and adding his health to her scattered mind was enough to make her lose it.

A grin spread to his face and he brought her hand to his lips. He wasn't sure if it was the drugs pumping through his system, or the lack of oxygen to his brain, but he loved this woman, and he didn't care who knew it.

"Marry me?" he asked.

"What?" she frowned.

"You're already wearing the Claddagh ring the way an engagement ring is supposed to be worn, and I don't want to lose you. You're the only thing that's pulling me through this bullshit with my heart, and if it wasn't for you, I don't think I'd be able to think clearly—or keep my cool for as long as I have been," he said. "So, marry me."

Nelle let out a laugh as she wiped her fresh tears from her cheek. Kade smiled at her, waiting impatiently for her answer. She leaned forward to kiss him, giddy smile on her face as she did.

"Yeah," she giggled.

"Yeah?" he asked and laughed. "Oh, baby, I love you."

"I love you, too," she laughed and kissed him again.

Sandy and David came in with Corey behind them as Nelle pulled away from Kade. Sandy tried not to show it, but she was on the verge of tears as she saw Kade lying in that hospital bed. Kade grinned at Corey with a nod, and Nelle kissed Kade's hand once more. If she could, she would jump for joy and announce their engagement to the world, but after seeing the worry painting his parents's faces, she kept her mouth shut.

"How're you doing, sweetheart?" Sandy asked.

"I'm okay, Mom," Kade said.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Corey asked.

"My burden to bear," Kade nodded as Sandy sniffed.

"I'll step out a sec, give you guys some privacy," Nelle said and let go of Kade's hand.

"No, baby, stay," Kade said and reached for her, but she was out of his grasp.

"I'll be right outside," Nelle said.

Corey nodded at Kade, they didn't need to exchange any more words, a simple nod was enough for each of them to know that they were okay and they'd talk about it when Kade was better.

Corey followed Nelle into the hallway and she let out a deep shuddered breath, wiping away at the falling tears as Corey looked at her.

“Is he okay?” Corey asked.

“He will be,” she nodded.

“I’ve been putting the pieces together, but I still don’t know what’s going on,” Corey added.

“He, um, has a heart condition, and has been on a waiting list for a heart transplant since he was fifteen,” Nelle sniffed.

“Shit, why didn’t he say anything?” Corey frowned.

“Didn’t want to feel like a burden to people? I don’t know. No one but his parents know, and I only found out by accident when he had one of his—fits? I don’t know what to call it. He missed a pill and started wheezing and got dizzy. Similar to what happened today, but he didn’t pass out...what if something bad happens?” she said.

“It’ll be okay, Nelle,” Corey said, trying to be reassuring. He pulled her into a hug and softly rubbed her back. “Let’s get something to eat while they talk, give them their space?”

“No, that’s okay,” she said. “If you want to head home, you can. I know Kade would understand. You don’t have to spend your Saturday at a hospital.”

“I’d feel like a dick if I left,” Corey said.

“It’s okay, really. We don’t know how much longer we’ll be here,” she said.

“Yeah,” Corey nodded, he did have to get home before three and it was already past that. Nelle forced a lopsided grin and he nodded again. “What’s your number? I’ll text you and you can keep me updated as the day goes on.”

“That seems fair,” she said.

Nelle gave Corey her number and he gave her one more hug, glancing at the closed door to Kade’s room before he made his way to the stairwell. She let out a deep breath and put her hands to her face, filled with so many emotions she didn’t know what else to do but cry. The pain she experienced all her life was finally going away and she was able to smile. Yet her smile seemed to fade every time she thought of the one person who made her happy, because she feared she’d lose him, too.

“Nelle?” David called as she leaned on the wall by the room. “You can come in.”

She nodded and followed David into the room as Sandy sat in a chair she brought over and held Kade’s hand. He smiled the moment he saw Nelle enter his room and tapped on his bed beside him for her to sit

down. Sandy looked up at Nelle and smiled as well, watching as she made her way to the other side of the bed and sat at the end of it.

“I believe congratulations are in order,” Sandy chuckled.

“Thank you,” Nelle smiled as Kade watched her.

“We’re going to fill you in on everything, but before we do that,” David started. “We wanted to ask you to move in with Kade. It would be good to always have someone there with him in case something like this morning happens again.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Nelle said and looked over at David then Sandy.

“Think the answer is easy,” Kade chuckled.

“I’ll have to talk to my dad before I make any decision,” Nelle nodded.

“That’s fine, dear,” Sandy nodded, her eyes welling with tears as she looked to Kade again.

“Is everything okay?” Nelle asked.

“They moved my name up the list,” Kade said. “I can go home today, but as soon as a heart matching my blood type is available, then I gotta jet back here and go under the knife.”

“That’s good, no?” Nelle asked.

“It is, but there is a lot of risk with open heart surgery, let alone a transplant. Doctor Michaels has advised us that you need to take it easy this week—that includes sex,” Sandy said.

“So, I just can’t have sex with my fiancé?” Kade asked.

“Why don’t we all have a talk with the doctor and see what he says, yeah?” David said.

Nelle took a breath and put her hand to Kade’s shin. He didn’t seem too bothered by the news of his upcoming surgery, and the more he studied her face, the more she wanted to cry. There was a chance, like Sandy said, that there could be complications during the transplant. Nelle didn’t know much about what could occur, and she knew the moment she was home, she would dive into endless research again in the hopes that she could learn as much as she could before he went under the knife.

“Other than the wrong dosage on your pills, everything else is okay?” Nelle asked. “You fell pretty hard.”

“I might walk away from this with a bruise or two, but I’m okay, baby,” Kade nodded.

“We have to monitor his heart rate more often, no more gym class at school, either,” Sandy added. “The less physical activity he does, the better for him until his heart—”

“I’m sorry, Mom, but I’m not giving up having sex with my girl. That’s one line I will cross,” Kade said. “Even if the doctor says—”

Nelle’s phone started ringing, and she took it from her back pocket to see her father calling her. It was surprising since he didn’t even bother to call her on her birthday, and she could only imagine what he wanted.

“I’m sorry, I have to take this,” Nelle said.

“Let it go to voicemail,” Kade said, knowing who it was by the look on her face.

“I’ll be right back,” she smiled at Kade and made her way out of the room. Kade let out a soft growl and shook his head.

“You need to stay calm, sweetheart,” Sandy said.

“As soon as her asshole of a father is out of her life, then I will be,” Kade said.

Nelle shut the door behind her and answered her phone with a heavy sigh.

“Hello?”

“Nelle, where have you been?” Sebastian asked. “The social worker is coming in less than an hour and you’re not even here! I’ve been cleaning this damn house all morning—and don’t even get me started on the fucking balloons on the front lawn.”

“Shit, I completely forgot about that,” she said.

“I need you home now, Nelle. Do you understand me? Now! We could lose the house if this goes badly,” Sebastian barked.

“Yes, um, okay, okay, I’m coming,” she sighed and he hung up.

She shook her head and placed her palm to her forehead, as tears welled in her eyes. As much as she wanted to stay with Kade, she had to leave, no matter how much it hurt him.

“Hey, baby. Everything okay?” Kade asked as she came back into the room.

“Yeah, um, I have to step out for a bit,” Nelle said.

“Why?” Kade scoffed.

“We have, um, a social worker coming to the house. I shouldn’t be long,” Nelle smiled and made her way to him.

“You’re not going alone,” Kade said and pushed himself up from the bed, the heart monitor beeping rapidly in the background.

“You need to stay calm, son,” David urged.

“I’ll see you when you get home, I promise,” Nelle said and kissed Kade’s lips.

“Please keep your phone on you,” Kade said, defeat painting his face.

She smiled and made her way out of the room once more. She searched through her wallet to see how much cash she had on her, and all that she had was the fifty dollar bill that David had given her for her birthday. She had no choice but to use it for a taxi home.

The monitor beeped rapidly and Kade put his hand to his head, taking a few deep breaths, trying to relax himself after finding out what Nelle admitted to him the night before. He hated that she went home alone, and if it wasn’t for his defected heart, he definitely would be welcoming the social worker into her father’s house with the disclaimer that she was moving in with Kade. Another breath left him as his mother fixed the oxygen to his nostrils, and he looked between his parents not able to hold in his cries any longer. Even though Kade promised he’d keep Nelle’s secret, he needed his parents to understand why he broke down the second she walked out of the room. She wasn’t safe at home, and Kade would do anything to keep her safe.

“Kade?” Sandy said. “It’s okay, everything will be okay.”

“You don’t understand,” Kade sobbed.

“Nelle’s a fine girl, she’s not going to leave, son,” David said, trying to be reassuring.

“She’s not safe in that house,” Kade sniffed. “Her father isn’t who he used to be. It’s like as soon as her brother died, her parents changed. Her mother left them, her father’s a drunk and can’t go an hour without popping another pill—he beats her, did you know that? She’s gone through enough the last few months, and he fucking beats her when he can’t find his booze or his pills...fuck, Nelle only lost all her weight by starving herself because it was the only way she could hurt herself without making any physical damage to her body.”

“Jesus Christ,” Sandy sighed.

“She’s moving in with us, and that’s final,” David said with the shake of his head.

“Please don’t tell her I told you all this, I promised her I wouldn’t tell anyone, but I can’t let her stay there any more than she needs to. I really love her; I wasn’t lying when I told you I asked her to marry me because I don’t want anyone else but her. If I can save her from knowing pain, then I will. I need her out of that house,” Kade cried.

Sandy rose from her seat and gave Kade a hug as he continued to sob. She glanced over her shoulder and gave a slight nod to David, he did the same. Nelle was one step closer to having her life change drastically in so many different ways.

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The moment Nelle got home, her father was ruthlessly cleaning, and she joined him, making sure that their home didn’t smell like an ashtray and that there was no sight of empty bottles of alcohol anywhere. She opened all their windows, emptied the garbage in the washroom and the kitchen before she mopped the floors.

The social worker came by an hour after Nelle got home—being her last visit since Nelle was of legal age, and did her inspection. Nelle sat at the kitchen table and calmly looked at her phone time and time again, seeing the messages from Kade coming in, but no way of replying because every time she looked at her phone, her father shot her a death glare.

“Everything seems in order,” Cathy, the social worker, stated as she came and sat at the kitchen table with Sebastian and Nelle. “From my last visit, when your mother left, you seemed in a very different place. How’re you doing now, Nelle?”

“Have to say, I am doing a lot better,” Nelle nodded.

“Has anything changed from my last visit in August?” Cathy asked.

“I’ve been on a steady diet so I don’t lose more than I need to, my grades are still high, and I’m sketching again,” Nelle nodded.

“That’s great to hear,” Cathy added.

“I have a boyfriend, too,” Nelle smiled, not ready to admit her engagement.

“Oh? Good for you,” Cathy smirked. “I hope he treats you right.”

“He does,” Nelle chuckled. “His name is Kade, he’s helped me a lot with my depression with everything that’s happened. When I’m with

him, I feel like I can smile again without feeling guilty...Dad's met him a few times."

"He is a very fine boy," Sebastian said.

Nelle took her phone from the table and opened up a photo of her and Kade that Sandy took of them yesterday. Kade's arms were wrapped around her as they were laughing at the camera. Sandy took a few photos of them posing and smiling, but this one was Nelle's absolute favorite.

"Here we are yesterday for my birthday with his family," Nelle said and handed Cathy the phone.

"He's cute, and very tall," Cathy chuckled.

"I've been looking for work," Sebastian said, wanting to steer the conversation away from Nelle's love life. "My old job won't take me back until they're sure I'm stable. I've tried to prove to them that I am, but they're still keeping me on leave for the time being."

"Yes, I've spoken with your boss," Cathy said. "He wants to give you another month before welcoming you back part-time."

Sebastian nodded, knowing he wouldn't be able to go back any time soon, and with Nelle graduating high school in several months, she would be able to get a job and better support them. The social worker spoke with them for the next couple of hours, both individually and together. Nelle didn't lie to Cathy, telling her everything she asked—Sebastian, on the other hand, lied through the skin of his teeth, ensuring he wouldn't lose his daughter or the house.

