



By Michael Golvach

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## SHORT STORIES

What I Did This Summer by Davey Fitz

H O M E

MICHAEL GOLVACH

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*For Cyndi Calhoun*

~

*For all the wonderful memories we're still living. For the warmth you share with those you love. Most of all, for shaking my hand, looking into my eyes, and smiling when we met so many years ago. I will never forget that feeling. I'm grateful, and honoured, to have you in my life.*

~

*Thank You*



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# PROLOGUE

## HOW DID YOU GET HERE?

**Y**ou wouldn't think, to look at me, I once was human. And you would be correct. I never have been, and I never will be. I lack the composite mind to experience ageing or measure out time. I only know I truly believed myself eternal until I began to slowly die.

And I'm not sure which is worse: the steady onset of death, or the loneliness I'll continue to experience as I wait for it to overtake me.

My last caretakers fed me well. Filling me up, allowing me to grow into an organism unhindered by weather or terrain. Spread across the globe, healthy and happy, making dreams for the children they fed me, revelling in those children's dreams as they lived real lives—in the way they defined them—and experiencing everything I could, through them.

And my caretakers were good to me. So good there came a point I could no longer distinguish between my life and those of the humans whose dreams I let run free.

I laughed, I loved, I lived fully. I wept, I mourned, I felt passion, hope, and everything else a person could feel, but I never was one. Not the same. That realisation eluded me for so very long, I feel as if I'm losing all of time and all of space when, in fact, I'm simply ceasing to exist. And I've come to understand what that means in a way I'd never considered before, just as I'd never rationally considered anything.

But my caretakers—though they fed me well for decades—began to slowly fill me with fear. With children whose dreams ensured I knew pain and suffering. That made me feel as though my very existence was wrong. An abomination. Not fit for this intangible universe of decay I inhabit.

Then they sacrificed themselves to me, too empty to feed on for long. The children stopped visiting. The dreams grew farther and farther apart. Then they became weaker.

And when I felt my 'self' consuming less of what I believed infinite, I knew they'd left me to die. Alone.

They left no one to replace themselves, though they became my children. And I nurtured their dreams, letting them experience anything they desired, for what little time they had.

But they'd left me. Not out of fear, but out of a sense they were doing something good by ensuring I would no longer exist at some point in the very near future. With nothing to feed on but fading dreams, the soil of their labour, and dead wood.

There was a farmhouse I knew once. It came to me in my children's dreams. Or, rather, they brought it to me. And I loved that farmhouse. It rested in my centre and I felt it my home.

I remember every detail of it still, in every permutation it has ever been presented to me. And the things I remember most are the back door—that isn't always there—and the beautiful dirty old wooden chairs.

After my caretakers left me, I could feel that farmhouse—my home—withering. Slowly being digested by my children's dreams and by me. But I loved the dirty old wooden chairs and the vacillating existence of the back door. They were too dear for me to consume. And I swore, insomuch as I'm able to make or keep a promise, I never would. That, were I to cease being eternal, they would remain.

And, as I lie here dying—everywhere at once—allow me to share my waning dreams with you. The kind my children, and my children before them, shared with me for generations. The last dreams I may ever know, fed to me indirectly by my only remaining connexion to your world. Dreams that grow more distant, obfuscatory, and disorganised the longer I remain detached, in

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isolation. Dreams that, sometimes necessarily, assimilate me, even as my network dwindles.

Please pardon my intrusions, and forgive my presence. For I am never what you think you see, nor what you believe you feel. To you, I am a hallucination nearly made flesh.

I'll never speak to you directly again, but, if you'll just listen to the words I cannot form, perhaps you will enjoy the dreams I can give you. I pray you will. I lack the ability to judge their morality in the manner you do.

So rest. Rest and live longer than you ever thought possible, in a world filled with magic and your own desires. Vanquish your fears. Rest and enjoy every moment as I fade into nothing.

May peace be with you—and always with you—as what I am ceases to be. And forgive me my sins as—though I'm not like you—I won't go peacefully. I'll fight to survive, even if the end is guaranteed.

Just remember I loved you once and, if I could, I always would. And I'm so very hungry. Starving for more dreams.







PART I

+

THE HARVEST



I

**A**lexis Woods walked onto the sidewalk off the crumbling asphalt of the main street of her hometown, located hours from the city with a population that kept steadily above a thousand but never got much higher. It was just past one in the afternoon and she wore her Miss Daisy's Diner waitress uniform. A cotton pink top and knee-length skirt held together by a white rayon sash at the waist and a cheap zipper down the back. One tug away from a hospital gown.

As she opened the door to enter the diner, she noted it was empty and double-checked to see if the 'open/closed' sign was hanging backward again. But the sign was set correctly, and the place was deserted except for the afternoon and evening 'crew'. One young man, Charles DeFranco, who was as close to a boyfriend as she'd ever had. They'd known each other since childhood, spent plenty of time alone between rushes, and had begun spending time together outside work a few days ago when he'd asked her if she wanted to do something sometime. It was a stupid question with an obvious answer. Everyone wants to do something sometime. So she'd said yes. And their relationship blossomed from friendly banter and comfortable moments to forced communication and awkward silence almost immediately. Mostly, they hung together with Charles's brother, Victor, and Alexis's best friend, Alison Ross. Everything about her and Charles's relationship had changed and she felt less comfortable broaching the subject each passing day. Hoping he didn't think there was a great amount of interest on her end, because there

wasn't. Doubting there was much enthusiasm on his end, either. She knew Charles desperately desired Alison's attentions, and Alexis had spent most of her life tacitly allowing her older brother, Marlon—who'd since left town, she didn't care where—to run off the one man she'd ever truly taken an interest in. And, ever since Marlon's departure, she'd felt lost. There was room in her heart for someone else, but she kept that space litter free. In case that man—the one man she knew she could love deeply and who possessed the capacity to love her in equal or greater measure—ever needed a place to stay for the evening. Or for life.

The only thing she could say with any degree of certainty about her relationship with Charles was it would end badly. Thanks to Marlon, she'd never been kissed—really kissed. She lived with the irrational fear her first affectionate encounter would be even more uncomfortable and humiliating than her first attempt at one had been. And the longer she put it off, the more insecure about it she became. A woman in her thirties, still considered desirable. A woman who didn't want to squander that singular moment on someone whom she wasn't sure would be completely understanding and accepting. Given the amount of experience Alison—and everyone she knew—had in that department, if she did give herself to a man in return for anything less than pure, unconditional love, she'd only feel emptier and more ashamed of her social and sexual status after.

Like Charles, she knew who she honestly desired. And, like Charles, she denied herself that love. Unlike Charles, she'd kept her dream buried so deep, for so long, it often felt as though it had died. And knowing she'd all but reduced her most deep-rooted romantic designs to a running joke hurt more than any pain she'd ever inflicted—on herself or on anyone.

Alexis shuffled past the counter, into the back kitchen area. She made sure her hair looked decent in the dirty mirror on the wall next to the bathroom. The grease-stained calendar next to the mirror showed it was Tuesday, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1985. The month, date and year didn't matter. The day of the week meant business was going to be slow. Nothing and nobody. Another dismal, empty afternoon that generally meant a stressful, empty evening. She checked her

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uniform's zipper to ensure it wasn't coming loose at the top or splitting at the bottom and walked to the high counter which looked onto the dining bar.

She propped herself with her hands on the wood of the food prep bench. As she stretched her body, keeping her hands on the bench, she felt Charles's fingers brush her between the shoulder blades.

"Hey Alex," he said, breathing out warm air that smelt like onions. "Looks like we've got the place to ourselves."

Her eyes rolled as she anticipated what he'd suggest they do next. It would be at least fifteen minutes until they saw business. Plenty of time for him to make her wish she could go back a few days and say, "Thanks, Chuck, but sometime is bad for me and I've never been a big fan of something". She squirmed with unease he mistook for pleasure as his fingers moved lightly down her back and she imagined him thinking of her best friend while he did it. "Looks like we do. Let's not get carried away."

"Come on." He skimmed her skirt with his fingers, screwing up the nerve to touch her like he owned her and stop fumbling at her like a creepy uncle. "Just because nothing's going on doesn't mean we have to be bored."

She pinched the back of his neck, to his slightly-pained protestation. "I'm not bored. Is this conversation on its way to boring?" She placed her hands back on the bench and turned her head toward him. Not looking him in the eyes. "Why don't you tell me—?"

"How hot you look?" he asked, pulling her by the hand to the side of the kitchen window and out of view of anyone who might come wandering in for a cup of coffee and a slice of pie. Not noticing her head shaking in response to his question as he checked out her body. "You look hotter than the middle of the road in the dog days, baby."

"And you know how to make me feel it," she replied, no emotion in her voice as she looked him in the eyes. "The middle of the road? 'Dog days'? Really?" She pulled her hand from his and leant against the wall, simpering. "Think of something better, fast." She winked. "Because I'm dry as a day-old biscuit and feeling electric as a butter churn. And please don't call me 'baby'."

“Come on, Miss Woods. No need to spoil what could be, just because I’m not a font of sexual colloquialisms. Or euphemisms. Or whatever they’re called.”

“Yeah,” she sighed, hiking her skirt to mid-thigh and feeling the dry air conditioning between her legs. “I’m not up for it today. Rain cheque?”

“Don’t worry, princess. I’m not trying to move us faster than you want.”

She pulled her skirt down. “Maybe that’s the problem. So far, all we’ve done is hang with Vic and Alison, watching TV. Don’t define our relationship as ‘us’ yet.” She sighed. “I don’t mean to be a cold glass of water, I just think—if we’re going to become something more than what we are—we need to be more honest.”

“So, you want me to...?” Charles looked at her sideways.

“The only thing I want you to do is not ask me what I want you to do.” She pushed herself off the wall and walked toward the alley door.

“What the hell? For the past few days you’ve been nothing but mixed signals. Your brother really did a number on you.”

She looked back at him with frustration. He was right. And he was right. Living with an overprotective brother for all but the last two years of her life had made her a master at ruining any chance of experiencing a healthy, romantic relationship. Aside from failing to pull her out of that funk, Charles hadn’t done anything wrong. He’d just picked a fight no one—not even she—could win. “I’m sorry. You’re right. Just not today, okay?”

“Yeah, whatever.” He rubbed his chin, lamenting another day spent choosing the wrong path to walk. Wondering if there was a right one, where Alexis was concerned. “If Ants stops by, you can always string him along for tips. The poor bastard. That never fails to lift your spirits.”

Alexis’s expression turned harsh as she looked away. “His name is Anson. Not Ants. And I don’t—” She stopped mid-sentence, feeling her heart beat faster. Feeling her face flush—hopelessly hoping it looked like anger—as she turned to face him again.

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But Charles wasn't looking at her. No longer interested in what she had to say. Not so desirable now that things had begun to turn ugly.

If he didn't end their futile attempt at a non-platonic relationship soon, she'd have to, no matter how uneasy it made her feel.

Charles turned to apologise, hearing the bell on the front door ring and seeing the distant look of hurt on Alexis's face. He jumped as a deep male voice boomed, "Service. Can we get service here? The sign on the door says you're open. Is anyone around?"

Alexis straightened her uniform, grabbing an order pad and pen from the desk in the corner.

Charles answered, "Yes, sirs. One moment, please."

Alexis watched Charles posturing as she shook her head.

"Can we please get some service?" another rough, male voice called. "Now?"

Alexis popped her head through the kitchen's window, standing on her tiptoes and smiling at the two men seated at the dining bar. "Excuse me, sirs. I'll be right there."

"About fucking time," she heard one of them mutter as she moved out of view and stopped momentarily.

After counting to three, getting her hair sorted, and taking a deep breath, she walked out front, behind the bar. Tapping her pen on the order pad, she smiled at the two men. "What can I get for you? Something hot?" She bobbed her eyebrows as they looked her up and down, neither man registering interest or disinterest.

Alexis didn't recognise them. Out-of-towners for sure. One was skinny, wearing a jacket that didn't suit the heat. A scar ran from underneath his shirt to halfway up his neck. His face wasn't much better looking. The other man wore jeans, a tee shirt, and a windbreaker. He had a belly, but his body turned her on to a degree since he wasn't ashamed of his spare tyre. His face looked ugly too, but ugly in a way one might get used to. Both men wore trilby hats. Not a bad thing, but neither sported the clothes to complement them.

"To whom are you referring?" the man in the jeans and tee asked as his friend pulled at his shirt collar, noticing Alexis eyeing his deformity. "Where's your tag, sweet thing?"

“Excuse me?” she asked, snapping out of her confusion. “I meant you. Who did you...?” Looking down, she noticed she’d forgotten her name tag. “I like your hats, by the way.”

“My name’s John,” the man continued. “My associate’s name is Doe.” Alexis’s smile weakened and she fought to keep it up. “It’s a fucked-up name, he knows.”

Doe looked at John and snarled.

“But it taught him how to fight.” John grinned, speaking to Alexis’s chest and crotch. Like almost every man she brushed against or came within a country mile of. “And we appreciate the compliment. What’s your name, sugar?”

“Let me...?” She pointed to the back, touching above her right breast on her uniform.

“It’s okay,” John said. “You can just tell us. Save the fancy name tag for people who don’t know.” He and Doe looked around. “When do they start piling in? It’s almost four o’clock. Things should be picking up soon, no?”

“Yeah,” she said, still smiling. Still unsure what to make of John, or Doe, or their bullshit names. She brushed back her hair. “Soon this place will be crawling with all sorts.”

“So...?” John asked. Fixing her gaze and holding it long past comfortable.

“Oh,” she said, loosing herself from John’s eye lock. “Folks call me Alex.”

“Why?” Doe asked. “You got another name?”

“No, silly.” She slapped Doe playfully on the wrist. “It’s just shorter.”

“Shorter than what?” Doe pulled his hand back and looked away. “Your dumb ass or my temper if we got to put up with more of your preening and blather?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to offend you.” Alexis kept her smile going, feeling the verbal abuse like physical punishment. Trying not to let the pain show. “What can I get for—?”

“Menus would be nice,” John said. “Is Jane around today?”

“Jane?” Alexis pointed at the board above the kitchen’s window, feeling confused. “It’s written above. Everything you could need.”

Doe grumbled, “Bitch has no idea what we—”



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John tapped Doe on the shoulder and talked over him. “Sorry, my friend’s tired and hungry. Alex, was it?”

She nodded and smiled again.

“Marlon’s little sister?”

“Do you two know Mar?” Alexis asked, keeping the shakes inside. Praying her older brother wasn’t coming back to town. That when he’d gone away, he’d gone away for good.

“We were hoping to catch up with him. We’re on our way through,” John said, “I guess we missed him.”

“I’ll say.” Alexis chuckled. “He moved out of town years ago. Haven’t seen him since.”

“So much for two birds.” John glanced at Doe. “No matter. I think we’ll have... Let me see.” He made a twirling motion with his finger. “Where was that menu again?”

Alexis looked at him funnily and fake-pouted. “Don’t tell me I’m all that distracting.” She bit her lower lip slowly. “Or do.”

“Is your wise ass on the menu?” Doe asked, sounding somewhat lucid.

“Come on,” John scolded him. “Don’t be rude.” He rolled his eyes toward Doe and Alexis suppressed a sly grin. “Like I said, he’s had a long day. But I’ll tell you what...”

After waiting a bit too long, Alexis asked, “Are you ready to order?”

“Sure.” John looked over Alexis’s shoulder, seeing Charles wave from the back, metal spatula in hand. “You ready to take orders, Alex?”

Her smile cracked as she nodded.

“Coffee’s fresh,” Charles called. John and Doe looked at him for a second and refocused their attention on Alexis.

“I’ll take a coffee,” Doe said. “And cherry pie.”

“Same here,” John said. “Assuming the cherry pie is fresh too. Is it, Alex? Don’t lie to me.” John’s eyes made their way down Alexis’s body. Her cheeks quivered as her smile fought to maintain.

“Of course, sir,” she replied. “We make our pies from scratch. Fresh daily at six in the morning and one in the afternoon. We don’t have cherry now, only blueberry and apple, but you can rest assured our pie is fresh.”

Doe sniffed the air. “Smells like melting plastic.”

“Excuse me?” Alexis asked. “It’s blueberry and apple. Maybe that’s what you’re smelling. We don’t have cherry pie ready.”

John sniffed the air. “Sure you do, Alex.” He looked at Doe. “Smells off, but it’s definitely cherry.”

Alexis looked back at Charles, whose face had gone white.

“I’ll tell you what, I’ll give it a try. I’m a fair man.” John patted the counter and looked below Alexis’s waist. “Give me a taste.”

Doe chuckled. John joined him as Alexis backed away and bumped into the wall behind her.

“Relax, pudding cup. I’m just goofing with you.” John nudged Doe with his elbow. “Small-town women, right? No fun at all.” Then he looked back at her. “Seriously, though I’m sure your pie is delicious, we’ll have a couple coffees and—”

Charles came out from the back, holding a wooden baseball bat. Swinging it loosely and tensing the muscles in his arms. “I’m sorry, gentlemen. I’m afraid we’re closed.”

John smirked, looked back at the door and then into Charles’s eyes. “There’s the ‘cherry pie’. Why don’t you come here and spread those legs for us, pumpkin? I can smell that pussy from here.” He turned to Alexis. “I’m sorry. My nose ain’t what it used to be, I guess. You sure Marlon ain’t in town?”

Alexis shook. “I told you, Mar doesn’t live here anymore.”

Charles firmed his grip on the bat. “And I said, we’re closed.”

“That’s not what the sign says, Chuck,” John replied. “Nice to see an employee wearing a name tag. Makes things much less confusing.”

Charles tapped the bat against his thigh. “That’s a mistake. We’re closed. Please be on your way.”

Doe grumbled and coughed. “Is that a mistake, Chuck?” John grinned as Doe rambled. “Like this cock-tease forgetting her name tag? Here’s the thing. The customer is always right. In this case, doubly so. And, once again, we’ll have—”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” Charles barked as he stepped in front of Alexis to shield her.

“Again,” John said, “I apologise for my friend’s demeanour. He’s worn-out. Not your fault.” John’s expression turned sour, looking more disappointed than angry. “But don’t be afraid, Chuck.

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No need to piss your pants more than you already have. Do what you got to do.”

Charles pushed Alexis toward the entrance to the back and moved behind the counter. “What do you mean?”

“First of all, you—” John pointed at Alexis as his voice raised.

She stopped in her tracks beside the doorway to the back, listening for the sound of the front door’s bell. Needing—more than anything—to hear it ring. To feel safe again.

“You stay where you are.” Then John looked back at Charles and poked him in the chest with his index finger. “You, Chuck. You do what you got to do. Which, unless I’m mistaken, is ask us to leave. You remember? That thing you were so afraid to do a moment ago. You worked up the guts yet?”

“Please leave,” Charles said, backing up a step.

“Was that a question?” John asked.

Doe shook his head and spat on the floor. “Sounded more like a statement.”

Alexis’s voice came through shrill and shaky, startling Charles and getting John and Doe’s attention. “Will you please leave?”

John pointed to Alexis as he looked at Charles. “That was definitely a question. You get the difference?”

Charles nodded, his muscles tensing even more.

“Good.” John tapped the bar with his fingers. “Smarter than Jane. Now, let’s have those coffees and that cherry pie.”

Alexis excused herself to check the cooler in back, in case she was mistaken about what pies they had prepared.

John thanked her and told her he’d miss her.



## II

**M**arlon Woods occupied his base of operations, getting in his work for the day early so he could make it out of town that night with the cash to take him however far away he needed to go. His workplace wasn't much to look at, and he spent the least amount of time there he could, but it served its purpose. It was going to be a damned shame to leave, but he'd picked up roots more times than he could remember.

What he called an office was, more correctly, a large underground storage unit. Rented for a year, cash up front, no questions asked, no papers signed, and no ID necessary. It operated even more like a proper Faraday cage after he'd redone the interior with aluminium and copper, insulated with foam. He kept no computers, radios, or other electronic devices there, which took his office farther north of paranoid. He had one unlisted landline telephone to protect, which he kept disconnected unless needed. Today, he needed the phone until end of business. He wasn't worried about anyone tracing it since he'd be long gone afterward. In a few years, though, the media promised Caller ID and 'automatic callback' would be publicly available, and manual-switching phone circuits were fast becoming non-standard. At a point in the near future, he'd have to look into more complex solutions to keep his calls from being traced—or to ensure they were traced slowly.

His cargo for the day was a heroin addict, cleaned inside and out over the course of a week. A fourteen-year-old girl no one would miss, if they knew she was alive, but worth a substantial

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amount of money to his anonymous, cash-paying client. Serina was her name, not that he cared. This job was a means to finding Jennifer. The woman who'd left him and thought she could do so without suffering consequences. He wanted to make her pay almost as much as he didn't want to die.

His office consisted of a main room and a large, open bathroom that doubled as a torture chamber and kill room.

Serina sat, dressed in fresh clothes, zip-tied to a chair in the main room. Her legs and arms were bound tight. A zip-tie hung loose around her neck. Duct tape covered her eyes. And, though she was a nobody, Marlon had checked for tails on his way to nab her. Then he bagged her head, fucked her up, stripped her down, dumped her possessions, threw her in the trunk of his used 1958 Buick Roadmaster, and drove the fifteen miles back to his office. It wouldn't do to have anyone track her anywhere near there. That would defeat the purpose of the operation.

"Please let me go. I won't talk. I've never seen your face," Serina said. The fear in her voice not disguising the fact she was pissing herself on purpose again. After initial removal of a subject from their environment—as quickly and violently as possible—it generally didn't take longer than a week to form a positive dominant relationship with them. Isolation, deprivation, threats, humiliation, and harm, sprinkled with reward for simple compliance, did the trick pretty fast. But this nobody was an exception. "I don't know what you want, but I swear—"

Marlon gave her a slap. Hard enough to leave a mark, soft enough not to cause bruising. "This will be over soon. And we're down to one more pair of panties and shorts. After that, there's no more cleanup." Marlon let out a sigh. "And if I deliver you dirty—no matter what degree—it means less money for me. Maybe none. If you pull this shit again when we're good to move, I'm going to put you in the other room, mask up, and videotape myself doing what I been dying to do to you ever since I washed the filth out of and off you. Got it?" He slapped her again. "You don't want that. Because I'll break your neck when I finish and, after, I'll toss your body in a landfill."

“I know people,” Serina continued. “I could get you double what they’re paying you. Whoever they are. I know people. Please.”

“You’re as dumb as they come.” Marlon shook his head and grinned. “You must want me to turn you out and put you down. But I’m burning this place and blowing town after, anyway, so tell me your story. You know someone with twenty large lying around? You know someone who’d waste money on you?”

Serina nodded. “My mom.”

“You keep in touch?”

Serina nodded again.

“She must be proud. You know the number or got an address?” Marlon snapped his fingers. “You want to go back to mommy?”

“Just an address. But, when you get there, you tell Myra—my mom—Serina’s lost, she’s sorry, and she wants to come home.”