By seven, Cathy finally bid them goodbye, and wished Nelle all the luck with her future endeavors. Nelle kept her number in her phone, knowing that if she ever needed someone outside of her life to open up to, Cathy would surely be someone to help.

Nelle took her phone from the table and wrote back to Kade.

Sorry, I didn't think it was right to write back when the social worker was here, she sent.

It's okay, how did it go? Kade replied instantly.

Inspection went well, and I told her about you—she says you're cute, she sent with a tongue emoji.

That's it? Just cute, he replied with a winking face.

If she said anymore, I think I'd have to take a page out of your book and let the jealousy flow through me, she replied.

Are you coming home? He wrote.

You're out of the hospital? She replied.

Parents are signing me out now, I should be home within the hour, he wrote.

I'll be there as soon as I can, my dad wants me to cook dinner. I'll be there right after, she sent.

I don't want you travelling at night, I'll come pick you up when they discharge me, he wrote, but Nelle wasn't able to reply since her phone died and her charger was in her overnight bag in his garage.

She cooked Sebastian a quick dinner of fish sticks, rice, and boiled vegetables, munching on a few vegetables herself. As soon as he finished, she waited until her father drank himself to sleep before she was going to leave again, except that didn't happen, all he wanted to do that night was argue with her. He yelled and screamed about nothing, and she just sat there as if everything was her fault.

"Are you even listening to me?" Sebastian yelled.

"If you stop yelling at me, maybe things would start to register." Nelle shot out.

Sebastian laughed and took a long swig from the bottle of rum at the table. Smoke escaped the ashtray in the middle of them, giving Sebastian this menacing look as he stared at her through it.

"Everything I do for you and this is how you speak to me?" Sebastian grunted.

"You haven't done much for me in the last six months," she scoffed.

"There's a roof over your head isn't there? Food in your belly? A phone bill you use to speak to your boyfriend? Who do you think pays for all your shit?" Sebastian yelled.

"Well, maybe you should stop if I'm such a burden to you!" she screamed.

Sebastian stumbled out of his chair toward her and she shot up as well, walking backward until her back hit the wall. A whimper escaped her as Sebastian stood before her, angrier than she'd ever seen him before.

"You want to try that again?" he asked, the stench of alcohol from his breath infiltrated her and she couldn't help but cough.

"I'm moving out," she admitted.

"Where the fuck are you going to go? Live with *him*? Then when he gets tired of you and knows that you're nothing but a fat whore who's

done nothing with her life aside from ruin everyone else's by being the wrong kid to die!" Sebastian yelled. "What then?"

"Fuck you," she cried.

Sebastian swung his hand to her face and clocked her right on the nose, blood splattered out of it and immediately started leaking down her face. She quickly got to her feet and ran out of the house, Sebastian's yells moved behind her.

Her footfalls echoed the quiet street as she used her tank top to clean the blood from her nose. That was the last straw, and she hoped her father knew it, too. He needed help, and if he didn't get it, then he would lose everything that ever mattered to him.

*

Kade tried calling Nelle for nearly two hours, but his parents wouldn't let him take the car when he arrived home from the hospital. Kade's leg tapped restlessly as he sat on his sofa, trying any way he could to contact Nelle. By the time ten hit, he went to lie down in bed, still dialing out her number, and leaving her messages on her social media.

He didn't realize it, but he had fallen asleep, the chaos of the day taking its toll on him. Nelle left her home with her dead phone in her back pocket, and walked to Kade's house. It was a thirty minute walk, but the fresh air was doing her some good in calming down. Sebastian wasn't like that, he never laid a hand on her, Greg, nor her mother. The pain Sebastian was going through was clearly being bottled up and the only way he knew how to express it was by attacking the only family he had left. Parts of Nelle knew that if she died instead of Greg, things would be so different. Hearing her father admit to her that the wrong kid died, didn't hurt Nelle as much as she thought it should, because in so many ways she knew he was right.

It was nearing eleven when she arrived at Kade's house, and knocked softly on his door. She wasn't expecting him to answer, but she knocked again, a little harder that time. It was terrifyingly dark on her walk, and her paranoia was on high alert, especially as she stood there waiting to get into his room.

Kade inhaled sharply as he heard a third knock on his door and rushed out of his bed, expecting the knocks to be Nelle. He opened the door quickly and didn't even have the time to take in the blood on her face and shirt, she already lunged at him and hugged him tightly through her sobs.

“Nelle?” Kade said and held her as she cried. “What the fuck happened?”

“I’m okay,” she managed through weeps.

“Look at me,” he said and lifted her face.

“No.” She forced her head into his bare chest.

“Baby,” he said softly and lifted her chin. “Jesus Christ.”

Nelle wasn’t sure, but she believed her nose might be broken. Blood had stopped falling, but that didn’t stop it from caking onto her face and decorating the likes of her white tank top. He kissed her forehead and pulled her into his room. She took off her shoes, her sniffs moving through the silence of the room, and he led her to the shower in the washroom.

Nothing was said between the two of them as he lifted her tank top over her head, helping her out of her jeans as well. He started the shower as she took off her bra and underwear and he looked back at her with such anger, she was scared what he might do.

He stepped out of his basketball shorts and pulled her into the shower with him, closing the glass door as he held her. She squeezed him, wanting nothing more than to hold him all night and try to forget the likes of the last twenty four hours. He kissed the top of her head, slowly taking her hair out of her topknot, and running his fingers through it as the water fell upon them. The clear water at their feet ran a light pink and he pulled her away from his chest to delicately clean her face with a washcloth. He studied the likes of her nose, deeming it not to be broken, but he didn’t want to say anything just yet.

“I shouldn’t have went home,” she said.

“You couldn’t’ve known,” he whispered.

“I’ll move in with you,” she sniffed as he cleaned around her nostril.

He nodded, trying to hide the smile that was spreading to his lips for he knew she was better off with him than she was with her drunk father. Until Sebastian got help, she wasn’t safe there and Kade wouldn’t allow her to be somewhere she wasn’t safe.

They washed one another, having the most intimate moment together that didn’t involve sex—though by the rise of his manhood, it surely could’ve led to something he just didn’t try anything. He simply held her, letting her know without saying anything that she was safe, and that no matter what, he wasn’t going anywhere.

The moment they stepped out of the shower, she quickly dried herself, and crawled into his bed. She felt so exhausted, she wasn't sure how much longer her body would be able to tolerate staying awake. Kade tousled his hair with the towel and tossed it to the floor, also crawling in bed with her. Without even saying anything, she lifted her head to his chest and she listened intently to the beating of his heart.

"What happened, baby?" he asked, and kissed her head.

"Doesn't matter," she whispered.

"It does to me," he said and lifted her chin.

Tears welled in her eyes and she couldn't help but start crying again. Kade kissed her lips and squeezed her to his chest, quietly shushing her to calm her down.

"I told him I was moving out," she sniffed. "And things just escalated."

"I should've been there," Kade growled.

"It would've just made it worse," she said. "And your heart, if something happened to you—"

"Nothing will happen to me," he let out a shuddered breath.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Why?"

"For dragging this stress on you when you don't need it."

"You're getting out of this, so there won't be any more stress. I love you, and all I care about is seeing you smile. I know living here will be different, and we'll always be in each other's way, but it will be so much better for you. You'll be happy, and fuck, I'll be like a pig in shit. I hate that you've always been treated so poorly and there was nothing I could do about it. I wish I did something to make you smile so much sooner, I kick myself in the ass every day for taking so long—"

Nelle interrupted him with a kiss, touching his stubbly chin.

"I love you, too," she smiled.

Kade let out a soft chuckle and held her tight; this was the start to their happiness together. Discussing their future was the first step he wanted to fulfill before he underwent the surgery he so dreaded the moment he made Nelle his.

"Mm, morning, baby," Kade's groggy voice said as he kissed her shoulder.

“I want to sleep,” she whispered.

“I have a whole day planned for us, that was supposed to happen yesterday—”

“Don’t stress out about this, we don’t have to do anything but lie in bed all day,” she said and rolled onto her back. Kade looked down at her with a mischievous grin; a grin he forced to stay in place as soon as he saw the redness of her nose.

“We will stay in bed all day, as soon as you’re moved in, and as soon as we have breakfast. Most of the things I have planned are right here in this very room, my love,” he smirked. “Now get this cute little butt out of bed.”

“Yes, sir,” she chuckled.

Nelle and Kade quickly prepared themselves for the day, being sure to dress comfortably for whatever activities Kade had planned for her. She fixed her hair into a topknot and stared at the likes of her nose. Wondering how on earth she would cover it since the only makeup she owned was her mascara and a few lip balms.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Kade asked, flushing the toilet.

“Your parents are going to ask some questions about this,” she sighed.

“Then we tell them the truth,” Kade said and took her hand.

Nerves struck her as they approached the home, she felt like if she showed her face to the people that have been so kind to her, then she’d feel like she let them down—she already felt like it was her fault in the first place. Kade unlocked the front door, and the smell of eggs, turkey bacon, toast, and coffee infiltrated her.

As soon as Sandy saw the likes of Nelle’s face that morning, a gasp escaped her. Sandy knew it would never be Kade to do something like that to his girlfriend, but she gave Kade the most horrifying stare he put his hands up and stammered on a few words. David let out a sharp breath as he stirred his coffee.

“What happened to your face?” Flora asked.

“It’s nothing, I’m fine,” Nelle nodded and sat beside Flora.

“Flora, can you go upstairs for a moment, we’d like to talk to Nelle and Kade alone,” David ordered.

“But I’m hungry,” Flora whined.

“Give us five minutes,” Sandy said and came to the table. “Go get changed for the day.”

Flora dragged her feet out of the kitchen and Kade sat in her spot, putting his arm around Nelle as they waited for the sound of Flora's stomps to be further away.

"Nelle, Kade," David started. "The truth, now."

Kade glanced at Nelle and she slowly shrugged a shoulder, looking down at her hands. She didn't want to explain to them what happened—she was scared to. Kade gripped her hand and took a breath.

"She came to me last night like this," Kade explained.

"Did your father do this?" Sandy asked.

"It's not his fault," Nelle sniffed. "I said some things I shouldn't have said—"

"That doesn't give him the right to hit you!" David raised his voice for the first time in front of Nelle.

"You're pressing charges," Sandy ordered, looking at Kade.

"No, no. I can't do that. He's my dad...I'll get him the help he needs. I will—" Nelle said as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"You are staying here, understood?" David advised. "You will not ask permission. You will be staying here for as long as the two of you need to. I wish you would've told us about this, Nelle. We would've helped you get your father the help he needed much sooner."

"I'm sorry," Nelle whispered.

"There's absolutely nothing you need to apologize for," Sandy said and made her way to Nelle.

Kade squeezed Nelle's hand as Sandy hugged her. A nod left Nelle, as she wiped away a few of her tears, feeling Sandy let go of her and make her way to Flora. David was staring at Kade, and nodding slightly. All Nelle could feel in that moment was being a burden, as she's always felt her whole life. The harder Kade squeezed the more she wanted to cry.

"We're going to pick up her things after breakfast," Kade said to David.

"As soon as you're ready to go, I'll drive the both of you over," David said as Sandy walked back in with Flora.

"You don't have to do that," Nelle said. "I already feel like I'm putting you out."

"Nonsense," Sandy said. "You're part of the family, dear. Whatever you need we will help you."

"I don't know what to say," Nelle started and looked to Kade.

He pulled her head to his lips and nodded at his parents, letting them know how thankful he was to them for doing this for Nelle. She sniffed and kissed Kade's lips quickly, before turning to Sandy and David with a nod. They sat in silence for the remainder of breakfast, listening to Flora discuss all the new things she was learning in school. Kade squeezed Nelle's leg every so often, letting her know he was there whenever she needed him, and she truly appreciated that. Frankly, she didn't know how to thank this family for doing so much for her in the short time they met her. They never judged her or questioned her, they simply welcomed her with open arms; now more so than ever. She finally felt her life start to turn around.