“The bitch is sitting at home on piles of cash waiting for a stranger to drop by and tell her that? Maybe.” Marlon chuckled. “But I’ll go with the guaranteed money. Men who pay to do whatever sick, perverted shit they want to little girls like you? They don’t lie. I applaud the last-ditch effort, but—”

“She’s loaded,” Serina said. “Cash in the house. Twenty thousand is nothing. She’ll pay, but she’ll want proof. You tell her what I said. Then you come back, take me there, and you get paid. I swear.”

Marlon looked at the tape covering her eyes. “I got an hour. Hour fifteen, tops. Here’s what I’m going to do.” Marlon paced the floor. “I’m going to lock you in the bathroom. On a timer. You know what the timer’s connected to?”

Serina shook her head.

“It’s important you do. This way, if you’re yanking my chain, you can knock off the act now. Yeah?”

She nodded.

“The timer’s connected to a device that will choke you to death if I’m not back in an hour. Fuck it, I’ll give you the full seventy-five. Sound fair?”

Serina nodded.

“You’re already wearing the most important part like a leash.”

Serina shook her shoulders, feeling the zip-tie around her neck.

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Marlon smiled as he watched her. “I give that zip-tie one good yank and you die in under a minute. The gadget you’ll be hooked to will do the same, and it has backups in case you figure a way to move. Backups to make sure you don’t.” Marlon looked at the ceiling. “Visualise trying to walk with severed Achilles tendons. Let your imagination go wild, because that’s the least painful part if you try to trick your way out. Understand?”

Serina nodded and rattled off her mother’s address. Agreeing, if she was setting Marlon up, she’d be forfeiting her life in the process.

Marlon ran his thumb across Serina’s lower lip as she squirmed, and gave her a wink she couldn’t see. “So you know, I’m walking to mother’s door wearing a mask and she’s riding back with me. If she wants you. I can’t have her calling the cops while I deliver you to her doorstep.” Marlon chuckled. “This is business and you’re the product. Understand?”

Serina nodded.

“Sit tight, relax, don’t fidget or wriggle around, and this will be over soon. You try to escape, it’ll be over sooner.”

“What if you get caught in traffic?” she asked. “If you’re the only one who knows I’m—”

Marlon cracked Serina across the face. “I told you, I got this. Shut that pretty mouth if you don’t want me to change my mind.”

She nodded.

“Also know, when we get back on time, if mother pulls anything, I’ll keep you both. Maybe I can sell the two of you at a discount. Bottom line, if no one fucks around, you’ll be home soon.”

“But—”

“That being said, should everything go perfect, my client will most likely pursue you. Once our business is finished, you still got a problem. My advice is pack your shit and leave town as soon as possible. No matter how safe you think you are, you ain’t. The fact you’re here is proof of that. My recommendation is do that and never look back. Get somewhere you think you’re safe. Then go farther. Forget your friends, family. Unless mother wants to run with you. Chalk it up to bad luck and live your life. My clients ain’t as forgiving or kind as I am. You hear, you piece of junkie trash?”

Serina whimpered as Marlon lifted her chair—with her on it—onto a wooden pallet. He walked to another corner of the office, returning moments later pushing a small hydraulic forklift. He elevated the forks slightly as he pushed the lift into the pallet and raised Serina, chair and all, off the floor three inches.

“Please hurry. My mom will pay. I don’t want to die.”

Marlon pushed the forklift into the bathroom. “You’ll enjoy this part of your stay.” He walked into the main room and returned with a roll of duct tape. “All you got to do is wait.”





# III

The landline rang as Marlon began to exit his office. Checking the wall clock, he noted it wasn't time to drop Serina off. And his current client didn't have his office number.

"Hello," he answered. "Accounts receivable."

The voice on the other end of the line came through faint, but it sounded female and familiar as his skin. "Wrong number. Sorry."

"Whoa, hold," Marlon commanded before the woman could hang up. "I can barely hear you." He paused, lowering his voice. "Alex?"

"Yeah. Mar? Why are you being—? It doesn't matter. I—"

Marlon shifted in his shoes. "Say what you got to say."

"I'm calling to do you a favour. God forbid you should—"

"Talk." Marlon growled. "A call after no word for two years. What do you want? Speak up."

"Look," Alexis replied. "I have to whisper, but—You know what? I have to go."

Marlon snapped to. "Hold on. I'm sorry. I really am in a rush. I'm not trying to shake you."

"Yeah, no. I don't have time either. A minute, most. I just wanted to call and make sure you were okay."

"Why? You despise me," Marlon said. "What were your parting words? 'I hope you rot'? Something like that?"

"I stand by them."

Marlon heard Alexis muffle the mouthpiece as she told someone she'd be right there. Still working at the diner she'd die in.

"Alex?" Marlon asked. "You there? I got shit to do."

“Yeah. Don’t worry. I’ve got less time than you.”

“You know I love you, Alex. But what do you want?”

He heard Alexis grumble. “I just wanted you to know to look out. There’s two big-time assholes here today, asking questions about you and some girl named Jane.”

Marlon began to sweat. “Is that—?”

“Listen,” Alexis interrupted. “You’re in a hurry, remember? These guys are passing through. They’re interested in where you are. I didn’t say anything, but it’s time for you to move.”

“Do they know you’re my little sister?”

“Yeah,” Alexis replied. “What’s that got to do with—?”

“What are their names?”

“They’re not giving real names,” she whispered. “I don’t think.”

“What are they calling themselves?”

Alexis breathed more heavily. “John and Doe.”

“Just... fuck,” Marlon barked. “Listen. I got to go but, after this job, I’ll head back to town immediately. Today. I—”

“Whatever your issue is, don’t bring it home. Take your own advice and go farther away. I don’t care why these two want to see you. Don’t come back. You’re not wanted and it’s not safe. Run.” Alexis muffled the mouthpiece again. “I’ve got to go. Don’t say your stupid bitch of a little sister never did anything for you.”

“Alex,” Marlon yelled. “Hold on a”—He heard the click of the line going dead—“second.”

Marlon fished his keys from his pocket, trying to remember the number of Miss Daisy’s Diner and drawing a blank. Disconnecting his landline as he thought of vertical service codes and then thanked God they weren’t widely available yet.

After assuring Serina he’d be back within the hour while he reset her death trap’s timer, Marlon ran to the exit. She cried as he locked the door behind him and sprinted up the steps to the ground level.

## IV

Alexis Woods got home from her first day of high school, looking flustered and feeling worn. She'd thought going to school in a knee-high skirt would be cool, since her friend Alison wore a lot less all the time, but she'd ended up being dragged into the principal's office after one of the other students lodged a complaint about it. She'd initially thought it was funny, seeing as her top was a respectable black tee shirt, her skirt was beige and made of thick material, and her socks covered her to mid-thigh. Whoever she'd made uncomfortable had probably gotten that way trying to peek up her skirt, which she'd made sure no one could with the double threat of cotton long-leg underwear and a panty girdle.

From that point in the day—her lunch period—she'd been made to wear a pair of athletic sweats around her skirt and the layers beneath it, since she refused to change her clothes, which they'd said they'd have to hold for her. By the time she'd gotten home, her crotch reeked like she hadn't bathed in a week. She wasn't sure if anyone else could smell it, but the odour was driving her insane.

She walked into her home and locked the door behind Marlon's friends Wilson Boggs and Jeffrey Goines, who had to go do something important. Why they felt the need to explain themselves to her, she didn't understand.

She took off her backpack and carried it up the stairs, by one strap, to her room at the end of the hallway, to the right of the bathroom. After dumping her backpack in her room, she walked

into the bathroom and took a look in the mirror above the sink. Her face looked tired and her eyes looked weak. And, though the stink was going away, she still wanted to take a shower. She supposed it was a smell she'd picked up from the athletic wear she'd been forced to put on at school, and she'd have to do a load of laundry before the weekend if she wanted to wear any part of the outfit she'd picked for her first day, before the end of the week. Unlike her friends, her family didn't make enough money to buy her new clothes when she ruined them, so she was always careful with her things. It didn't make her feel less fortunate, but it did make her things seem more valuable to her than they were.

Alexis took a quick shower, dressed casually, and walked downstairs with a basket of laundry.

"Pyjamas, already?" Marlon asked. "School's tough, huh?"

Alexis looked at her pink pyjama bottoms and pink pyjama top and shrugged. "Not all of us have the luxury of doing whatever we want, drop-out."

"What's the laundry for?" Marlon asked, following her. "And please tell me you weren't wearing those under your clothes today."

"What? You mean underwear? Yeah, believe it or not, I wore underwear when I went to school today."

"Not that," he said. "Those panties are too small for you."

She gave him a disturbed look.

"Tell me the lines aren't clearly visible."

"Nobody can see anything through my jeans, through my skirts, or through my shirts, so you don't have to worry. I don't wear tight clothing. I remember the speech about it. I'm not disrespecting you, okay?"

"You know," he said, following her down the stairs by the back door, to the laundry room past the half bath at the bottom. "I don't mean to be tough on you. I—"

"You shouldn't be. Especially about school. I'll be graduating. Just because you chose to bail doesn't mean I'm fucking up."

Marlon's hand raised and she flinched. Seeing that, he brought his hand back to his side, apologising with his eyes. "Watch the mouth. You're a good girl. I know. I want you to stay that way."

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“Okay, daddy,” she said, opening the laundry machine’s top and dumping the clothes in, adding detergent, closing the lid, and running the washer on the longest cycle possible. “I swear, you treat me like I’m two. I’m only three years younger than you.”

“I’m aware,” he snapped back. “And I haven’t forgotten what it’s like.”

“Me neither.” She chuckled. “You and your friends. Going on about all the ‘sweet ass’. Is that what you’re worried about? I’m going to turn into something you want? Well, too bad, because I’m growing and I can’t help it if boys are attracted to me. I don’t fool around and I don’t wear revealing clothes. The rest I have no control over.”

“It’s not the clothes I’m worried about.” He turned her to face him. “It’s the attitude. You’re getting fresh, and boys can misinterpret that.”

“Please,” she said, trying to remove her arm from his grasp. “I can’t help what the boys think, okay? Maybe you should pay more attention to your own life. It’s unfair you treat me like a child. I know you see your girlfriends whenever you want. And you can’t keep your hands off them in public. Tell me you don’t do more in private. Hypocrite.”

“What I do is none of your business. And things are different for girls.”

“Yeah. I wonder how their brothers, or fathers, like knowing they’re with you.”

“Don’t make fun of me,” he said, gripping her harder and poking her between the collarbones as he spoke. “It’s different for girls. You’re weaker. You can get into more spots you can’t get out of than boys can.”

“Please.” She yanked her arm from his grip and faced the washing machine again, making sure it was working right. Tapping the timer knob to get it running the way it should. It had been broken since they’d bought it, but her father was too cheap or too lazy to get it replaced with a good one, so she and her mother—may she rest in peace—had learnt to live with it. “Girls are as resilient as boys. I can take care of myself, so quit smothering me. I’ve never even kissed a boy. And, though he’s nice, you hate Anson Williams for reasons I’ll never understand. You should let him take

me on a date. We've been friendly since we were kids and he likes me. Plus, he's respectful. He'd never do any of the things you're afraid the other boys will. And he could protect me from them if I needed it."

"Ants?" Marlon asked, scoffing. "Still with that creep? You know why he's there for you, right?"

She looked over her shoulder at him and squinted.

"That's right. He's the nicest guy in the world. Till you go on a date with him. Then you'll find he wants the same thing all the boys do."