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"You're coming in with me?" Nelle asked Kade as she sat behind him in the minivan.

"Of course," Kade said.

"Don't do anything stupid, son," David advised.

"I won't," Kade said as they pulled into her driveway.

"I'll wait right here. You leave the front door open," David said.

Kade nodded and Nelle stepped out of the van, fiddling with the keys in her hand. The door unlocked to a cloud of smoke as her father was standing above the stove, making his daily bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich. He glanced over his shoulder to see her walk in with her head down and Kade follow her down the hallway to her room.

"Not even a good morning?" Sebastian called.

Nelle didn't say anything and rushed into her room with Kade following close behind as she took a suitcase from her closet and dropped it on her bed. She didn't even know what to take, given that she didn't have that much.

She started by emptying out her underwear drawer, only taking the ones that fit her, and tossed them into her suitcase. She added the few tops she owned, and jeans she bought. Her dresses and sweaters hung in her closet and she only grabbed the ones that fit her new body. Next were her shoes, and even those she only had a select few that she wore often, and that included the flats she was wearing now.

"You're not taking everything?" Kade asked, eyeing the hanging clothes.

"Those don't fit me anymore," she shrugged.

She took all her school books from her windowsill and tossed them into the suitcase as her father came up behind Kade. He didn't say anything as he saw her packing, and Kade refused to move from the doorframe for Sebastian to even be able to get into her room.

"You're leaving?" Sebastian asked.

"I have to," she sniffed.

"I have the drinking under control, Nelle," Sebastian scoffed.

"Is that why her face looks like that?" Kade raised his voice.

"Nelle?" Sebastian called.

She ignored him and grabbed the photos of her and Greg from her dresser and nightstand then took her jean jacket from the accent chair with her purse she left there last night. She didn't want to yell at her father, even though she believed he deserved it the last few months, but this wasn't him. He wasn't mean spirited, or violent. He was the kindest person she knew, just like Greg was. His death changed everyone, many for the worst.

"In a few days, people are going to come get you and bring you to rehab to get you the help you need. You can argue with me, you can scream at me, you can hit me again for all I care. This has to stop," she started as her lower lip quivered. "I miss him, too, Dad. He was my best friend and for the last few months I've been completely lost without him. You've been so wrapped in your own little world after Mom left, to even realize what I'm going through, or to even bother to see if I'm okay. Because I'm not. I don't know if I'll ever be, but Kade has been helping me a lot. If it wasn't for him, I don't think I'd be here right now...we're getting married, did you know that? He asked me to marry him and of course, I said yes. He's the only thing that's ever come into my life that I haven't hated, or haven't tried to push away. I really don't give a shit what you have to say, this is my decision. His family has been nice enough to take me in and I accepted. I expect you to accept it, too."

"Are you really getting married?" Sebastian asked through a wave of tears.

"Yes," Kade replied for her. "I love your daughter, and I would do anything for her. That includes removing her from the toxic house she's been living in."

Sebastian nodded and continued down the hallway to the kitchen where he continued cooking his daily bacon intake. Nelle let out a breath and sat on her bed, looking up at Kade. He grinned at her as she fiddled

with the ring on her finger. A weight felt lifted from her chest, of course, there were so many things she wanted to tell him. So many dark things she hadn't even told Kade yet, but she kept her mouth shut, leaving the goodbye a bittersweet one.

"Thank you," she said.

"Don't need to thank me," Kade nodded.

"I feel so light, if that makes any sense?" she chuckled and wiped a tear from her cheek.

"It does, baby," he grinned. "I'm here for you, I'll always be here for you. Any time you need to talk, to vent—use me. Okay?"

"You're the best stress reliever anyone can buy," she smirked.

"Wanna give your bed one more round before we leave," he winked.

"Stop," she chuckled with a sniff.

"I love you," he said.

"Love you, too," she smiled.

"Now, c'mon, let's go home," he said.

She nodded and packed the rest of her things, being sure that her jewelry box was secure in the front pocket of the suitcase, and that she remembered to grab all her sketchbooks and photo albums from the closet. Kade helped her reach for a few of her things in the closet, being much too high for her, even when she went on the tips of her toes.

"That should be everything," she said.

"You wanna do a double check before we leave? There's nothing around the house that you want?" Kade asked. "Your toothbrush and girly stuff?"

"Everything I own is in this room, the rest of the stuff I was forced to get rid of when we moved from the old house after Greg died," she sighed. "My toothbrush is already at your house, but I'll grab my shampoo so I don't have to use yours all the time."

"What's wrong with my shampoo?"

"I don't like smelling like a lumberjack," she chuckled.

"I like everyone knowing you're mine," Kade shrugged.

Nelle chuckled, escaping to the washroom to grab what she needed before returning and dropping them into her suitcase. Kade zipped it up and carried it for her as she held her sketchbooks and photo albums. Her father sat down at the table with the morning newspaper, his BLT, and a fresh cup of coffee. Kade nodded at him as he walked

past, and Nelle did the same, eyeing Sebastian as he poured the remainder of his rum into his coffee. She was getting her father the help he needed, she just didn't know how she wasn't going to do it.

-13-

"Kade," she said as he kissed her passionately, locking the door to his room and leading her to the bed. "The doctor said we can't do this...Kade...are you even listening to me?"

"No, all the blood that should be going to my head has rushed someone very important right now," he chuckled and lifted her onto the bed.

"You should stop," she said as he groped her breasts.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"N-no, but the doctor—"

"The doctor said we can't fuck like we usually do, and have to take it slow. As long as my heart rate doesn't get too elevated, I'll be fine," he interrupted her and continued to kiss along her neck.

"Maybe I could try going on top? I've never done it before, but at least I can control how fast we go," she suggested.

"That just raised my heart rate a little," he chuckled and pulled his shirt over his head.

"Well, don't tell me that." She nudged his shoulder.

He turned onto his back and undid the ties to his sweatpants, pulling them off. She pulled her dress over her head and her underwear came off next. She grinned as she straddled him and he adjusted the pillows behind his head so he could get a better look at her. He bit his bottom lip as he removed her bra, staring at her with such passion; he knew he had to relax before he passed out.

"Just rock slowly," he said as he fixed himself inside her.

Nelle felt entirely out of place, and had no idea what she was doing, but tried to remember what she had seen in movies, mimicking those movements. Whatever she was doing was working because he let out moans she'd never heard before. He squeezed her hips as he thrust upward to her speed, feeling all of her. Her moans travelled through the empty room, bouncing off the walls and causing him to shudder with pleasure as she slowly sped up.

"Oh," she moaned.

"Fuck, baby, cum with me," he moaned.

Kade thrust upward once more and released his substance. She grinned as she looked down at him, his head rolled back on the pillow showing off his chiseled yet bearded jawline, as his whole body shook under her.

“Guess I’m not that bad on top,” she chuckled.

“Why we haven’t been doing this more often is beyond me,” he said and took a breath.

“Are you feeling okay?” she asked.

“I’m good, I promise,” he grinned and pulled her closer to him.

She kissed his lips with a smile as she rose off him, feeling his substance leaking from her. He chuckled, pulling her to his chest and fixing the covers over them. She listened to the rapid beating of his heart as he took a few deep breaths to help calm him down.

“Your heart’s beating so fast,” she said and moved her hand to the middle of his chest.

“I’ll be alright, baby,” he said and kissed her head.

“Oh, I forgot to ask you yesterday. Did you message Corey? He was at the hospital all day with us, and left when you saw him,” she asked.

“Yeah, we spoke last night,” Kade said and placed his hand on hers. “Can I ask you something?”

“Depends on what you want the answer to be,” she chuckled.

“We’ve never used protection, and, um, I’m just starting to wonder if we should get a pregnancy test or something. I haven’t seen you on your period either, so I’m not sure if—”

“You don’t have to worry about that. Um, I haven’t had my period in a few months, it’s probably because of the lack of food in my system—malnourishment as the doctors would describe it if I went to one,” she said, slightly ashamed at what he might reply.

“That’s not good, Nelle.”

“Nothing about the way I treat my body is good,” she said.

“I think you should get yourself checked out, just to make sure—”

“I’m fine, Kade.”

“Baby,” he sighed. “You’re eighteen years old; you should be seeing a doctor regularly. Especially now that we have sex quite often.”

“I’m eating again, aren’t I? It’s not much, but at least I’m eating,” she said and looked up at him. “And I haven’t had a cigarette in two

weeks—minus the one from Friday night. I’m trying to fix the damage I’ve done.”

“I don’t want anything bad happening to you,” Kade said.

“I’m fine, Kade. I promise you, if anything’s wrong, I’ll let you know,” she said.

He kissed her head softly and lifted her hand to his mouth, kissing her fingers delicately.

“While we’re on that topic, when do you think we should have the wedding?” he asked, trying to calm himself down, knowing he had to push her seeing a doctor, but he didn’t want to stress out about it.

“Probably after we finish school,” she said and kissed his chest.

“And what if we get pregnant before then?”

“Then maybe we should start using protection,” she chuckled nervously. “I don’t think I can handle raising a kid.”

“I’d be there to help you,” he said.

“Aren’t you going to college?”

“Aren’t you?”

“I can’t afford it,” she admitted. “Why do you think I don’t give a shit about my grades?”

“So, you’re just not going to go to college?” he asked.

“No, I’ll find myself a job that pays decently and stay there for the next thirty or forty years,” she said and propped herself up on her elbow to look at him.

“You’re smart, Nelle. I’m sure if you applied for a scholarship, they’d grant you one,” he said, running his fingers along her back.

“I don’t think I want to go,” she admitted. “I really don’t need to—”

“You should,” he interrupted.

“Why?”

“Because I want to start a life with you, and we can go to college together, once we graduate, we can get ourselves a house, start making babies... I don’t know what’s going to happen with my heart, and I want to be with you for as long as I have left.”

“Don’t say that.” Her voice cracked.

“I’m just thinking rationally.” He shrugged.

“I don’t like it,” she sniffed.

“I know, but that’s how my brain works. That’s why I want you healthy, so we can start thinking about our future—”

“What if I don’t want to go to college? Can’t my husband make all the money and I can thank him the only way I know how,” she said, trying to change the topic.

“Oh, is that so?” he chuckled, seeing the frustration in her eyes. “And how would you do that?”

She licked his face and laughed as he rolled onto her and started nibbling at her neck. She let out a string of laughter and he couldn’t stop smiling as he watched her, truly in love with the woman before him.

-14-

On Wednesday, Nelle got a phone call during Mrs. Maxwell’s class, but she didn’t hear it ring since she always left her phone on silent. Kade had his arm draped to the back of her chair, kissing her shoulder every so often as they listened to the lesson.

“What’s wrong?” Kade whispered, noticing her shifting in her seat.

“My phone keeps vibrating,” she whispered back.

“Oh, yeah? Is it turning you on?” he said and bit her shoulder.

“Stop,” she chuckled.

“Kade, Nelle, please pay attention,” Miss Maxwell said and continued on with her discussion.

Nelle pushed her lips together as Kade wrinkled his nose, tangling his fingers in her hair. They still had the assignment to complete and they hadn’t even begun, being too distracted with everything that had happened over the weekend.

After the fourth time her phone went off, Nelle fished it from her pocket and Kade looked down at it to see her father calling her. Kade let out and sigh and removed his arm from around her, letting her hair fall to the back of the chair. She stuffed her phone back in her pocket and watched as the clock ticked by until the bell rang.

Kade followed her out of the class and to his locker. She nibbled on her bottom lip, wondering why on earth her father was calling her so much and Kade could see it written all over her face.

“Just call him back,” he said.

“What if he pulls me into some bullshit lie like he usually does?” she sighed.

“Then you ignore it,” Kade said as Corey was making his way over to them. Kade kissed Nelle, and pulled her into a hug. “I’ll see you at lunch, okay? My phone is on me if you want to talk.”

“Okay,” she said and rose to the tips of her toes to kiss him again.