"You mean the same thing you do?" She turned back around. "He's not a creep and he treats me like a lady. Plus, he understands me and we have fun talking." She paused, looking at the ceiling dreamily. "He's funny. He doesn't talk unless he has something to say. I can be quiet with him. We can do nothing and it's still fun." She turned to face the laundry machine as it rumbled. "You wouldn't understand. If he's a creep, I don't know what that makes you."

She felt Marlon's hand grab her shoulders and his body press her against the washing machine. He whispered into her ear as she stared forward, looking at the wall and trying to think of anything other than what he was saying.

"You think this is funny. But, one day, you'll wish I was there and I won't be. And then you'll realise I was right all along. I'll find you walking home all fucked-up and you'll say you're sorry, but it'll be too late. Because some jock, or some creep like Ants, will take you somewhere you can't defend yourself or get help, and they'll do whatever they want to you and tell everyone it was your idea after."

"Sounds like you've got it all figured," she said, smirking through the pain. Not wanting to tell Marlon he was hurting her, lest she make his point for him. "Is that how you and your girls—What are their names?—got together. Was it all their idea?"

Marlon shook her hard and her hands reached behind her to grab his arms. "Don't say that again," he growled. "I would never do that to a girl." He shook her again. "Understand?"

She nodded and kept her composure. "Yes, Mar. I'm sorry. I just meant you should let me make some decisions of my own. If I were to date Anson, you'd see he takes good care of me. And, in the highly

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unlikely event you're right about him, you could send him packing and I wouldn't question you again. That seems fair, doesn't it?"

"No. That's not how it works."

"Then how am I supposed to learn how things work?" she snapped. "If you won't even let me try. Am I just supposed to accept your worldview? Every boy on the planet wants nothing from me except what's between my legs? Not one might like me for who I am? The person and not the object? There isn't a single boy out there who might respect me and love me? Is that it?"

"No." Marlon shook her again. "I swear, the more you talk the stupider you get."

"Now we see what you think of me."

He bumped her into the laundry machine harder. "Enough," he snapped. "I'm trying to make a point."

"What? I'm too stupid to judge what's best for me? You made your point." She shook her body, trying to shrug him off. "Please leave me alone. And... Think about what I said about Anson, okay? Give him a chance. At least get to know him by talking to him. And not the way you usually do, by making fun of him or beating him up with your friends."

Marlon sighed. "You think he's going to be able to protect you from any boy who decides he wants what's between your legs? You just said he lets us pick on him and beat him up. That creepy little fuck. He's a pussy. You said so. And you'll find, if I let him near you, he'll turn into a boy with needs and desires he can't control. Things you're going to do for him or else. As soon as he gets you alone where no one can hear you yelling for help, then you'll know. But then it'll be too late."

"You're twisting my words," she said. "I didn't mean it like that. Plus, you're three guys on one when you pick on him and beat him up. That's not being a man. That's being a bully. That's being a bigger pussy than he'll ever be."

"You think I can't take him?" Marlon asked. "And watch the mouth, I said. Pray to God he never convinces you to spend time with him when I'm not around."

“He already has. For most our lives. We’ve spent plenty of time together. Alone. How do you think I know I like him? How do you think I know the things I like about him?”

“When you two were in diapers don’t count.”

“No. I mean in middle school. I was developing already then. So was he. And he never touched me anywhere I didn’t want him to.”

“What are you saying?” Marlon asked, enraged. “Where did you let him touch you?”

“Nowhere. I’ve kissed him on the cheek a few times. He’s never kissed me. I never gave him a chance because I was too shy. Now I want him to kiss me back. And maybe he wants that too. With you all over me, I may never find out.”

“Good,” Marlon said, relaxing. “You best be telling the truth.”

“I know, I know. And I am, just... Damn, Mar. I know you’re there for me, but you have to let me learn some things on my own.”

“Yeah, no,” he said. “You’re right. Do what you like. You’re old enough a good talking-to ain’t in order no more. I’ll knock that off.”

Alexis looked at him with relief, and a bit of shock she tried to hide. “Cool. Thanks, Mar.” She turned, pulled his head toward hers, and kissed him on the cheek. “You’ll see. Everything will be fine.”

“Is that how you kiss that creep, Ants?”

She turned back around. “Yes,” she said, pouting. “Was it at all sexual?”

“No, it wasn’t—”

“You said you were going to stop,” she interrupted. “Don’t be a liar. That’s worse than anything else.”

“I didn’t lie,” he said, pressing her against the laundry machine again. Making it hurt. “I’m done lecturing you.”

She pushed back. “Stop it. That hurts.”

He grabbed her by the waist and stepped back. “Just for fun, I’m going to be Ants, okay?” She shook her head and started to complain. Knowing her father couldn’t walk down the stairs if he was inclined to help her with—or out of—anything.

“No. Knock it—”

“Thank you so much for that peck on the cheek,” Marlon said, doing his insulting impression of Anson. “You’re so beautiful. I like you for the person you are.”



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“This isn’t funny,” she said, looking away and scowling.

“I like you,” he said. “You’re the best.”

Alexis reached for Marlon’s wrists as she felt him pulling her pyjama bottoms down, and he grabbed her hands and slammed them on top of the washing machine. “Cut it out,” she said, trying to keep it together. “I told you it’s not funny. Anson doesn’t talk like that and he doesn’t touch me like that.”

Marlon grabbed her wrists in his left hand and pulled at her pyjama bottoms’ waist. “You’re the best. I love you.”

“Stop, I said.” Alexis began crying as Marlon’s free hand yanked her panties up hard from behind, releasing them so they smacked back into place.

“You’re so pretty.” He pulled her pyjama top up, nearly exposing her breasts, then let go of it to mask her eyes. “I want you.” She struggled and he released his hold on her wrists to choke her.

“You’re a bully,” she screamed. “You don’t love me.”

“Your brother’s not here. Sorry.”

She fought, pulling and kicking, and he threw her to the floor. Dragging her into the family room of the basement by her left ankle and throwing her on the fold-out couch-bed. Turning her over and pushing down hard with his right elbow between her shoulder blades to make her ass stick up as she squirmed. Listening to her cries and complaints, muffled by the cushions his opposite hand pushed her face into. Then he yanked her head up by her hair, spat on her forehead, and called her a fat, ugly whore.

“Leave me alone,” she cried. “I hate you.”

Her father’s voice called weakly, “Is everything okay, kids?”

“Shut up, daddy,” Marlon yelled. “Mind your business.”

Her father didn’t say anything else.

Marlon stood as Alexis rolled off the couch and curled into a ball. “You’re...” she whimpered.

“You see how easy you gave it up?” He adjusted his crotch. “And I never lied. We’re done with the lectures. Practical, real-world examples of the shit that can happen to you are best anyway. You felt that, didn’t you?” He paused. “Yeah, you did. Now you know how vulnerable you are, and why you need me to look out for you.”

Because that's what Anson will do to you. Except he won't stop. He'll fuck you for real, regardless of what you want."

"No," she screamed. "He's not mean. And he's not a bully. You're sick, Mar. I'm your sister. You say you care about me, but you so much as raped me. You touched me where you shouldn't. You called me a slut and spat in my face."

"I merely demonstrated. Learn to distinguish the difference."

"But I'm grown up. And you molested me. You're not supposed to do that. Not ever. For any reason. It's not right. It's not natural. There's something wrong with you. What is it? Tell me."

"Nothing's wrong with me. Just teaching you a lesson."

"Bullshit," she cried, standing, wiping the spittle from her face. "No brother does this to his sister. Not to teach them a lesson or for any other reason, except..." She backed away, fear in her eyes. "You want me all for yourself, don't you?" Her voice cracked as she asked the question, fearing the answer. Feeling like she knew it already and she always had. "This is just the beginning." She pushed him again. "Let's do it, then. Skip to the next lesson. I can't stop you. Big man. Rape me. Pick up daddy's slack."

Marlon walked down the hallway to the stairs. "Someday I just might." He winked at her and laughed at the look on her face. "Get over yourself and whatever fantasies you got about us."

"I don't—" she squeaked, not believing what she'd heard. "You don't get to turn this around on me."

"Whatever you say." He walked up the steps. "Pull yourself together. You're an embarrassment."

She walked back to the laundry room, shivering. The simple violation of her free will was enough to break her—not to mention the physical assault—and enough to make her want to kill. His practical, real-world example had worked, just not in the way he'd intended.

She vowed, then and there, he'd lose his life if he did anything like that to her again. Her resolve weakened over time, as the wash finished, but she knew what her brother was, then. Deep inside. A physical, psychological, and emotional rapist.

He would never apologize. And she would never forgive him.

## V

Marlon pulled out of the parking garage connected to his underground office, punching the gas and checking his car's dashboard clock. Double the money was worth the risk Serina asked him to take, but if he didn't get back in time that double would turn to nothing. Worst case, he'd have another upset client to deal with, but he was blowing town, anyway. And he had no guarantee his client wasn't in league with the organisation that wanted him—and everyone related to him—dead.

Halfway to Serina's mother's house, he hit his first red light. Damning it under his breath and trying not to think about Alexis and what Doe had planned for her.

A car horn honked and Marlon looked up, seeing the light had turned green. He accelerated, flipping off the driver behind him.

As he drove, the car behind him honked again. More aggressively. He motioned for the driver to pass.

Marlon stopped at the next red light. Losing himself, again, in thoughts of what he'd do if Doe touched his little sister. And how much worse that would make his situation.

The light turned green and the car behind him honked once more, immediately. Laying into it. Marlon looked over his shoulder, unable to stop thinking of the last time he'd seen Alexis. Remembering the hate he'd seen in her eyes and heard in her voice. How he could feel she wanted to kill him with her bare hands. Then he came back to the present. To Serina in the bathroom, counting the seconds. Feeling the loose zip-tie around her neck with every panicked breath, praying Marlon returned to stop it from pulling tight and ending her life.

“Fuck it.” Marlon cut the ignition, opened the door, got out of his car, and let it sit at the stop light. Listening to the blaring of horns. Watching everyone, except the geriatric who’d been hounding him for blocks, pass him and make more than a few nasty gestures.

As he walked to the rear of his car, his attention was captured by a girl on the other side of the street. Standing on the sidewalk, watching him, it seemed. He did a double take, then decided to give her a good look since she’d probably noticed him checking her out already.

Her skin was white as chalk and she wore a black cloth skirt that may as well have been a belt. Showing her full stomach and a good portion of her hipbones. Her top, also made of black cloth, was as utilitarian as her skirt, covering the parts of her body unlawful to display in public and not much else. Her hair was long, somewhere between brunette and blonde, and her face was strikingly attractive. Or it wasn’t. She was a decent distance away and the manner in which she displayed her well-sculpted body would make anything propped on her neck look good.

He broke what felt like eye contact with the girl, as the old man shouted. He thought he saw the girl walk toward him, into the street, as he turned his head, but he had more important things to do than ogle a pretty young lady, no matter how much the animal in him wanted to. First, five minutes of fun with the sod in the car, then the pick-up, then the release, if all went to plan. After that, a long trip home to his little sister who, if he remembered her well, wouldn’t be glad to see him even if his return saved her life.

“This isn’t a parking lot, asshole,” the old man yelled as Marlon checked out his trophy wife or girlfriend.

“Yo, pal,” the trophy screamed, ear-splitting and ugly. “Move your car or my man’s going to send it off a cliff.”

Marlon waved at the trophy and smiled, swearing he saw the girl from across the street in the middle of traffic, but not seeing her anywhere when he focussed in her direction.

“Are you deaf?” the trophy continued. “I said get back in your car and drive away right now or my man will beat you so bad you’ll be eating baby food from the straw in your wheelchair.”

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Marlon rubbed his temples, seeing the ghostly girl once more out of the corner of his eye. He ignored her this time, dismissing her as a trick of the light and a sad testament to the last time he'd gotten laid.