“I love you,” he grinned as Corey clapped him on the shoulder.

“Break it up, lovebirds, we got a mechanics class to get to,” Corey said and pulled Kade away from her.

“I’ll see you at lunch, baby,” Kade said as Corey pulled him down the hall.

Nelle could’ve easily gone to her math class, ignored the calls from her father, but deep in her heart she couldn’t. She snuck out of the school and sat against the brick wall in her usual spot, waiting for the phone to ring once more. Like clockwork, another call came in and she answered it after the third ring.

“Hello?” she said, tears already welling in her eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were sending me to some nut house?” Sebastian yelled.

“It’s not a nut house, Dad, it’s rehab. I called them on Monday, and they said they’d come get you sometime this week. It’ll be good for you to get clean and be yourself again,” she said, and wiped a tear from her cheek.

“We could lose the house, Nelle,” Sebastian said.

“I know,” she said.

“They’ll stop sending me my monthly checks to pay for everything!” he screamed.

“I know,” she said.

“How’re you going to survive without my money?” he asked.

“Something I have to figure out,” she said.

“Have you spoken to your mother?” he wondered.

“She doesn’t take my calls,” Nelle lied, she hadn’t tried to reach out to her mother since she walked out on them.

“She sent you a letter,” he said. “I don’t know what it says, I didn’t open it. But it’s a thick envelope.”

“Leave it on the kitchen table, I’ll go get it when I can,” she sniffed.

“They’re telling me to get off the phone,” he sighed.

“I’ll see you in three months,” she said with a nod.

“Yeah,” he said and let out a breath. “I’ll see you, Nelle.”

Sebastian hung up the phone, Nelle didn't want to, but she couldn't help but to cry. She hated her relationship with her father, they used to be so close—even when he poked fun at her weight, she didn't care, because she always had Greg to defend her. There was a part of Nelle that wished she could turn back time and get her brother back, her family back together, and tell Kade how she felt before she gave Corey her virginity. Things would've been so different if that were the case, but life wasn't that simple.

Her phone vibrated again as she opened her bag and took out her last cigarette. Kade wrote to her, asking if everything was okay.

Debating whether or not I should have my last cigarette, she replied.

Don't! He sent. *I want my girl tasting like MY girl and not some ashtray.*

I feel like I need it, she wrote.

You don't, baby. I'm telling you, you don't. What happened? He wrote.

They're taking my dad to rehab for ninety days, and apparently there's a letter from my mom in the mailbox, she wrote.

We'll stop by your house on the way home, he wrote back. *It'll be okay. You know as well as I do, this is good for him.*

Doesn't mean I have to like it, she replied.

I know, he sent.

Can't you get out of class? I need you, she wrote.

Okay, okay, I'm coming. Where are you? He replied.

My usual spot, she wrote.

Kade didn't reply, which made Nelle worried he wasn't coming. She held the unlit cigarette between her fingers and bit her bottom lip, trying her hardest not to light it. It would be so easy, too, her lighter was already in her hand, all she had to do was put it between her lips and flick her lighter, then inhale the toxins from the one thing that used to make her feel better.

She sat there for a good ten minutes looking at the unlit cigarette and before she finally decided she was going to smoke it, footfalls echoed nearby and Kade turned the corner, grinning at her. He was out of breath, and was trying his hardest to breathe in through his nose and out through his mouth to relax himself.

"You didn't run, did you?" she asked and got to her feet.

"For you? Anything," he grinned, adjusting his backpack.

"Kade, you can't run," she said and placed her hand to his chest, feeling the rapid beating of his heart.

“You said you needed me, you can’t say that and not expect me to drop everything and get to you,” he said and kissed her softly.

“You made it just as I was about to light this,” she said and held out her cigarette.

He took it from between her fingers and snapped it in half before tossing it aside. A grin left her and she wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing it softly. He let out nasal chuckle and met her lips, kissing her with such passion, he truly didn’t care who saw them. She ran her fingers through his hair and he pushed her into the brick wall, the heat of the moment taking control. His hands groped her bottom under the jean skirt she purchased the other day with the leftover money David gave her for her birthday. Kade’s tongue twirled with hers and he pulled away from her, pushing his lips together.

“We should stop,” he said and took a breath.

“You don’t want to fuck me out in the open like this?” she said as he dropped his backpack.

A growl left him and he slammed his lips to hers again, lifting her against the wall. She reached down to help him unbuckle his belt, eager to blow off some steam. He tugged her underwear to the side and slid inside her, letting out a soft moan as he thumped. She knew he shouldn’t be doing this because of his heart, not after he ran all the way to her, but she needed him and she needed this badly.

“Fuck,” he grunted and rested his head to her shoulder, out of breath. “I think this was the most daring encounter we ever did.”

“Was it good?” she asked as he put her down.

“Every time we have sex it’s good,” he said and kissed her quickly, adjusting himself in his pants. “Do you feel better?”

“A little,” she said, noticing his attempts to catch his breath. “Are you okay?”

“Always,” he smirked.

“Sorry I made you run here and then do this.” She nibbled on her lip. “Kind of selfish of me—”

“Baby, stop. Whenever you need me, you now I’ll be right over—shitty heart or not, nothing is stopping me,” he said and moved a strand of hair from her line of view.

She smirked as she watched him fix his pants around his waist and adjust his t-shirt. He was so handsome, she wondered what right she must’ve done in life to deserve his love and kindness.

“You want to get out of here?”

“Like skip school?” he frowned with a smile.

“Never skipped school before?” she said and adjusted her underwear.

“No,” he blushed.

“First for everything,” she grinned and picked up her book bag.

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Kade let go of her hand and draped his arm over her shoulder to kiss the side of her head as they walked through the mall. He felt somewhat guilty for skipping the rest of the day, and knew that he was going to get into trouble for it when he got home. However, when he saw how lighter she felt as they walked away from school, he smiled. He truly would do anything for this woman, and he didn't care who it bothered.

He'd never admit it, but this was the first time he was actually scared to get his surgery. If something went wrong, he wasn't sure what would happen to Nelle, if she could handle going on without him around. She had no one anymore, and he felt obligated to take care of her. He helped her open up in so many different ways, built her confidence, and showed her how truly beautiful she was. He knew that if something happened to him, she wouldn't just shut down like she did with her brother, she'd completely end. That scared him more than anything.

“So, where to?” Kade asked as they waked through the second floor of the mall.

“I don't have money to buy anything, I just like looking at the stuff they have in the windows,” she said.

“Let me buy you something,” he smirked.

“No, I can't let you do that. You do enough. And with me living with you—I don't have a job to help out around the house, and I have to find one. You can't be my sugar daddy our whole relationship,” she chuckled.

“I thought you said you'd pay me back with kisses and licks on my dick,” he whispered in her ear.

“And I can't really repay your parents that way, now can I?” she said and he let out a laugh.

They walked toward the food court, hearing his stomach growl was sign enough that it was nearing lunch hour. He bought himself a couple new shirts and a cap Nelle thought was cute. He wanted to buy himself a new videogame, but decided against it, hating that Nelle didn't

buy herself anything, nor would she let him spoil her. Although, she was enjoying their day, the laughs they shared, the stories they told, and she truly couldn't believe this man before her was going to be hers forever.

"Alright, baby," he started as he tongued the tuna and vegetable sandwich from his cheek. "Where to next? Can't just walk around the mall all day aimlessly...I was thinking you can try on some lingerie, and take a few pictures for me?"

"And what're you going to do with these pictures?" she chuckled and forked a piece of lettuce into her mouth.

"Well, it's not like before when you didn't stay over and I could've used those photos—but I figured it would be kinda hot to have some," he smirked.

"Or—and I like this idea a little better—why don't we head home and you take photos of me without any lingerie on, just me on your bed in any position you want—since you figure it would be kind of hot and all," she said and bit her lip.

"Well, fuck," he said and leaned forward as he put a hand to his crotch. "That got me hard."

Nelle laughed and took his water from his tray. As much as she wanted to take him home, and have her way with him as he documented it, she had one important thing to do, something she had been dreading since she found out this morning.

-15-

Kade pulled into her driveway and she let out a heavy sigh. He put his hand in hers and kissed it tenderly, flashing her those bright green eyes. There wasn't a clear thought that ran through her mind. The letter from her mother could be anything from someone trying to get in contact with Nelle to advise her of her mother's death...to advise Nelle that her mother's in prison...to advise Nelle of something she truly wasn't sure if she wanted to read. She nodded and fished the keys from her book bag before stepping out of the car.

Kade followed close behind as she unlocked the door and found the home still as clean as it was when she left. Only a few dirty dishes resided in the sink, a couple of empty bottles of booze were on the coffee table and kitchen table, where the thick envelope her father was talking about resided.

"This it?" Kade asked, picking up the envelope.

“Guess so?” she said and took it from him.

She sat at the table and opened the envelope addressed to her. There was a folded letter in her mother’s handwriting along with a second envelope filled with thousands of dollars of cash.

“Damn,” Kade said as she handed him the envelope of cash. “You should put this in a savings account, save yourself some money and maybe use it for school.”

“Y-yeah, maybe,” she said as she opened the letter.

My dearest Nelle, there are no words to describe what it’s like to lose a child. I know my leaving hasn’t helped things at home, and if I’d have known how bad it was, I never would’ve left you there. I deeply apologize, my love, and I wanted to give you this. It isn’t much, but it’s all I have. I will continue to send you money when I can, and hope you accept it. It doesn’t replace the hurt I left you, nor does it replace the emptiness you must be feeling without me there to help you through Greg’s passing. I just couldn’t be there anymore. Not in that house, not around your father, and I’m so sorry, my love, but not around you either. I love you, Nelle, and I hope you one day understand why I left. Forever your mother, Mary-Anne.

It would be easy for Nelle to cry, so easy for her to shed a tear for her mother, but she couldn’t for she didn’t understand why Mary-Anne did what she did. Nelle would *never* understand.

She put the letter down, reading her mother’s address on the envelope in Maine. Kade picked up the letter and read it, looking up and Nelle when he finished it.

“Baby, I—”

“I’m okay, really,” she nodded. “She left because I reminded her of Greg, and if she loved me, she wouldn’t have left. My dad was the one who said it best, things wouldn’t have changed if Greg didn’t die. Mom would still be here, Dad wouldn’t drink, Greg would’ve been closer to graduating college on the scholarship he earned—the wrong kid died.”

“Don’t say that,” Kade scoffed.

“Being told you’re not good enough your whole life, you start to think it’s true,” she sniffed and took the envelope of cash.

“You are good enough, you have to believe that. You’re beautiful, perfect, and beyond anything I could have ever imagined. These people are delusional for loving Greg more than they loved you. He was a great guy, but you’re also their kid and they have to see that, baby. You have, god, you have so much potential to be the most amazing woman in the

world, but they did nothing but drag you down,” Kade said and leaned forward to put his hands to her knee.

“Why are you always so nice to me?” she sniffed.

“Because I love you, think I always have.”

“I love you, too.”

“Let’s go home,” he said and kissed her knee.

-16-

They drove in silence on their way home, listening to music as they held hands. There wasn’t much to say for she didn’t want to discuss her troubled past any more than she needed to. He knew enough and never judged her for it. They were starting their new life together, and to Kade, that was all that mattered.

As soon as they pulled into his driveway, he took their school bags and quickly made his way to his room. She kicked off her shoes and before she even had the chance to take a breath and relax, he kissed her hungrily. He dropped their bags to the floor and led her to the washroom, emanating a chuckle out of her.

They undressed one another and got into the shower, laughing as the water poured out cold before it warmed up against their skin. He ravished her for the second time that day. It seemed like he was getting in as much time with her as he could before he got the call for a new heart. It frightened him more than anything, but knowing he had someone who loved him relaxed his scattered mind a little.

Nelle stepped out of the shower first and dried herself off so that he could use the towel when he got out. She pulled on one of his t-shirts and decided to count the money that her mother left her, which totalled out to five thousand dollars. She let out a small gasp, debating whether it was right or not to take the money in the first place. That was a lot of money, to which Nelle could use to help out around the home, or even be able to keep the house her father would stay in once he got out of rehab...she set aside a thousand dollars and piled the rest to put back in the envelope. The side door to the garage opened as she was putting the envelope in their underwear drawer, startling her slightly.

“Kade?” David asked as he poked his head in.

“He’s just finishing up in the shower,” Nelle said and fixed her wet hair on her shoulder.

“Can you tell him I was looking for him?” David asked.

“Of course,” Nelle smiled.

“Thank you, and I wanted to say, you being here has put him in really good spirits about his heart transplant. Sandy and I haven’t seen him this happy in a very long time,” David nodded.

“I should thank you for having me stay here,” she said and picked up the thousand dollars from the bed. “I wanted to give you this. It isn’t much, but I wanted to do my part around here. I figured it would pay for the electricity, food you cook me, and gas for Kade’s car, at least for a couple months.”

“I don’t want your money, Nelle,” David chuckled.

“Please? I wouldn’t feel right if I lived her for free,” she urged and held out the money to him.

Kade came out of the washroom, holding the towel around his waist. He sure did look breathtaking, especially as droplets made their way down his chiselled body. Nelle couldn’t help but give him a once over, and he winked at her then nodded at his father.

“What’s going on?” Kade asked.

“Your wife is trying to pay me for letting her stay here,” David chuckled.

“I told you they wouldn’t accept it,” Kade said and pulled sweatpants from his dresser.

“Please take it, just for my own peace of mind,” she said and lifted the money to him again.

“Fine, I’ll take it and save it so the two of you can get your own place one day,” David said and folded the cash, placing it in his back pocket. “I actually came here to give you something, son.” He pulled a gold pocket watch from his shirt pocket and looked down at the engraving on the front of the watch.

“What’s this?” Kade asked taking a step forward.

“My grandmother gave this to my grandfather on their wedding night, and he gave this to my father when he proposed to my mother, and my father gave it to me when I proposed to your Ma. It’s only right that I hand this down to you, Kade,” David said and placed the pocket watch in Kade’s hand. He smiled and looked over at Nelle as he read the engraving.

“What’s it say?” Kade asked.

“*Mo anam cara*, it means ‘my soulmate’ in Gaelic,” David said.

“I don’t—I really don’t know what to say, Dad,” Kade said, opening the watch.

“A simple thank you is enough,” David chuckled. “Dinner will be ready in an hour...and I promise not to tell your mother you skipped school today.”

David winked and left them in the room as they were. Kade looked down at the watch and nodded, vaguely remembering his father taking the watch out only on special occasions.

“Guess this really makes this engagement real,” she said and looked at the watch.

“Do you regret it at all?” he asked and licked his lips.

“Not one bit,” she smiled.

“Good,” he said and kissed her. “Love you, baby.”

“Mm, I love you, too,” she said and wrinkled her nose.

“You doing okay?” he asked.

“I have you, of course, I’m okay,” she said.

“I’m serious, baby,” he chuckled softly then took her hand. “It’s been a heck of a few days for you—your dad, your mom, Christ, add the scare of me to that list...I just want to make sure you’re not on the verge of a breakdown.”

“I probably am, but I promise you’ll be the first to know if I’m about to lose it,” she nodded. “Things are looking up, and that’s what matters.”

He nodded softly, nudging her nose with his and kissing the lips he craved even when he was kissing them. Their lives were evolving together, and it was up to them to make sure they continued to smile, even on their tough days, he had to see her smile.

-17-

Each day that passed was another day they eagerly waited for the phone call that would change their lives, but the phone call still hadn’t come and it over a month since they changed the dose on Kade’s medication. Nelle was getting anxious and worried, but she tried not to show it to him. The less he stressed out about it, the better.

Kade’s snores moved through the room when the side door to his room opened and Sandy stormed in. Nelle cuddled into his chest as he held her, his growing chest hair tickling her nose as she breathed deeply. It was an hour before the alarm was to go off for school, but by

the sound of Sandy's footfalls making their way to the bed, there was something wrong. Soft sniffs escaped her as she came to Kade's side of the bed and sat down.

"Kade?" Sandy whispered, shaking his shoulder. His snoring diminished, but his heavy breathing remained. "Kade?"

"Huh?" Kade said.

"Sweetheart?" Sandy sniffed. He rolled over slowly, lifting the sheets on Nelle as he did to cover her naked body, and opened one eye to peer at Sandy.

"Did our alarm not go off?" his groggy voice said.

"We got the call this morning," Sandy started and began to sob.

"What call?" Kade asked and sat upright.

Sandy cried deeply, trying to get the words out of her. Kade frowned and nudged Nelle softly, wanting her to wake up. She inhaled and sat upright with him, rubbing her eyes as she held the sheets to her chest.

"They have a heart for you, they have a heart," Sandy managed through cries.

"Oh my god," Nelle said and put a hand to her mouth as tears simmered in her tired eyes.

Kade was speechless, he knew this had to be done, because if it wasn't, then he'd have to say goodbye to Nelle so much sooner than he would without a new heart—or any fluke complications that could happen in the operating room. Nelle hugged him as her tears decorated his shoulder and chest, and he put his arm around her, kissing the side of her head as his eyes widened.

"Marry us today," Kade finally said to his mother. "Can you do that?"

"They want you in this afternoon to prep you and prepare you for—" Sandy began.

"I want to marry her today, before I undergo this surgery. I *have* to marry her today," Kade said and looked to Nelle. "Please?"

"Okay, okay," Sandy said. "I'll make a few calls."

Sandy nodded and looked between the two of them before she wiped her tears. Kade let out a shuddered breath and kissed Nelle's head again as his mother squeezed his hand. There was anticipation and fear on Sandy's face, knowing the complications that could occur if anything

went wrong—but she hid her fears with a smile and made her way out of the room.

Kade sat back and placed a hand to his face, letting out a few sobs.

“Hey,” Nelle said, holding him as tightly as she could. “This is a good thing, you know it is.”

“What if something happens? What if I never see you again?” he cried.

“You can’t think that way,” she sniffed.

“But I do...I love you, Nelle. I can’t lose you and I’m scared you might lose me,” he sniffed. She got to her knees beside him, letting the sheets fall from her body.

“I will be there every step of the way,” she said. “You’ll make it out of this with a brand new heart—and, think, as soon as you’re better, we get to take it for a spin.”

Kade let out a chuckle and wiped his eyes, he didn’t want to talk, he didn’t want to think about it. All he wanted to do was make love to Nelle all day long until he was forced to head to the hospital.

He grabbed her face and kissed her, maneuvering himself on top of her. He parted her legs to either side of him and slid inside. She let out a moan right away, feeling the enormity of his manhood that early in the morning. Kade was petrified, and all he wanted was to distract himself from what was to come, and hearing her moans move through the room was doing just that.

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“Don’t be nervous, dear, you’re making one man very happy today and I’m sure you feel the same way,” Sandy said as she fixed the dainty flower crown around Nelle’s head.

“I don’t like being center of attention,” Nelle said, through a breath.

“It’s just us today,” Sandy advised and turned Nelle to face the mirror.

Nelle wore a long, white bohemian halter dress that Sandy had in her closet. Nelle wasn’t used to showing off that much skin, let alone cleavage, but she sure did look beautiful. Sandy painted her face in the most natural makeup, to the point that even Nelle didn’t recognize herself. Kade was going to absolutely love this.

“Are you ready?” Flora asked coming into the room and hugging Nelle’s waist.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Nelle smiled.

“David will give you away,” Sandy said and handed Nelle a ring.

“What’s this?” Nelle asked looking down at the plain white gold band.

“Didn’t have much time to prepare, you can’t marry him without giving him a ring,” Sandy chuckled. She fixed Nelle’s hair over her shoulder and smiled at their reflection. “Picked this from the selection of rings I have for my clients. You can have it engraved with your name when he gets out of the hospital.”

“And he just turns my ring around right?” Nelle asked, looking down at her hand.

“Exactly, sweetheart,” Sandy smiled.

“Kade’s getting anxious.” David popped his head into the room.

“She’s ready,” Sandy said and gave David a kiss on the cheek before she disappeared on the other side of the door. “You got this, sweetheart.”

Nelle picked up the small bouquet of red roses and nodded at David, following him out of the master bedroom. She took a breath, not because she didn’t want to do this, but because this was exactly what she wanted to do. She was nervous for his surgery not walking down the aisle and making Kade hers.

Flora was behind Nelle, holding her wicker basket of different coloured petals she wouldn’t stop talking about all morning; she was eager to walk down the aisle and drop the roses on the ground. Hearing her banter about being flower girl put a smile to Nelle’s face.

Sandy wasn’t lying when she said the ceremony would be small. Their backyard already looked like the Garden of Eden, and a natural archway of vines by the large orange tree was the perfect place for them to wed. Kade called Corey that morning and advised him what was going to happen, asking if he would miss some school to be his best man. There wasn’t even a moment’s hesitation, and Corey helped prepare the backyard with David and Kade for the nuptials.

Sandy stood in the middle of the archway, with Kade in a dark blue suit to her left and Corey in the grey suit he was going to wear to prom behind him. Kade kept his eyes on the backdoor of the house, anxious and eager to see Nelle walk out.

“Are you ready?” David asked.

“Yeah,” Nelle chuckled as David put his arm out to her.

“Go on,” David said to Flora and she skipped out of the house, dropping rose petals as she skipped.

Kade laughed as he saw his little sister skipping with the biggest smile on her face, but his gaze didn’t leave the backdoor. Nelle took a breath and locked arms with David as they stepped out of the home. Kade’s smile grew and his eyes sparkled in the morning sun. She was absolutely breathtaking and he couldn’t wait to finally call this woman his from this day on. Nelle exhaled sharply as David let go of her and went to stand behind Corey.

“You look gorgeous, baby,” Kade said, smiling.

Sandy chuckled, took both their hands and joined them, squeezing momentarily. Kade shed a tear as Sandy did the ceremony, making it much shorter than she usually did. It was perfect, thoughtful, and to the point; something Nelle certainly wanted. As soon as they said their *I Do*’s, Kade kissed Nelle so passionately, she nearly cried knowing that this could be the last happy moment with him for a really long time.

Their wedding cake was a happy birthday cake that Corey picked up from the supermarket on the way over—he stated it was the only type of cake they had available, and Nelle truly didn’t care. It just made their love story that much more alluring. Nelle smothered Kade’s face in the vanilla frosting, causing him to grab her face and kiss her, spreading the frosting onto hers as well. Sandy took as many photos as she could, wanting to remember this moment just as much as Nelle and Kade. It wasn’t a typical wedding, there was no first dance, there was no throwing of the bouquet, and there were no clinking of glasses. It was small and intimate, just for them to embrace. A sweet memory that would last a lifetime.

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They had to be at the hospital for noon, and it was nearly eleven o’clock. Kade pulled Nelle into his room, closing the door behind her as they kissed. She wanted him badly and needing him one last time before their lives would change so drastically. He stumbled back onto the couch and she straddled him, spreading a smile to his face.

“I love you,” he said, moving his hands up her thighs as she moved the dress out of the way.

“I love you, too,” she giggled as he tried to grab at her underwear and gave her a quizzical look.

“Are you not wearing any underwear?” he asked.

“Touch me and find out,” she said and shoved her tongue into his mouth.

His fingers touched her delicately and a moan left his lips. He quickly undid his pants and pulled his shaft out, sliding it into her. She rode him quickly, not holding back any of her moans. He loved every moment of it, squeezing her hips and thrusting up with her. If he could stay in this moment forever, he would die one happy man.

“Oh, fuck,” he exhaled sharply.

“Cum with me?” she moaned.

“Always.” He kissed her and grunted, letting out a deep moan as he squeezed her tightly.

Kade sighed and fell back, out of breath and staring at his wife. He wanted to memorize her face, take in those almond shaped eyes, those beautiful lips he craved so dearly, and that smile that brightened up her face. He put a hand across his eyes and started crying, soft sobs shaking him.