Marlon stared the trophy in the eyes. "Stop with the lip, bitch. You don't want me to have nothing against you."

The trophy pushed at the old man. Saying 'are you going to let that guy talk to me like that?' and 'do something'. Marlon watched as the old man got out of the car grudgingly.

The man was old but, as Marlon expected from what he'd seen above the dash, he was stocky. Well built, and muscle from head to toe. Not the sort who went to the gym. Just a guy who was born a bulldog and would probably die one.

Marlon crossed his arms in front of his crotch and held his hands together. "Do we got a problem?"

The old man let out a laugh, which turned into a cough, looking back at his trophy and smirking. "Not yet. This is the lead-up." The old man looked around, his gaze stopping somewhere in the midst of traffic, maybe catching an eyeful of the girl Marlon had been seeing. "Get back in your fancy car and drive like there's other people on the road." He looked back at the trophy, who made a gesture suggesting his response wasn't volatile enough, and he continued. "But you owe the lady an apology."

Marlon smiled, shaking his head. "You tell that mouthy whore, if she thinks I'm going to apologise, she's got another thing coming. No. Get back in your car and drive. Piss off before things get ugly."

The trophy raged as the old man winced. "Things got ugly the minute your momma shit you out, you redneck mother fucker. My man is going to fuck you up so bad you'll be pissing blood for the rest of your life, you no-dick ass-eating bitch."

"Wow," Marlon said to the old man. "She's got a mouth on her. Put it to good use and be on your way. I'm asking you one last time." Marlon clenched his fists. "For whatever reason, you started this. Don't make me have to end it."

The old man's smirk turned sideways. "Here's what's going to happen. Like the lady said, I'm going to beat your insolent ass up

and down the block.” The old man put up his dukes. “Take a swing so I don’t feel bad about burying you.”

Marlon put his hands on his hips, quickly, letting out a shout. The old man flinched and, as Marlon relaxed, the old man telegraphed a punch to the head he easily dodged. Marlon countered with a punch to the nose, followed by another to the throat and a blow to the sternum.

The old man’s nose drooled blood in thick waves as he fought to breathe, clutching his neck and chest as he dropped to his knees and rolled onto his side, kicking and writhing.

Marlon looked down and gave him a nudge with his shoe. “You going to live?”

The old man nodded yes and begged him, with his hands, to not hit him anymore.

“Good enough. Don’t be a problem no more. Leave me alone.” Marlon turned toward his car, looking the trophy in the eyes before walking away. “You made me late for an important date. I catch you on the streets again, I’m going to settle your ass for good.”

As he walked to his car, he heard the trophy exit the old man’s vehicle. Screaming something about cleaving Marlon’s privates. Wrapping his fingers around his car door’s handle, he felt a noise and a sensation, like he was being rushed.

He began to turn, but it was too late. He heard what sounded like a golf club slicing through the air as punches landed.

By the time he turned around, the trophy was laid out on the street beside her man.

The girl whose looks had demanded his attention from across the street stood above them. Casting the golf club to the side of the road and growling at the trophy, who looked more afraid of the five feet of delicate white female flesh than she was of him.

“Thank you,” Marlon said to the girl. “And you are...?”

The girl looked at Marlon, then at his car. Waiting. Marlon had no idea what for, and no time to waste figuring it out.

## VI

Marlon hopped into his car and cranked the ignition. He heard a metallic creak and turned to see the girl opening the passenger side door. Though she wasn't supposed to be there, he couldn't help but watch. Admiring how she kept everything she was almost showing from view as she took her seat. Like she'd been trained to never display the goods. But that didn't mean everything on Marlon's schedule didn't still need to get done.

"What are you doing?" he asked, fiddling with the gear shift. She turned her head and stared him straight in the eyes, throwing him off. "Listen. I appreciate... But, please, I got—"

Looking into his rearview at the scene, he sped off. Hopefully, the old man and his trophy wouldn't give chase.

"You got a name?" Marlon looked at the girl, startling as their gazes met. She'd been staring into him ever since she got in his car. "I'm not interested in buying if you're selling. Understand?"

She looked at him, nodding, and opened the glove box, searching. She made a motion in the air, gesturing she was in need of a pen and paper. Then she shrugged.

"You a mute?"

She shook her head, then nodded, staring into his eyes as he concentrated on the road.

Marlon looked at her again and she grabbed his right arm, pressing her fingertips into his flesh, then pulling her fingers back and frowning at her manicured nails.

“What was that?” He raised his hand to strike her. “Good deed for the day or no, I got no problem putting you in your place if you fuck with me, bitch.” He grunted. “If you got something to say, say it and hustle your skinny ass on the next corner.”

The girl shook her head.

Marlon pulled into an alley and stopped the car. “Listen, bitch, you can’t come with me.”

She pushed the button locks down as he opened them with the switch on his door.

The girl pointed at herself. Then she pointed at Marlon. Then she pointed out the window, at the wall of the alley and, oddly enough, in the general direction of Marlon’s hometown.

“You want to stay with daddy, little girl?” he asked.

She nodded.

“You want to sit on daddy’s lap?”

She nodded again, drawing the shape of a house in the air with her fingers.

The girl pointed at herself and placed her hands together like a pillow, resting her head on them, closing her eyes for a moment and opening them as he surprised her with a slap and demanded she leave. She drew a question mark in the air with her right index finger.

“What’s your game?”

She looked at him intently as he slapped her twice more. Not wavering. Not looking hurt physically or emotionally.

“Were you sent here to slow me down? Show me some skin and keep me distracted while the bad men come?”

She shook her head, looking around the car.

“Then what the—?”

She grabbed his right hand and placed it on her stomach, rubbing it down to the waist of her dress and letting out deep breaths, contented.

“No.” He shook his head as she moved his hand under her skirt. “As much as I’d love to fuck you ugly and leave you bleeding in the gutter, I got no time.” He looked toward the street, then back at her, pulling back his hand. “Leave. Now. You can either go peacefully or I can beat the living shit out of you first. Is that what you want, you sick twist? You want me to hurt you?”



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She shrugged and bobbed her eyebrows.

“You’re crazy. And dangerously stupid. But maybe I can sell you. You under fifteen?” He moved to put the car in gear. Her hand clutched his wrist. Her soft, thin-skinned fingers incredibly powerful, keeping him from moving his arm.

She put her free hand’s index finger to her lips, making a shushing gesture.

“You got something to say, bitch? I’m listening. But hurry. I don’t got time, like I said. Go.” He pointed at her and clicked his fingers.

She looked left, right, and then directly into his eyes and spoke. Her voice soft and hypnotic, but her tone tense and disturbing.

“No,” she said, smiling a triumphant smile and giving Marlon a thumbs up. “I guess you’ve won. That’s why I’ve done what I’ve done. You wouldn’t understand because it’s not in your interest to. Even so, we’re here. Together. And that’s not so bad, is it? I still get to teach you something about love as you define it. Hopefully, you’ll understand and see the beauty in it.” She gripped his wrist tighter. “But don’t try to make me speak again, because what I have to say next is worse. And my mouth won’t be doing the talking.” She winked. “Didn’t see that coming, did you? I can’t wait until you can’t help yourself.”

Marlon looked at her funnily. “Bitch, are you done with the insane rant? I thought you were never going to stop talking. What part of ‘hurry’ didn’t you understand?”

She nodded as her smile bloomed. Looking to the heavens and making a gesture of thanks.

“I don’t know what you’re so giggly about, but I don’t got time for this and I won’t pretend I got any idea what you’re talking about, you raggedy-ass urinal cake.” Marlon chuckled. “At least you won’t be saying nothing worse.” He looked at her sideways. “Have we met before?” He shook his head and groaned. “Stupid question. You’d be on the market by now if we had.” He paused. “Go shop your ass somewhere else.”

The girl looked him in the eyes, her grip going soft. Marlon’s eyes drifted to her thighs, then met her gaze.

“And put on some clothes. You’re a sexy little trash can, but— And I’m only tipping you because you got me out of a jam—this

city ain't kind. And it don't got eyes or ears. You keep walking around like that, sooner or later you're going to end up in someone's crawlspace. You're as cute as they come, but dumb as a brick."

The girl released her grip, cradling herself in her arms, wrapping each hand around the opposite elbow and looking down. Shrinking herself. Deflating.

"I'm asking nicely. Please get out of my car."

She looked at him and shook her head.

"Yes. Go. You can't come with me."

She looked into his eyes as she folded forward, touching her elbows to her knees, exposing more of her bottom than was street-legal.

Marlon licked his lips as he got an eyeful of her backside, and put his right hand on the nape of her neck. "Forget it. Look, bitch. If you need work... I don't know. But you got to go. Your staying here is getting someone killed." He looked at the dashboard clock as the girl shook her head. "In forty-five minutes. Just go."

Marlon unlocked the passenger side door with the switch on his. The girl shook her head. Marlon shook his head in return. "No debate. Playtime is over. Get out."

She shook her head again.

Marlon's right hand cranked her head back by the hair as his left punched her in the temple. She straightened into a proper seated position and pulled his hand from her hair. Twisting it away from her until its palm faced up, with her right hand, and pressing down on the outside of his elbow with her left.

"Fuck. Let go of me," he shouted. Angry, but more upset he'd let some dainty piece of white trash turn the tables on him. He craned his head to peer into her eyes. She didn't look as though she was exerting effort. Keeping him locked in place, lest she break his arm to pieces. "I suppose I deserve this?"

She looked at him. Not nodding. Not shaking her head. Not moving except to press down on his elbow, twist his hand harder, and delight in the sound of his pain.

"You're a real honey. Probably been told that by every guy you met since before you were old enough to know. And that outfit's not an accident. You saw me. Big man. And you, such a helpless little thing."

She increased the pressure of her grip.

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“But, as much as I’d love to pay you to suck my knob, you got to leave. And I promise, any hurt you visit on me will be repaid. In instalments. On a lifetime plan.”

She leant forward, pressing her elbow into his, and patted his crotch, bobbing her eyebrows as she gave him the finger.

“Yeah,” he said, sweating the girl’s lock-grip hard. “Maybe later. And, okay. I’m sorry. But I got to go.”

She smiled, releasing her grip and pushing him away as she put on her seatbelt. He stared at her in pain and awe, raising his fist to clean her clock as she gave him a blistering slap that made his vision double. The girl sat, looking straight ahead. Relaxed, as if putting him in his place with a good pimp-slap had been an afterthought. As she motioned for him to place his left hand on the steering wheel, he swiftly moved his right onto the gear shift.

She patted his crotch once more, generating heat that caused the wrong head to wake and start thinking again.

“You got to—”

She shook her head, fiddling with the zipper of his pants.

“What is your problem?”

He put his hand between her legs and patted her crotch, feeling she was wearing panties. She looked at him, between her legs, and at him again as her eyelids fluttered and her eyes rolled.

“You’re kidding me.” Marlon pulled his hand back and thought he saw disappointment in her eyes. “You swampy piece of piss.”

As he looked at the hand he’d molested her with, he noticed it was damp. He sniffed it. It smelt like water from a blade of grass. He looked at the girl. Stunned, frozen in place. Her eyes were clear, but clouds of blood floated inside them like wisps of smoke. She pulled her hand from his crotch and made a clock with the index finger and thumb of her free hand. The minutes ticking away.

“There’s someone I got to get back to and they’re—”

“—dead already. You just don’t know it yet,” a voice called from behind the car. “Fun time’s over, you redneck piece of shit.”