“Hey?” she said and cupped his face.

“I’m scared, Nelle. I can’t lose you, and I can’t help but to think something will go wrong. It’s fucking open heart surgery—this heart—everything’s going to change, baby. Please don’t leave when things get tough or when you see the scar that I’ll have,” he managed through cries.

“You’re my husband now, I’m not going anywhere. Your scar will be a reminder that you’re going to be okay. That the doctors saved you so we could spend our life doing this all day long,” she said and rocked slowly, still feeling him inside her. “You’ll have a scar down your chest, just like I have stretch marks on my hips that will always remind us what brought us together. I love you, not what you look like—although the fact that you’re *really* attractive helps.”

“Back at you, baby,” he chuckled and took a breath. “But you’re right, you’re right.”

“When you’re better and back on your feet, we’ll be able to go on a honeymoon with the money my mom sent, get us one of those suites.”

“Some whipped cream and maybe chocolate sauce,” he smirked.

“Finally get me in a bikini,” she said and bit her lip.

“Oh, damn, Nelle,” he kissed her, lifting her up and laying her on the couch.

He adjusted himself back inside her and began to rock, letting out all his aggression and fear toward his upcoming heart transplant. He gripped the armrest as he thumped, pushing inside her as hard as he could. Nelle moaned at every movement he made, but he could see the slight discomfort on her face from his thrusts. He grunted loudly, and pushed as deep as he could, hearing her let out a sharp moan.

“It’ll be okay,” she whispered as he leaned his head to hers.

“I really hope so, baby,” he sniffed.

A knock struck the door and it opened slightly, Nelle was getting annoyed at how many times this happened to them—especially today of all days. Kade didn’t move and pushed in deeper, not wanting to separate from her any time soon.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Corey said with a smirk as he saw their partially naked bodies on the couch. “I gotta get to school.”

“Yeah, man,” Kade nodded and looked over his shoulder. “It’s no problem. Thank you for being here.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Corey grinned. “Congrats, and I wish you the best, Kade. Please keep me up to date with everything, Nelle.”

“I will,” she nodded.

“I’d come in and give you a hug, but I really don’t want your dick to be the last thing of yours I see before the surgery,” Corey snickered.

“Fuck off,” Kade laughed.

“See you soon, man,” Corey said.

Corey still hesitated, wanting to come in and give Kade a hug goodbye. Instead, Corey’s knuckles tapped the doorframe and he smiled at them, closing the door.

“Does that mean we have to get ready, too?” Kade sighed.

“Think so,” she said and kissed him. “I’m here, okay?”

“Okay,” he whispered, feeling the cries form a lump in his throat.

-18-

Days had passed, but Nelle refused to leave Kade’s side. As he was brought into the operating room, he cried heavily, gripping onto Nelle for dear life. She tried to stay strong and keep it together, but she was terrified, too. She hated seeing how scared he was, hated knowing she couldn’t be there for him, but she knew this needed to be done.

After two days of being on breathing tubes and restraints, they took the tubes out of him so he could breathe on his own, but he still didn't wake up. The doctors didn't seem too worried about it, advising everyone that this was normal. Nelle still feared the worst.

As she curled up on a chair beside the bed, open sketchbook on her lap and her pencil case on the edge of the bed. Kade groaned softly, coughing as lightly as he could. His eyes fluttered open as he took in the room. He felt disorientated, and nausea followed next. Sweat beads formed on his forehead and he breathed deeply, feeling pressure and soreness on his chest.

Doctor Michaels and Doctor Simone warned them that he could wake up on his own from the induced sleep, or they would wake him in a couple days. The operation went well and Kade took to the new heart, his beats were normal and his blood pressure was secure. Nelle couldn't be more happy to hear the great news. Sandy and David stayed at the hospital from morning until they had to pick up Flora from school, and today of all days, was the day they decided to sleep in before joining Nelle at the hospital.

The monitor beeped rapidly as Kade tried sitting up, and that's what startled Nelle awake.

"Kade? Kade, you're awake!" She jumped up from her seat, dropping her sketchbook as she did. She quickly came to him and planted a kiss to his lips, but he didn't reciprocate and pulled away.

"Where—Nelle? Is that you? Why—what're you doing here?" Kade asked, his hoarse and groggy voice getting the better of him.

"Why wouldn't I be here?" she asked, puzzled.

"What happened? Why am I here?" He touched his head, his hand shaking on the way up.

"You had the transplant done...a-are you okay?" she worried.

"How did—why are you skinny?" he frowned giving her a once over.

"I lost it after my brother died...you know this," she said with the shake of her head.

"Your brother died?" He looked stunned.

"Kade?" she said softly as tears skimmed down her cheeks.

"Is Emily here?" he asked.

"What? No?" Nelle scoffed. "Kade? It's me...when do you think it is?"

“Good morning, dear. I got you a—Kade? Oh, sweetheart! You’re awake!” Sandy cried, placing the drinks on a table as she made her way toward the bed with David behind him.

“Hi, Mom, Dad,” Kade said, still staring at Nelle.

“I’ll go get a doctor,” David announced.

“Is Emily here?” Kade asked Sandy.

“Why would she be here? You haven’t been with her for months,” Sandy said and glanced up at Nelle as she tried to hide her crying face by nibbling on her thumbnail. “You’re with Nelle now...Nelle’s your wife.”

“My what? No, no, no, no, no, I’m seventeen! I can’t be married!” Kade raised his voice.

“Your birthday past...you married Nelle three days ago,” Sandy said. “What day do you think it is?”

“March?” Kade said. The monitor started beeping rapidly.

“Oh, no,” Sandy started. “It’s nearly November...you and Nelle have been together for a while. Moved in together after only being with one another for a little over a month—you live in the garage now, too. Your father and I fixed it up for you and you moved in around May, June. Like I told you before, you married her the day you came in for the surgery, and she hasn’t left your side since.”

“Why do we live together?” Kade asked, giving Nelle a look she knew meant it was over.

If he got his memory back then, of course, they’d be back to the way they were, but if he didn’t. Nelle knew there was no way she could live with someone who didn’t love her like he promised he would. Kade’s eyes scanned her a couple of times, trying to piece together what his mother was telling him, but the confusion and frustration in his voice proved to Nelle she had to get out of there. There wasn’t that look in his eyes of pure love and admiration anymore, there was something else entirely, and she didn’t want to stick around to find out more about it.

“It’s a long story, sweetheart, but she’s your wife—” Sandy said.

David walked back into the room with a grin, excited and happy to see his only son awake and well. Doctor Simone followed him in, taking a pen from his pocket and nodding at Nelle and Sandy.

“Well, hello, Mr. Kade. How’re you feeling?” Doctor Simone asked as he opened Kade’s chart.

“His memory is off,” Sandy said, wiping a tear from her cheek.

“That may happen,” Doctor Simone advised. “Give the drugs some time to wear off and he’ll be back to normal. Now, I need to know how you’re feeling, Kade?”

“Confused, tired...confused,” Kade said, giving Nelle a couple of glances.

As the doctor spoke, Nelle couldn’t register anything, she assumed neither could Kade as he kept glancing at her, and giving her the same look he would give her when they crossed paths in the halls at school; his curious mind at work, and her lonely heart withering away.

“I’m just going to run a couple preliminary tests—” Doctor Simone started.

“Nelle, I think you should leave,” Kade said. “This is something my family should be here for, and we barely know each other.”

“What?” Nelle said and glanced at Sandy.

“Kade, she’s your wife,” Sandy repeated.

“I don’t remember her,” Kade said, raising his heart rate. “I think you should leave!”

“Mr. Kade, I need you to relax a little,” Doctor Simone said and gawked at Nelle.

Nelle wasn’t entirely sure what to do as everyone was looking at her, so she did what she did best and planned her escape. She picked up her sketchbook from the floor and snatched her pencil case from the bed, before taking her purse with her. Broken wasn’t even the word that would explain how she felt. Everything that made her happy, couldn’t even remember a single moment of their time together. Kade watched her, his face angered yet still confused. As much as everyone was telling her she should stay, he didn’t want her there and he couldn’t understand why.

“Where’re you going?” David asked.

“I just—he’s right. I shouldn’t be here... I-I need some air,” Nelle said and briskly walked out of the room before she broke down.

“I’ll go get her,” Sandy said.

“Why?” Kade asked. “Why is she crying?”

“She’s your wife, Mr. Kade,” Doctor Simone said.

“No, she’s not,” Kade growled.

Sandy came out of the room to find Nelle walking with her head down, she didn’t even have to catch up with her to know she was crying by her hunched and shaking shoulders.

“Nelle?” Sandy called and touched her arm.

“I just want some air,” Nelle cried.

“Come back inside, sweetheart, hear what the doctor has to say,” Sandy nodded.

“He doesn’t remember me,” Nelle sniffed. “I can’t go in there and have him look at me the way he is—I’m going to head home for a little, give him his space until he remembers.”

“Don’t leave, he needs you here to *help* him remember,” Sandy said.

“I think it’s best if I do,” Nelle sniffed. “Please don’t try to change my mind.”

“Nelle,” Sandy sighed.

“I’ll visit soon,” Nelle nodded. “Let me know when he’s being discharged, too. I’d like to welcome him home.”

Nelle forced a smile at Sandy and continued down the hall to the elevator, moving around the various nurses and patients walking about. Sandy shook her head and stepped back into the room as Doctor Simone was checking Kade’s blood pressure.

“Where’s Nelle?” David asked.

“I don’t think she’ll be coming around much,” Sandy said and wiped a falling tear from her cheek.

“I didn’t mean to hurt her,” Kade said. “But Nelle and I rarely ever spoke at school, I was closer with her brother than I ever was with her. I’ve always liked her, but she never gave me the time of day...plus, I’m with Emily! Nelle shouldn’t have been here, Emily should’ve.”

“You and Emily broke up in March!” Sandy snapped. “Nelle has been with you every step of the way throughout this process. She didn’t once leave this room in the last three days! I know you can’t remember any of this, but at least a thank you to her instead of kicking her out of the room. She didn’t have to sit here, sleep in these godawful chairs, but she did!”

“Mom?” Kade frowned as Sandy let out an angered breath.

Kade may not have remembered much, but he never saw his mother this upset toward him before, not even when she caught him stealing alcohol for his friends a couple years ago.

Nelle fished her phone from her purse and immediately sent a message to Corey, letting him know that Kade was awake. Corey replied instantly and advised he’d be at the hospital right after school. Only

problem was, Nelle wouldn't be there to explain the situation to him, she'd be at her father's house debating whether or not she should guzzle down one of the half-drunk bottles that were lying around or not....

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As soon as Doctor Simone stepped out of the room to speak with Kade's parents in private, Kade took his phone out, searching for Emily's number. She wasn't in his phone, nor was she a friend on any of his social media accounts. He searched through some of his pictures and saw what everyone had been saying, him and Nelle smiling at the lens, kissing one another, and countless naked photos of her he wasn't sure if he felt right looking at. He opened the last photo on the camera roll, which happened to be the photo Sandy took of them after Nelle smothered his face in cake. Frustration hit as he tried to remember, but he couldn't, and the more he flipped through the photos, the more upset he was getting. Nelle certainly was beautiful, and the more he stared at the photos, the more he was realizing it. He must've stared at over twenty photos with absolutely no memory of them, bothering him even more...the next photo was her smiling face again, which caused him to smile as she covered her eyes with her hands. He felt guilty staring at this photo as she sat there on his bed completely naked, her large breasts perfectly captured. He analyzed the photo for a moment, looking at her smile, her thin body, and staring at those breasts he couldn't remember ever touching. He dropped his phone on his lap and pinched his eyes together, trying his hardest to remember any piece of Nelle, but nothing, absolutely nothing, came to mind.

-19-

"Knock, knock," Corey said and poked his head into Kade's room.

"Hey, man," Kade said and pushed himself up a little.

"I'll go get something to drink," Sandy smiled. "Give you boys a moment before your father comes back with Flora."

Corey smiled at Sandy as she squeezed his arm, and closed the door behind her. He scanned the room quickly, looking for Nelle as he made his way next to Kade.

"How're you doing?" Corey asked.

"Sore, but it's expected," Kade chuckled.

"Where's Nelle? I told her I'd be here after school," Corey said and looked around again.

“People keep telling me that, but I don’t remember anything from March on. Fuck, the last thing I remember is getting into an argument with Emily over not wanting to go over to her place in the middle of the night—and now everyone is telling me I’m married to Nelle! Everything is so overwhelming, I just want some peace and quiet so I can try to remember what they’ve been telling me,” Kade scoffed.

Corey took out his phone and sent a message to Nelle, wanting to know where she was and worried that she would undo the months of change that Kade had done to her. It was truly nice to see her smile after everything everyone at school always put her through and after everything she’d been through.

Hey, where are you? Corey sent.

Nelle was in a warm bath at her father’s house, having smoked nearly eight cigarettes since she got in the bath. She took a couple shots when she arrived at the house and tried to get some sleep in her bed, but nothing worked. She thought perhaps cleaning the house would help, and that didn’t either. When she got in the bath, the hot water washed over her and gave her a calming feeling, only for a moment, before her mind took over again.

She took her phone from the side of the bath and put the cigarette in her mouth.

Home. Don’t ask anything other than that. If you’re with Kade, you’ll know why I’m not there, she sent and exhaled the smoke from her nostrils.

You should be here, help him remember, Corey wrote.

Why? He’s the one who asked me to leave. It’s better this way, she sent.

Corey didn’t want to ask her more than that, he knew if he did, he could only imagine what she would be feeling on the other end of this phone. He sighed and put his phone in his pocket, looking up at Kade as he draped his arm over his forehead.

“I don’t know what to say.” Corey shook his head. “Did you look through your phone? You guys have pictures and videos of one another. Maybe that’ll help you remember.”

“I’ve looked at some of them, but there’re naked pictures of her, it didn’t feel right to look at more than that,” Kade said. “I feel like I should talk to her, but I don’t know where to start.”

“You know how much you’ve help her the last few months,” Corey started. “When you broke up with Emily, you were so much happier and I don’t know what you and Greg spoke about, but whatever

he said made you finally grow a pair and try to ask Nelle out—then he died, and she shut down. Lost all her weight over the summer, but even then you still tried to contact her...you have to try to remember, because I'm scared she might do something to herself if you don't. You're all she has left, y'know."

"What do you mean?" Kade frowned.

"After Greg died, they sold their house, her mom left, her dad moved into a place on Stillview and became an alcoholic-slash-drug addict, and well, Nelle put him in rehab. If it wasn't for you, she'd be by herself, and a broken girl alone with her own thoughts is not something to take lightly," Corey explained.

"What did she say when you messaged her?" Kade asked, feeling entirely bad for Nelle.

"She doesn't really see a reason to be here if you don't know who the heck she is," Corey said. "I don't want to upset you more than you probably already are...you're awake and the operation worked, this is what should matter now."

Kade couldn't help but to want to know more about Nelle, why she wasn't here if everyone claimed she was his wife...then she should be here, but after his outburst this morning, he somewhat understood. He tried to imagine what she was going through, but all that came back to him was seeing her beautiful crying face this morning, and how utterly bad he felt.

-20-

Nearly a week had gone by, and Nelle would visit Kade every day, but never enter his room. She'd sit out in the hall and wait until Sandy stepped out, and she'd ask how he was—or until a nurse walked by. Nelle had gone into the room, but only when he was asleep, just to sit there and look at him for a moment, wondering why he couldn't remember her.

She stayed at her father's house, keeping it tidy and attempting to keep herself together in the process. School didn't come easy for her that week, and she tried to get up and go multiple times, just to distract the voices in her head, but she never ended up going. Corey came to visit her twice, and every time he did, he saw how deteriorated she was getting. He could tell she wasn't eating, he could smell the cigarettes she smoked, and see the hurt in her eyes. He said nothing, just made sure she was still

alive and left. Kade explained to Corey all of Nelle's secrets when she came to school with a bruised nose, he told him about her starvation after her brother died, he explain her parents, and worst of all, he explained what her father did to her and why her nose looked the way it did. Corey didn't judge, he just felt sorry for Nelle, and hated himself for treating her the way he did. It truly made him appreciate the friendship they had now.

*

Nelle was lying on the floor in the living room with nothing on but her bra and underwear, getting lost in the bizarre pattern of the stucco ceiling as the ashes from her cigarette decorated her stomach. She'd do that a lot, trying to find new ways of passing the time since they cut her cable bill from lack of payment, and she already got the call that they'd cut her electricity if she didn't pay by the end of the month—of course, she wouldn't. Nelle had no money other than the money she stashed in the underwear drawer she and Kade shared. This was her father's house, if they lost it, then so be it.

Her phone bill cut out too—forgetting to pay it since the fiasco after her birthday—only reason she believed Corey would visit. She didn't care that she didn't have a phone, she had no one to talk to and let the phone die out. As long as she had her cigarettes and her sketchpad, there wasn't anything else she needed—other than Kade, but he had no idea the life they shared together.

The doorbell rang, startling her, and she blinked a couple of times coming out of her trance. She rolled over and got to her knees, wiping away the ashes from her stomach as she took another drag of the cigarette and put it out. Another ring echoed, and she groaned, making her way to the door.

Corey stood on the other side of it, raising his eyebrows at her with panic and worry.

"Jesus, Nelle, we've been trying to get a hold of you for three days!" Corey scoffed.

"They cut my phone, I told you this," she said and squinted from the brightness of the sun.

"Kade's coming home today," Corey said, putting his hands in his pockets.

"Oh?" Nelle nodded. "Well, that's—that's good."

“Think you should be there,” he went on, giving her thin body a once over.

“Question is, would he even *want* me there,” Nelle said.

“Of course, he would want you there,” he sighed.

“Kade’s old heart maybe, but this new one doesn’t like me very much,” she said, feeling her lower lip quivering.

“Go get changed, I’m bringing you to him,” Corey ordered.

“I think I just want to go back to sleep,” she said and started closing the door.

“Nelle, c’mon, it’s Kade we’re talking about here. Your husband,” he said and pushed the door open as she made her way to her room. He followed with determination in his step.

“Corey,” she said as he stood in her doorway, trying his hardest not to check her out. “Does he even want me there?”

“Everyone wants you there, and I really think you should be there. We miss you, I’m sure Kade does, too,” he said. “Now, get dressed, put a smile on that pretty face of yours and let’s give him the welcome home he deserves.”

She sighed again, and looked at Corey’s desperate face. She knew she had to be there, it was only right that she was. She nodded slowly, and grabbed one of her shirt dresses from the accent chair in the corner of her room. He watched as she dressed and picked up her purse from the top of her dresser, anxious for her to get to her real home.

“I have my dad’s car, I can take—”

“No, I’m driving,” Corey said and made his way out of her room.

He rushed down the hall to the front door, looking back at Nelle as she fixed her hair into a high ponytail. She grinned and grabbed her keys from the hook, locking the door securely before they got into Corey’s car. Nerves struck Nelle, but she was too tired to even begin to muster up any emotions. It was definitely going to be one interesting day.

*

Nelle sat in Corey’s car, as he leaned on the hood, waiting for Sandy and David to drive in with Kade. They advised him they would be there by nine in the morning, and it was already pushing ten. Nelle was starting to get restless, and the urge to smoke was taking over but she had smoked her last cigarette when Corey arrived that morning.

David’s minivan pulled into the driveway, and Corey shot up from his hood, looking back at Nelle. She still didn’t get out of the car,

watching distantly as David opened the backdoor and helped Kade out of his seat. Flora skipped out the other side, holding flowers and balloons that were crowding up his room.

Kade nodded at Corey and put his head down, as his father helped him walk into the garage. Sandy made her way to Corey and spotted Nelle in the passenger's seat, instant tears fell from her eyes as she looked to her.

Nelle got out of the car and shrugged a shoulder at Sandy, hating how she cut them all out of her life the last week because of her own selfish insecurities.

"Oh, Nelle, I'm so happy you're here!" Sandy said and brought Nelle into a hug.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here more," Nelle said.

"Please, you're here now," Sandy said, her face growing wary as she studied Nelle, seeing the worry and starvation she was putting herself through. "He'll be happy to see you."

"Let's go in," Corey grinned.

Sandy put her arm around Nelle's shoulders and led her inside, Corey right behind them.

"I don't know if I can," Nelle said softly.

"Yes, you can," Sandy smiled.

"It'll be alright, Nelle," Corey added.

David guided Kade onto the bed and he sat back, David made sure to adjust his pillows accordingly. Flora was placing the balloons and flowers in the living area of Kade's room, she was ecstatic that her brother was finally home.

"You alright?" David asked.

"Yeah, I got it," Kade said.

"Nelle!" Flora exclaimed, giving Nelle a hug. Nelle smiled and kissed the top of Flora's head. "I'm so happy you're here. I've missed you so much."

"Hi," Nelle chuckled nervously and glanced up at Kade. "I missed you, too."

Kade's face lit up when he saw Nelle, his eyes shimmered with tears, but they could be for absolutely any reason and she didn't want to look at him any longer, for she would start crying, too.

"Do you need anything?" David asked Kade.

"No, I'm good," Kade nodded, keeping his eyes on Nelle.

“I’ll head inside and make us some breakfast,” Sandy said.

“Can I help?” Flora asked. “I want to crack the eggs.”

“Always, my love,” Sandy grinned.

“Corey, I need your help with some bags in the van,” David said, raising his eyebrows at Corey.

“Yeah, of course,” Corey said and nodded at Kade.

“I’ll, just, um,” Nelle said and scratched at the back of her head. “I think I’ll get out of your hair. Let you guys have your welcome home thing—”

“No, don’t go,” Flora whined.

“I think we should talk, Nelle,” Kade said.

Sandy nodded at Nelle and took Flora’s hand as they made their way to the house, Corey and David followed them, giving Kade and Nelle their much needed time alone to fix whatever it was that broke.

“It’s good you’re doing well, Kade. And, um, welcome home,” Nelle said, taking a small step back, knowing all she had to do was walk out that door and she wouldn’t feel so awkward.

“You can come sit down,” he said and tapped the bed.

“I don’t know if I should,” she said quietly.

“You should,” he said and tapped again.

Nelle looked back at the open door and hesitantly made her way to the bed they shared many nights in together. All week she hurt herself by telling herself over and over again not even the one person who swore to love her unconditionally for the rest of their lives couldn’t even do that. She made herself believe she wasn’t worth it anymore, she was worthless, and no one would ever love her again...she hesitated because she feared he would tell her it was truly over. She took a shaky breath and sat down, gazing at him and wondering what on earth was circling his mind.

“Sorry that I wasn’t in the room with you every day,” she said.

“My mom told me you *were* there every day, and you sat outside my room until visiting hours were over, and did the same thing the next day...why did you stop? I tried to find you the last couple days, but you weren’t there,” Kade said.

“I don’t know,” she said, feeling the lump grow in her throat. “I felt like I lost you...those three days you were asleep I imagined what it would be like when you work up—and when you did wake up and didn’t

kiss me back or didn't want me there, I felt so hurt like you were just another person in my life who stopped caring for me."

"You did lose me, but only for a little bit. I didn't know anything before March, and even when I looked at pictures of us, I couldn't remember," Kade said. "I'm not all there yet, but I do remember bits and pieces of us."

"Bits and pieces," she repeated under her breath.

"Can you look at me?" he asked.

She sighed and looked over at him, the bags under her eyes were dark, her cheeks were sunken in more than they used to be. Nelle didn't look good, and it scared Kade quite a bit. He could only imagine what she was going through alone, what thoughts were clouding her mind, and he hated that he didn't remember anything enough to help her.

"I think I want to go home," she sniffed.

"You are home," he whispered.