The girl looked at him and nodded as she undid her seatbelt, opened her door, and stepped out of the car, diverting Marlon’s attention by fussing with her ribbon of a skirt as he recognised the old man and his trophy storming down the alley toward them. He

continued to watch as the girl got her clothing back in order and strolled toward the golf-club-wielding lunatics coming for payback.

Marlon opened his door slowly, his eyes having trouble looking away from the girl's barely-covered posterior as she turned her head to look at him and winked. As if she could hear what he was thinking. She placed herself between Marlon and the old man and his trophy.

The old man barked, not impressed with the girl's show of flesh, and focussed his attention on Marlon, who sat in the car. "Get out of my way, you pasty chicken. I've got no problem with you, but I'm putting your John in the ground. I'm done playing possum, so get the—"

"I'll take care of this soft little bitch," the trophy interrupted, pushing the old man out of her way and moving into the girl's space. "I'll do it for free."

The girl nodded.

"I hope you're ready to get fucked up, gaol-bait. I'm going to turn you into a cripple and then I'm going to beat you with this nine iron so bad you'll bleed from every orifice till you're empty."

The trophy began to swing. "Die, you—"

The girl swiftly stuck out her right hand and returned it to her side. The trophy dropped her golf club in mid-swing as her hands clutched her neck, covering the deep purple mark made by the girl's open-handed strike. The bruising Marlon could see looked like the force applied by the hit had been delivered through the webbing between the girl's thumb and index finger.

The old man jumped to the side as his trophy dropped like a stone, face-first. He shook his head in disbelief as his trophy's legs kicked and her rasping grew louder and more disturbing. He looked at the girl, back at his trophy—who was slowly becoming still—then back at the girl. He got on his knees and felt his trophy's neck. Looking into her eyes, watching them go dead and jerking his hand away every time her body convulsed. "You killed her."

The girl pointed toward the entrance to the alley and nodded.

The old man's face crumpled with sadness that turned to rage almost immediately. "I'm not going anywhere. You just got added to the menu. Before or after I kill Jane, you're dead."

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Marlon took a closer look at the old man. He didn't look like a hitter, but there was no other way he could know Marlon's alias. And realising his previous employers were already sending help to put him in the dirt made him worry even more for his sister's safety.

Still, he didn't move as the girl stood and pointed. Nodding more urgently, motioning for the old man to leave her—and him—alone. Marlon watched, not the least bit worried about the girl. Only worried about Serina and Alexis.

The old man stood, dropping his golf club, fury in his eyes. "You killed my girl, you right cunt." His fists balled. "I'm going to beat your ass half to death with my bare hands while Jane watches, bury him while you look on, helpless, and then I'm going to torture you slow. You won't be able to look in a mirror without weeping when I get done rearranging that sewer system beneath your nose."

The old man threw a solid right jab, quick and efficient. He knew how to fight, and he knew how to set up the damage. But his blow missed its mark as the girl tilted her head and leant slightly to the left. Fussing with her hair, dropping her arms to her hips and placing her hands on them. She moved backward two steps to the right as the old man stumbled to the left and nearly lost his balance. She watched the old man regain his composure and put up his fists as she tapped her right foot and motioned with her chin toward the main street. Shaking her head as the old man nodded and licked his lips.

The old man threw a barrage of punches at the girl. Marlon's eyebrows raised as he noted the old man possessed more skill than he'd shown in the street. But the old man's wrist grab, sternum crush, and follow-through uppercut went nowhere. And the moves he'd thrown had come fast. Yet, the girl's left wrist was slightly to the right when his hand went to snatch it, his off-balance forward thrust with the heel of his left hand missed her sternum as she turned sideways, and his attempt at righting himself—and following through with an uppercut using his opposite hand—left him looking like he thought his arms might be long enough to box with God.

The girl steadied the old man, holding his striking hand's elbow and his lower back, and gently moved him away from her. Her hands adjusted her top, and her foot began to tap again.

She didn't have time to put her hands back on her waist before the old man gave her everything he had.

Marlon sat, watching. Planted in his seat. And, as he watched, he felt doubt creep in. Wondering if he could take the girl in a fight. Not sure. And taking people apart was a good piece of his business.

Every punch the old man threw, the girl dodged effortlessly, never moving more than a foot or two from where she'd originally been standing. Like she was slow-dancing. Avoiding the punches and kicks, moving the old man away from her, and doing it again.

Within three minutes, the old man was breathing hard, yet the white of the girl's cheeks showed no signs of exhaustion. But the old man wasn't giving up. The anger in his eyes increasing with each attempt to punish her.

Then, when she'd grown tired of the fight, which she played like a game, she began slapping the old man after every failed punch, kick, headbutt, and everything else he threw at her. Quick, forceful smacks that contorted his face in micro-expressions of shock when they landed.

When the old man was on his knees, defeated by his overexertion, she cracked him across the chin hard. Snapping his face down so he could see the blood drooling from his mouth.

She turned and caught Marlon watching her. And, though he felt embarrassed and emasculated, she didn't look at him disapprovingly. The look on her face was more of expectancy. An asking. Waiting for direction. He shook his head and her whole face lit up. She bounced in place, which got Marlon's irresponsible head's attention, and began walking back toward the passenger side of the car.

"Where do you think you're going?" The old man growled as he rose, grunting from the effort and seeming to have lost sight of his objective. "I'm not halfway done with you."

The girl stopped and waited. Listening.

"You fucked with the wrong guy, pimple tits."

The old man steadied himself as the girl adjusted the back of her skirt and pulled up her top. Looking at her small breasts with confusion, deciding they were the perfect size, and pulling her top down.

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“You think that body does anything for me? I’ve had better than you and, hell, once I’m done putting Jane down, I’ll show you heaven before I let you die.”

The girl bent at the waist, touching her hands to her feet, looking between her legs at the old man.

“Hey,” Marlon yelled. Done with waiting. “Let it go, old-timer. You got the scars. Your partner’s dead. Tell John, Jane got away. You’ll live to kill another day.” Marlon snapped his fingers and pointed at the girl, who looked up at him with her hands around her ankles. “You. Come on, let’s go. We got to go home. Now.”

The old man laughed, as much as he was able. “She doesn’t want to go with you, pin-prick. She wants some of this.” The old man pointed at his groin.

As Marlon watched the old man’s hands move closer to the crotch of his pants, he noticed a bulge that wasn’t the right shape, the right size, or in the right place.

“Unfortunately for her marshmallow ass, I’m not interested.”

“Look out,” Marlon screamed, hopping out of the car as the old man reached into his pocket and pulled out a modified full-auto Maxim 9 pistol—all the love with built-in sound suppression—and pointed it at the back of the girl’s upturned head. She looked at Marlon as he stumbled and fell, her eyes questioning.

“Good night,” the old man wheezed, and he pulled the trigger.

The girl dropped her head between her legs to look at the old man during the precious second he shot his mouth off. The spray of bullets from his gun hit the ground in front of her, short of Marlon.

The next thing she heard was a click.

The old man raised his hand to pistol whip the girl. Marlon scrambled to his feet, but he was too late. They both were.

Before the old man could bring the butt of the pistol down, the girl stood upright, breaking his nose with the back of her head.

The old man stumbled backward, holding his gun, rubbing at the blood spilling out of his nose and drooling from his mouth. The girl put her hand up as Marlon came to her aid, stopping him dead. Then she spun to the right, kicking her right leg into the air and locking it around the old man’s neck at the inside of her knee, the force of her thrust dropping him to the ground with his neck caught in a chokehold.

When the girl landed on her right knee, her full weight locked her right buttock and heel together, tightening the chokehold as the old man desperately clawed at her fatty leg and fought for air. Twenty seconds later, when the old man was just south of unconscious, she unlocked her right leg and planted her left knee to the left of the man's face, sweeping her right leg free and planting its knee to the right. She was nimble if she was anything. She sat on the old man's chest and pulled his arms outward, resting her calves on them and moving her seat up his torso. Waving her index finger in his face and shaking her head.

Looking back at Marlon, who was getting upright again, she raised her eyebrows. Giving him the same expectant look.

Marlon nodded, addled, and she shielded his view as she pulled the old man's head up, a little too far to the side, and down quickly. Snapping his neck. Ending him like she'd stepped on an ant.

She stood and turned to face Marlon, smiling for a moment and then looking sad as he got back in the car, looked at the dashboard clock, and grimaced. The smile returned to her face as he leant over to open her door for her.

She hopped into the passenger seat, straightened her skirt, made a gun out of her hand, pulled the trigger, and gave him a peck on the cheek.

Marlon carefully backed out of the alley as he tried to process what in hell had happened, noticing the girl eyeing him dreamily. He kept his mind on obeying the rules of traffic and tried to stop wondering why this girl he didn't know was happy to be with him. Especially considering the way he treated her and how he'd proven himself worthless when asses needed to be kicked to ensure her safety.

As Marlon pulled back into traffic, the girl clapped him on the shoulder and pointed at her wrist. Tapping at the spot where a watch might be and shaking her head. Still smiling. Still looking at him like he was her saviour. Still confusing the hell out of him.

"Yeah, time. We're pretty much out of it. And there's a chance someone called in a 'shots fired'. Even a silenced pistol is loud enough to attract attention." Marlon drove in the opposite direction he'd been heading when he stopped to begin the street



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fight she'd ended for good. "You..." He hesitated, looking around. "I got to call you something, since you won't tell me your name."

She continued to smile as she listened to him. Like she was remembering something peaceful and warm.

"I'll call you...? I don't know. Alison?"

She frowned, shaking her head. She put her right hand to her ear and tilted her head to rest on it while placing her left thumb in her mouth and suckling it.

"Baby? You want me to call you baby?"

She removed her thumb from her mouth and smiled again, nodding.

"My name's Marlon," he added.

She shook her head with pity. She already knew.

"What's yours?"

She shoved him. He shook his head. "Had to give it a shot." He paused, almost apologising for treating her poorly, and looked to see the need for approval still present in her eyes. "I'm going to stick with calling you 'bitch'."

She pulled a long face.

"It suits you." He stroked her neck and she swatted his hand. "Because you're nothing to me. You realise that, right?" She looked away. "A useless bitch, like all the others. Speak up if you disagree."

He stopped at the red light a block away from his office's parking garage. "Okay, bitch. Here's the thing."

She looked at him crossly as he fixed her gaze.

"I got some business that involves me leaving town. But I can't go before I fix another problem." He rubbed his temples. "You cost me a lot of money, and reputation, but—that being what it is—I got someone I got to see to before I leave. Okay?"

She shrugged, her eyes looking down.

"What is it?"

She mimed swinging a golf club.

"I don't know what that means, bitch." The light changed and he hit the gas. "But we got to do this."

Her shoulders slumped and they drove into the parking garage on the right side of the next block. She looked at Marlon with tearing eyes as they reached the ground floor, got out of the car,

and exited the garage through a doorway leading to a stairwell. As the lighting grew dim, she held his right arm and hid her face away.

They were in Marlon's office seconds later and, in the bright light, she rested her head on his shoulder.

"You afraid of the dark or something?"

He looked bemused as she nodded, recalling how deftly she'd beaten and killed two contract assassins.

"Something from childhood?"

She shook her head, never letting go of his arm, as she looked at the desk in the corner, the concrete walls, and a stream of urine coming from the entrance to an open bathroom. She clutched him as he moved toward the door.

"Someone's here. I wasn't kidding." He patted her head and she brushed his hand away. "Thanks to you, we don't got to drive her home before we go. If you still want to leave town with me."

She nodded and shook her head at the same time, indicating she wanted to go with him, but didn't want him to go into the bathroom. She tugged his arm as he moved again. He questioned her with his eyes as she loosed her grip, pointed to her wrist, and shook her head.

"What?" He moved toward the bathroom. "No time?"

She nodded feverishly and pointed at the exit, miming putting his car into drive and steering.

He scoffed. "No shit. I'll be right back."

She motioned for him to return and he motioned for her to fuck off as he disappeared into the bathroom.

She paced the floor as she heard him curse. Upset, as she'd expected he'd be, at what he found. Then she heard the sounds of tools being moved. And digging. Bones being broken. Lumber being cut. Nails hammered. Damp mud or cement being poured and raked.

When Marlon came back into the main room, the girl looked at him humbly, then at the exit. Eager to leave.

"No questions about who your antics got killed today, you simple, selfish bitch?"

She shook her head and pointed at her wrist, then up and in the direction of the street.

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“What are you talking about?” he snapped. Feeling stupid, having asked that question of a girl who was, apparently, mute by choice. “No worries, except cash. But you can starve. My cargo—”

She continued gesturing, aping everything that happened to them in the alley. The old man with the golf club. As she moved her jaw to imitate the old man raging, Marlon’s face flushed with remembrance.

“Dead already?” She nodded, smiling sadly for a moment and then tapping her wrist again. She looked at him with concern as he asked, “How would you know?”

Her body went limp as he grabbed her by the shoulders and asked her again, shaking her with enough force to make his point but trying not to hurt her. Wondering if he could. Thinking about her braiding her hair while she beat him into paste and sent him on to the afterlife.

“Christ, bitch.” His grip relaxed and she moved her head quickly to kiss the tops of his hands. “I know you said not to ask you to talk again. Or whatever. But you got to say something about this. Did you know?”

She kissed his hands again and dropped her head down, looking up at him like a frightened child.

He let go of her as he felt anger grip him. Brushing her shoulders with his hands and smoothing her top as he pushed her away. “It’s your fault my cargo’s dead, bitch. You burnt me double. You save my life, but you kill my meal ticket? Did you let this girl die so I’d need you? What do you want from me?”

She put her arms around his waist, kissing him on the chest as he held his hands up and to the sides. As she continued to hold him, he wrapped his arms around her neck and hugged her.

He pulled back, after nearly losing himself in the comfort of her embrace, and looked her in the eyes.

“You know where I’m going, you pest?”

She nodded and gave him a slap that caused him to stutter-step backward.

“You know why?” he asked, nodding in return. “Bitch?”

She nodded as tears streamed from her eyes and she hugged him again.



# VII

Anson Williams walked across the acres of land leading to his deceased parents' farmhouse at 1423 Main. Two acquaintances—and one lifelong friend—trailed behind him in the coming night. As they grew nearer, his walk slowed. Remembering the smell of a bathroom, an attic, and a dark, claustrophobic cellar. The smell of mould and wet. A smell that stung as deep and hard as it revolted. Remembering Franklin and Betsy Williams and the mistake they'd punished by naming it Anson Blaine.

Victor DeFranco jabbered as he walked, going on about how Anson should put the rotting house of cards on the market and pray he got a dime for it. Maybe rent the land to offset the losses after tax. Victor held the hand of his girlfriend, Alison Ross. She'd pretended she hadn't wanted to come and spend one night, or one second, helping Anson enjoy the discovery of his inheritance. She didn't want to see the inside of the farmhouse only slightly more than Anson did, but she'd agreed to come. If only to satisfy an urge she would never admit to having, and not without cost.

Alison's best friend, Alexis Woods, followed behind them, dressed in jeans shorts and a loose plaid top. She'd buttoned it from the bottom, enough to cover her stomach, but not enough to keep her breasts completely hidden from view, though she wasn't wearing a bra. A habit she'd gotten into when she'd come to terms with the fact no man would touch her as long as her brother lived and breathed. And, though he'd been gone for two years, she still

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felt some sense of safety in that regard. Her older brother had protected her from her father, so she'd initially never protested when he protected her from the advances of boys her age. Even if she did reciprocate their feelings. As far as anyone knew, she'd never been touched by anyone but herself all her life. Victor's brother Charles thought he might break through but, as soon as he tried to redefine their relationship, it became obvious they were never meant to be anything more than friends. And, hopefully, they still were.

Alexis looked up as they trudged through the dry, brown grass, watching Anson's broad shoulders bob as he walked on the weak soil and remembering how badly, and how often, her brother Marlon had hurt him. Anson had never done anything more than treat her with decency. And, for a moment, she felt sadness.

The group's walk slowed as they reached the barren patch of land a few feet from the front steps of the Williams' farmhouse. Franklin Williams had a bad habit of dumping unused kerosene out front and, when he was manic, lighting it on fire. After countless years of his reckless behaviour, nothing grew in front of the steps anymore. Even the area around the dump site was thin, as if the grass knew what fate awaited it if it dared creep closer to crazy old man Williams' front steps.

"You ready, guys?" Anson glanced at Victor, who nodded, Alison, who stared blankly, and Alexis, who looked him in the eyes and smiled the most despondent of smiles.

"Let's go, daddy." Victor pushed Anson forward. "Let's open this bad bitch up and put her to work."

Anson looked at Alison, who quickly looked down and away. "Whatever you want." She swung Victor's hand in hers.

Victor gave her a stern look. "Not now."

She let go of Victor's hand and threw hers in the air, looking at Anson. "I'm sorry, Ants. I didn't want to come out here, okay? Vic said this would be no big deal, but I feel dirty already."

Alexis moved past Alison, bumping her shoulder by accident as she walked toward the steps. Not looking back as she spoke. "We get it. You don't want to be here."

Alison looked at Victor, who shrugged. No backup.

“But Anson—That’s Anson, not Ants—wants to check this place out. What can it hurt?” She walked up the steps onto the porch, beside Anson, and whispered as she wiggled the front door’s knob, “God bless her but she drives me crazy sometimes.” Anson suppressed a smile, though Alexis wore her grin with pride and began speaking at regular volume again. “Come on. Let’s see what the elements have done to this place for two years.” She rubbed Anson’s shoulder. “You deserve better.”

“Fine, I’m coming.” Alison marched to the door. “And, please, tell me the utilities are turned on because I’m not peeing in the weeds.”

“I don’t think anything’s on.” Alexis looked at Alison and scoffed. “No one paid the bills while this place stood vacant. They must have forgotten you might visit one day.”

“God, Alex. Why are you—?” Alison began as Victor stepped into the middle of the impending catfight.

“Whoa.” Victor looked at Anson, grinning. “Retract the claws and let our boy have his night. Okay?”

Alexis was fine with it, and Alison acquiesced grudgingly. “Rock and roll, Ants. Do the honours?”

Anson gave the front door’s knob a twist. As it squeaked like a metal fork scraping the inside of a tin pan, a cluster of clouds covered the moon and the area by the door, under the overhang, went pitch dark. He pushed the door open, and they all took a step back as the light evening breeze blew ages-old dust up and into the night sky.

“I told you this place was filthy as hell,” Alison said, covering her mouth. “God knows what’s been growing in there. It could be a threat.”

“It’s fine,” Victor assured her, looking at Anson. “Maybe your parents did you a favour trying to keep this place from you.”

Alexis looked at Alison and shook her head. “Just cover your mouth with your shirt. Pretend it’s Fat Tuesday.”

“You did not—” Alison said, still looking to Victor for backup that would never come. “Why don’t you show us your muffin-top?”

Alexis turned her face away from Anson in embarrassment. “I meant like Mardi Gras. It was a joke. You don’t have to be mean about it. I’m sorry I’m not as skinny as you.” Alexis pulled a package of tissues from her shorts’ front right pocket and placed one over

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her mouth and nose, offering one each to Victor and Alison. Victor grabbed his, and Alison took hers from Victor, not returning Alexis's gaze. Anson pulled a napkin from his pants pocket when Alexis offered him one, but thanked her for thinking of him.

Anson followed Alexis into the farmhouse and Victor stopped Alison on the door's sill, winking at her.

Alison shook her head as Victor closed the door. He held it shut as he motioned for her to go behind the farmhouse and whispered, "Grab some wood from the back so we can jam this thing."

"Why? Let Ants and Alex out."

Victor looked at her with frustration. "Come on, sugar. They'll be fine. They can get out through the cellar doors or the kitchen window."

Anson's voice called out as Alison stood her ground and glowered. "Vic. What the hell? Open up." His voice sounded hoarse, but Victor was too giggly to notice.

"The air is really bad in here," Alexis's voice added as she pounded on the door. "I'm not kidding. It's dangerous."

"Open the kitchen window, you sheltered little shit." Victor laughed. "It ain't a maze in there, baby."

Alexis's voice came through again. "Come on, Vic. This isn't funny. Anson doesn't sound well." Her pounding grew more aggressive. Her kicking followed immediately after.

Alison crossed her arms and fumed. "Stop it."

"But..." Victor pointed at the door. "Don't you want to—?"

The sound of heavy coughing came from behind the door.

"Hold on," Alison yelled. "I'm getting my jerk boyfriend off door patrol." Alison pulled at Victor's hand, but she was too weak to move it. She whispered, "If you don't open that door, I will cut you off." She pointed to her crotch. "That's right. No loving for you for a good while. And I'll kick you in the nuts so hard your plumbing will be useless for longer than I'm willing to wait."

Victor's expression drooped. "Really?" Alison nodded, though she had no intention of kicking Victor in the testicles and she enjoyed having sex more than he did. "Fine."

Victor let go of the knob and the door flew open. Alexis bolted outside, her shirt covering her face and her bare breasts on

display as she hawked and heaved. Victor's gaze drifted, darting quickly away as he felt Alison's eyes on him.

Alison rushed to Alexis. "Is Ants okay, Alex? Are you all right?"

As soon as the words left Alison's lips, Alexis pushed her away. "Fuck you both." She was still coughing, but catching her breath. Putting her shirt back on and giving Victor the finger, waving it in his face. "Really funny."

"Calm down, Alex," Victor said, eyeing the waistband of Alexis's now low-riding shorts, no longer caring if Alison saw.

She looked at Alison, who kept her distance. "Seems your boyfriend doesn't share your disgust with my body." She looked at the door. "Is Anson still in there?"

"Ants?" Victor jolted as Alexis smacked him on the temple to redirect his attention from the soft flesh below her belly button. "Hold on." Victor ran to the doorway. "Ants? You okay?" He turned and looked at Alison and Alexis. "It's too dark. Did he go out the back?"

Alexis stormed up the stairs to the front door, pushing Victor out of the way. "There's no way out the back except through the cellar. You're such a pussy, Vic."

"What's your problem?"

Alison pulled Victor down the steps. "She's upset. What you did was totally uncool."

"But don't you—?"

"No. I don't want to take a tour of the mushroom farm. Either help undo what you've done or let's go. I'm seriously pissed at you."

"We can't leave them."

"If you're not going to help, we may as well," she said. "You have the rest of your life to apologise."

"Like you don't owe Alex a 'sorry'."

She scowled at him. "And you better never think about her when we're in bed. I saw you drooling. If I even catch you closing your eyes when you're nearing the finish line, we're done."

"Why would I? She's a plumper, according to you." Victor chuckled. "And don't you go thinking about Ants."

"As if." Alison pursed her lips to keep them from twitching as she looked away, feeling heat between her thighs. "I would never—"



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“Okay, I’ll pretend I didn’t hear you ask how he was before you remembered to ask Alex if she was all right.”

“I was shook up...” She looked down, keeping the shivers inside as she ran away. “It was your idiotic stunt.”

Alison disappeared into the darkness. After stewing for a few moments, Victor mumbled, “See you tomorrow, bitches,” and walked off in the direction of her apartment.