"Kade," she sighed and wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"You're my wife, you moved in after what your father did to your face. I asked you to marry me on your eighteenth birthday, and we did get married, right before this new heart. I remember what's important, Nelle. I remember your laugh, your perfect smile. The way your toes curl when I touch you. I remember us, baby. Not all of it, but enough to know that I hate that you let yourself suffer because you thought you lost me. I told you, I'm in this for the long run, and no defected heart was going to stop me. You're it for me, and I hope I'm still it for you."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there," she said and buried her face in her hands as she started weeping.

Kade groaned as he pushed himself off the bed, making his way over and sitting right beside her. He pulled her into him, and kissed her head as many times as he could.

"Look at me," he said softly.

"No," she cried.

"Baby," he said and lifted her chin.

He kissed her as soon as their eyes met, the passion he exuded as the weeks of missing her smile every morning, her chuckle every time he hugged her for no reason, and her insatiable moans every time they made love.

"I missed you," she whispered.

“I didn’t know it, but believe me, I missed the shit out of you,” he sniffed. “Please tell me you’re home? I can’t lose you, and I won’t let you stay at your dad’s...please, baby, because I need you so damn much.”

“I feel like such an asshole for leaving in the first place,” she sniffed.

“Everyone understood,” he said and kissed her lips once more.

“Are you okay?” she asked, eyeing the bandages behind his partially zipped hoodie. “What did the doctor say?”

“I’m fine, baby,” he grinned, thumbing a tear from her cheek. “Doctor said I just have to take it easy, can’t drive, can’t lift anything too heavy, gotta keep the incision clean—you can help me shower and stuff—keep up with my meds, there’s some physical therapy they want me to do, just to keep me in shape and work out my heart the right way...we can have sex whenever you’re ready, as long as there isn’t much pressure on my chest. He said I have to be rested and not doing too much work during the day before we can have sex, and, again, as long as you’re okay with it. I don’t think we’ll be back to our usual craziness just yet, but as long as we’re back to being us again, that’s all I care about.”

“When’s your next checkup?” she asked.

“My mom has it written down,” he said, studying her exhausted face. “Are you okay? I can taste that you’re smoking again.”

“Found a couple packs at my dad’s and couldn’t help myself under the stress I put myself in,” she admitted. “I would’ve been so easy to lose it, too. He has so much alcohol in that house, it’s ridiculous.”

“Did you drink?” he asked.

“I tried, if I’m being honest. I just wanted the fucking overthinking to stop, but I really don’t like it, so I opted for smoking like I’m used to,” she said. “I smoked my last one this morning when Corey picked me up.”

“Have you been eating?” he asked already knowing the answer.

“If I said yes, would you believe me?”

“No,” he said.

“I didn’t.” She shrugged.

“I can tell,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” she sniffed.

“Don’t be sorry,” he chuckled. “I hurt you, even though I didn’t want to and it was out of my hands. I did, and I get that you shut down

whenever you're hurt, but it's your turn to get help. I want you healthy, I want you having your periods again because what's going on, isn't right."

"Yeah, I know," she nodded.

"Because I do want kids one day, and if you don't fix your eating habits, then I don't think we'd be able to," he said.

"One step at a time," she chuckled.

"I'm serious, Nelle," he said.

"I know, I'll figure something out, I promise you," she said.

"Can you do it soon? I know I have a new heart and all, but I don't know how long this will last, and who knows, in five, maybe ten years from now, maybe I won't be around and I want to know that you're healthy, and I want to know that our kids will have their mom there to help them."

"I will," she sniffed. "But I don't think having kids is a good idea."

"Why? It's not because of the weight gain, is it?"

"It has a factor to do with it, but we're also still in high school, we have no money, no job—are you still going to college?" she said.

"I am. Just gotta submit my applications," he said. "I want to do this, Nelle. And I'm hoping you'll be on board with me."

"Where did this come from?" she asked.

"Hearing the doctor talk about life after the transplant. I want to talk more about this, when we don't have people waiting on us and we can lay out all the cards on the table," he nodded. "Please do this with me."

"I'm scared," she whispered.

"You don't have to be...I love you," he smiled. Nelle started crying again, wanting to hear him say that for so long, dreaming of the day he'd remember her. "Hey, baby?"

"I love you, too," she nodded, kissing his lips softly.

"Hey?" Corey said, popping his head into the garage. "Good to see you two all happy again...need help inside, big man?"

"Yeah," Kade chuckled and licked his lips. "Come in for breakfast?"

"Sure," she smiled, taking Kade's hand so he could stand.

Corey came to Kade's aid as well, gripping his arm so he was steady on his feet. Kade took to the transplant very well, but he was still weakened by the process and would sometimes get dizzy, the doctors

advised this was nothing to worry about and that it would be gone when he fully recovered.

“I’m alright,” Kade said.

“Just slow like an old man,” Corey laughed.

“Fuck off,” Kade laughed as well.

Nelle placed her purse onto the bed and looked around the room she shared with Kade. Sandy must’ve come in and cleaned it for them, the place was spotless and the scent of lemons still lingered in there air. She felt like she missed out on so much by leaving, but she didn’t see a reason to stay, not after feeling like she didn’t belong—even though she knew deep down she should’ve, at the time, it didn’t feel right.

-21-

Kade fell asleep sometime after breakfast, leaving Nelle alone in the room with her thoughts. It was nice having breakfast with her family again, she ate very little, but she ate all the same. Everyone smiled at the table, not a single one of them asked where she was or why she didn’t come home. They knew the pain Nelle must’ve gone through and left it at that. The struggle was over, it was finally time for them to smile. Sandy, David, and Flora went out after breakfast, to fill the fridge with food Kade would be able to eat. Corey left as well, saying he didn’t want to impose on the catching up Nelle and Kade had to do and would be by later on this evening for dinner. Nelle didn’t realize how being out of touch with the family for nearly a week and a half truly put a damper in what the family life changed into.

As quietly as she could, she undressed and got into the shower, feeling the stress of everything going on release from her. Seeing Kade’s face when he woke up and not be happy to see her, kept replaying in her mind. Seeing the anger ooze out of him when he asked her to leave still lingered and she hated that feeling. He may have remembered her now, but the hurt she went through would never go away.

Wrapping the towel around her, she emerged from the washroom to find Kade sitting up in bed and glancing over at her with a grin.

“Hey,” he said. “Wondering where you ran off to.”

“All my girly shampoo is here, been using old spice all week when I showered,” she chuckled.

“That’s why you smelt like another man,” he let out a short laugh.

“I would never cheat on you,” she frowned.

“I was just teasing,” he smirked.

“How’re you feeling?” she asked.

“Perfectly fine,” he smiled, giving her a once over. “Wanna try a little something?”

He sat back and moved the covers off his legs to reveal his growing manhood in his sweatpants. Nelle blushed and put her head down with a chuckle. The way they used to go at it, having not been able to touch him was absolutely killing her, and she could only imagine what he must’ve felt like.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” she said and bit her lip.

“Baby, I’ve wanted nothing more than to fuck you since I was fully awake...please?” he said and pushed his sweatpants down to touch himself. “Don’t make me beg, and don’t make me finish myself off.”

Nelle let the towel drop to the floor and crawled onto the bed, straddling Kade as he let out a moan. She leaned forward and kissed him, wary not to touch his chest as she did. He didn’t even wait until she was in the right position; he forced himself inside her and let out an audible sigh of relief.

She rocked steadily, being sure not to over work him. She was still unsure on what he could and couldn’t take. Before she even had a chance to start moaning and get into it, Kade squeezed her thighs and grunted, shaking slightly under her.

“That was fast,” she chuckled.

“It’s been a while,” he said and let out a few deep breaths.

“You’re okay? No pain or anything?” she worried.

“I’m good, baby,” he grinned.

She slowly got off him and grabbed the towel from the ground to clean him from her before getting back into bed and resting her head to his shoulder. He kissed her forehead and held her, vaguely remembering the countless nights they would spend in bed together, talking about everything and nothing at all.

“You know I didn’t cum,” she chuckled.

“I know, I’m sorry,” he laughed. “Give me a couple minutes, and I’m sure I’ll be able to go again, and make sure you cum this time.”

“How did your memories of us come back?” she asked, wondering why it left in the first place. “I should’ve asked before, but I didn’t know if I wanted to know.”

“Everyone kept telling me to look at pictures of us from my phone, and I did, but nothing really sparked anything—and I couldn’t get further than the first few because it didn’t feel right looking at naked pictures of you when I couldn’t remember anything we did together.”

“I hope no one else saw those,” she blushed.

“Corey might’ve sneaked a peek, but if he did, then he saw my dick, too,” Kade chuckled. “Have to admit, there was one afternoon I was alone and tried looking at our pictures, and came across a video. We weren’t doing anything but talking. You were holding a sheet to your chest and trying to get me to focus on some assignment...the video led to us having sex...and the more I watched it, the more I realized I had to jerking it...it was really funny having the heart monitor start going off from my elevated heart rate.”

“Even without remembering me you touched yourself to me?” she giggled.

“I told you I always liked you, and just seeing the pictures of us together, the texts we sent to each other—fuck, the naked pictures alone proved enough that we were a couple of some sort—it took me almost the week before I started remembering you, and when I did, I tried to call you, but your phone was disconnected and I swore I lost you, I thought you finally left like you said you were always going to do when you turned eighteen. I know someone sent you money...I think it was your Aunt...that’s where I thought you went. My mom tried to find you, and went to your dad’s house a couple of times, but you weren’t there. I really thought you weren’t going to be here either when I was discharged, you have no idea how happy I was when I saw you.”

“How much of us do you remember?” she asked.

“Enough to know how much I love you,” he said, softly.

Nelle took a breath and lifted the covers over them. There was a lot to think about, and the endless research she did when she was alone at her dad’s bungalow was enough for her to know that even with a new heart, they didn’t have much time together.

“Then let’s do it,” she said and looked up at him.

“Do what?” he asked, moving some of her wet hair out of the way.

“I’ll find myself a doctor and fix myself so we can start having babies,” she chuckled.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said as he turned her over and kissed her.

The happiness that spread to his face was something she’d never seen before, and she couldn’t wait for it to be there permanently. Nelle was swimming through dangerous waters, but she honestly didn’t care. For once, it was her turn to carve her own path of happiness, and she was going to do it with the only person who ever showed her any love. Nelle was getting her happy ending.



BLOCKED
ALYSSA MILANI



CHAPTER EIGHT
BLOCKED

Emppty.

That's the feeling. The utter sense of being devoid of all light. All thoughts. All willingness to learn and grow. Empty like the day you were born. Blinking silently to the rhythm of your quickened breaths. Everything is white, crisp, and clean. Slate ready for you, and yet it's still empty. The thoughts don't come, the cursors don't move. You're just empty. Floating through life and waiting for something to happen. But it never really does, does it? No. The emptiness grows the more you stare, the more they stare at you, too. They sit and watch. Mock you and your emptiness. The weight sinks in, sinks deep within until you force a feeling. Force a thought. And still, even after the tears fall, you're empty. There is no light at the end of the tunnel, no glow in the dark, no wind to clear the fog. It's you alone walking into the emptiness with no vision of clarity, no planned step. Just movement and patience. The more you

walk through the fog, the more alone you feel. There's no paranoia that someone's watching, no hair on the back of your neck rising. When all the lights go out you don't sense fear, the glow in the dark doesn't come, but that soothes you because it fills your void. Your eyes are open but they feel closed. The dark clouds you like a veil, blocking you from opening your thoughts. The clarity isn't coming either, even the tunnel is dark. As dark as the forest you're walking through, as dark as the missing glow you long for. The darkness feeds your emptiness, feeding it when it should be nurturing it. Inspiring it. Guiding it. But the good is there, the good is real. The emptiness is real. All you have to do is attack the void, attack the emptiness, and you'll finally be free.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Alyssa Milani is a Canadian author who studied at Concordia University obtaining a Major in Creative Writing and Minor in English Literature.

She independently published her first novel in 2014 of all the works that she wrote during her years in University. She now has nine independently published novels under her belt, with many more to come. She lives with her husband and their children in the outskirts of Montreal.

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