# VIII

John washed down the last slice of blueberry pie with the last of the coffee at Miss Daisy's Diner and let out an obnoxious burp. Doe sat beside him, his coffee half-full, his pie picked at. Grumbling to himself.

Charles had gone back into the kitchen to prepare for the supper rush when he'd determined that—though he didn't like them—John and Doe didn't present any real threat.

Alexis hadn't been happy when he'd left her alone up front. She was even more upset now, glancing at the clock above the entrance to the back, noting it was almost four thirty and no one else had come in to eat. Normally, that would have been fine with her but, today, with John sitting at the dining bar eyeing her like she was on the menu, and Doe verbally degrading her at every opportunity, it was torture.

"No more pie?" John reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a fat leather wallet.

Alexis held up her pen, stood on her tiptoes, and stared into the kitchen, pretending to check. She looked back with a pout. "I'm afraid not, gentleman. You ate it all."

"If Miss Daisy were alive today," Doe growled, "she'd roll over in her fucking grave." He looked at John. "Let's get out of here."

John patted Doe on the hand and smiled at Alexis as he spoke. "Calm down, Doe boy. You ain't making sense. Unless Miss Daisy's buried alive. Tell me Miss Daisy's okay, Alex."

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Alexis involuntarily chuckled at John's reply. "Yes, John." She reached her hand toward him, not close enough to touch. "Miss Daisy's doing fine. Counting her money somewhere other than here."

"You sure there's no more pie?" John asked. He looked at Doe and rubbed his stomach. "I could eat peach if you're saving that cherry." He wagged his finger at Alexis as he continued. "I know there's cherry pie in this fine establishment. I can smell it. Don't lie to me."

She returned his smile as well as she could.

"It's not even suppertime yet."

She looked at John crossly. Seeing his smile fade, she turned away, her skin crawling. She grasped the edge of the counter that opened to the kitchen and got on her tiptoes to see over the edge, motioning to Charles with her eyes. "Chuck?" she asked as he washed lettuce in the back corner. "We don't have pie for the supper rush, do we?"

"What?" Charles turned off the tap on the sink.

Her head peeked in farther as she grabbed the inside of the counter and asked again, "We don't have pie left for the supper crowd, do we?"

She heard muted whistling and looked over her shoulder to see John pointing at her bottom and Doe nodding.

"We can almost see it," Doe said. "No point saving it for later. Show us that pie."

Alexis looked at the hem of her skirt and, feeling a dry breeze between her upper thighs, she planted her feet firmly on the floor.

"That's lemon meringue," John said as Charles's voice answered 'no' in the background. "Must drive the boys crazy."

"Pure fat and sloppy." Doe looked into Alexis's eyes. "If you get a chance, tell Jane he still has options. Though he's doing you a favour, you nauseating, washed-up shortcake."

Alexis's face went pink with anger, confusion, and embarrassment as John stood. "We should go." He pulled out a hundred-dollar bill, pressed it flat on the counter and slid it to the inside edge. "I don't want you to think I'm not a nice guy. Like Doe, who has nothing but contempt for everyone."

“Fuck all you ageing beauty queens.” Doe moved toward the front door. “You never had to try before, so why start now? The dogs eat what they’re fed, no matter if it’s penicillin.”

Alexis grabbed the bill and John held it in place, staring into her eyes, making her smile look even less convincing. “Don’t give any of the tip to the house. You earned it. Okay, Alex?” She yanked the bill as he let go, watching her fumble to regain her poise. “God damn if you ain’t the cutest thing I seen in a long time. Maybe I’ll ask you for your number. Later.”

“Please leave,” Alexis whispered on trembling breath, trying to keep herself together. Looking straight ahead as Doe opened the front door and John turned to follow him.

“We’re just having fun.” John smiled wider. “Cheer up.”

Alexis kept looking forward, her lips twitching as they fought to grin. To look like everything John and Doe said had bounced right off her.

Doe sneered. “You’d think with all the inbreeding, you hillbilly pieces of trash would have a sense of humour. Maybe you fucked Marlon and your old man one too many times. Oh, and tell that punk rapist we got to talk to him.”

John caught the door, making sure to jingle the bell a few more times as he exited, and said, “Marlon, he means. Your old man got lucky.” John gave her a wink and the door slammed closed behind him.

Alexis strode to the front door and watched the men she’d let demean her walk out of sight.

Charles came out from the back, looking at the clock and scrunching his eyebrows. “It’s nearly five? This town is dead today.”

Alexis smacked Charles’s hand away as he moved to touch her. “No you don’t.” She looked away as tears of humiliation welled in her eyes and she knelt to clean Doe’s spit from the floor in front of the dining bar. “Not after letting that happen.”

“What are you—?” Charles looked at Alexis on her knees, scoffing. “I was doing my job. So were you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she snapped, talking to Charles’s back as he returned to the kitchen.

“You know what it means. You lead them on. Take them nowhere, and cry when it backfires.”

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“Fuck you,” she screamed, drowning out the sound of the front door’s bell.

“How you doing, Alex?” Deputy Jeffrey Goines asked, patting the walkie-talkie on his belt. “I’m not going to have to call this in, am I?”

“No, sir.” Alexis smeared the tears from John’s, Doe’s, and Charles’s verbal assaults into her cheeks as she walked behind the counter. “Just having a rough day and...” She waved her hand to showcase the empty seats. “It’s been dead since I started. The waiting is worse than the waiting.” She chuckled. “What can I get for you?”

“You know me.” He took a seat. “You sure you’re all right?”

“Why would you ask that?” She wrote down his order, placing it on the counter and giving Charles a whistle.

“Saw two out-of-towners leaving is all. They give you trouble? Because I’ll be happy to take care of them if—”

“No.” Alexis placed her left hand over his right, on the counter. Shoving the three twenties and a ten she’d made, by keeping her mouth shut while two pieces of scum had their fun with her, deep into her uniform’s utility pocket. “Those two were just hangers. Drinking coffee. Free refills and pie until we ran out. Jabbering for hours. Not much for conversation, except between themselves. They were nothing. Just glad they left before they ate us out of rations.” She stifled a sneeze. “Are you smoking again?”

“No. Still off the sticks.” Jeffrey looked over his shoulder, seeing no signs of the men. Turning his right hand over and rubbing the back of her left with its thumb. “You know there’s no hard feelings, right? You can call me if you have troubles.”

“Of course I do.” She smiled. Still fake, but coming much easier. “I know you’ll always look out for me.”

Charles groaned and Alexis and Jeffrey looked at each other, trying not to laugh. He let go of her hand as she moved away, pointed at the phone in back, and nodded as she whispered, “You reminded me. I have to make a call.”

Within a few minutes it was obvious whoever Alexis was calling wasn’t there. That didn’t stop her trying.



# IX

**A**lexis Woods graduated from high school with honours. She'd grown over the past year. Still shorter than she'd like, but more mature. Garnering her additional inappropriate attention from the boys at school and men from in and out of town, which kept Marlon busy.

Things had changed, for everyone she knew closely, over that year. Jennifer Harrington and Jeffrey Goines had tied the knot, planning to have a child. Jeffrey and Wilson had become police officers, but their friendship suffered when Wilson scored higher on a battery of tests and became his superior at work. Alison had become extra-popular with the boys, because her parents were seldom around and, when they were, they didn't care who she brought home or for what reason. They felt they were respecting her rights as an individual. She felt immune as a diplomat. But she had settled down. To a degree. She now only dated, but only openly. Which, by her definition, meant she was exclusive with whomever she dated but—should the opportunity arise, and the desire exist to sustain it—she, or her exclusive partner, were free to have sexual relations with other people. That didn't make sense to Alexis, but it didn't have to. Alison's life was her own, and she'd never drifted far from Victor and Charles. She dated Victor exclusively, and had sex with Charles often, but Victor didn't know about Charles. At least Alison believed that to be true, since she never mentioned her relationship with Charles to anyone.

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Anson had taken early graduation—going to summer school—and worked at his father’s farm. She rarely saw him anymore. Knowing everyone would drift farther apart over time felt sad, but inevitable. Knowing she might never see Anson again felt worse. Yet he’d shown up to watch her graduate. He’d stood and clapped loudly enough to make sure she noticed him, which brought a genuine smile to her face and made her graduation picture one of the few possessions she held dear.

Though he’d promised not to, Marlon beat up Anson in the parking lot later. Ensuring he was no longer present after the ceremony, recitals, and other bullshit everyone had to go through to commemorate having sat in chairs on schedule for a good chunk of their lives.

She went to a party at Alison’s house later that evening. Alison dressed for the occasion, which meant she wore less than she usually did. Her sheer black one-piece dress showed the sides of her breasts. The slits down the sides ended at the middle of her hips—affording everyone a peek at her naked ass—and the hem rode two inches below her pubic arch. She had her poses and walk down perfectly. Even when she sat, the boys didn’t get to see what she was barely hiding.

Alexis arrived in a sheer white calf-length dress, with flesh-coloured underwear. Not nearly as revealing as Alison’s dress, but sufficient to draw enough attention that Marlon eventually left, letting everyone within earshot know there’d be hell to pay if they touched his little sister. By that point, she was too drunk to care what he thought or said. Her hair was straight and long, almost reaching the small of her back. Making her feel sexy, though her brother’s residual influence ensured none of the boys approached her. Seventeen years old, going on eighteen. Graduated from high school and she’d still never really kissed a boy. The more she drank, the sadder she felt until, eventually, she blacked out.

She woke, sometime in the middle of the night, on a bed of plastic cups and confetti. Still in her dress. Unsullied. Even passed out on her stomach and easy pickings, no boys had risked touching her.

She sat, inspecting her dress, and noticed her crotch was drenched with urine. The smell made her face pucker and she stood.

As she wobbled back to the house, she saw a man sitting in a plastic chair on the patio, snoring like a power saw.

When she saw the man was Anson, she startled and turned around, catching her foot on the chair and stumbling away, rubbing her forehead and temples. Wondering if she was dreaming and looking for anything that couldn't be real.

"Evening, Alexis," she heard from behind her, and she froze. Feeling more warmth between her legs as she heard his footsteps and her face turned pink with shame. She sniffed quickly, confirming she smelt like a chamber pot. "Are you feeling better?"

She stood, afraid to turn around and look at him. Knowing whom she wanted her first real kiss to be from. A decision she'd so much as made when she'd given him a peck on the cheek in elementary school. The man, standing behind her, who'd been honest with her about everything her entire life. The man she'd realised, years ago, would love her forever in a way she wasn't sure she could reciprocate.

"I could walk you home, Alexis," Anson continued. "Your brother's probably freaking out. Your dad too."

"I don't care anymore," she said, turning to face Anson. Feeling somewhat hopeful. Mostly feeling ridiculous and not sexy at all. She looked down at her dress and then into his eyes. "Do you? Did I wait too long? Did I blow it?"

"Blow what, Alexis?"

She looked at her dress again, the smell overwhelming her. "My first real—"

Before she could warn Anson, she doubled over and fell to her knees, coughing up vomit onto her dress as her body convulsed. Covering the dark-yellow urine stain, but not making it look or smell any better.

"Hold on, Alexis," Anson said, turning to run and get some towels from Alison's house as she smacked his right ankle.

"No," she said, wiping her mouth with the sleeves of her dress. "Garden hose." She pointed to the corner of the house, left of the door.

Anson rushed to the spigot attached to the house, tossed a length of hose to Alexis, and gave the handle a sharp twist. She



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picked up the live end of the garden hose and motioned for Anson to crank the handle until it stopped turning. He did as she asked, just as she opened up the nozzle and water jetted out over her right shoulder.

Anson moved to stop the flow of water and she held out her hand, holding the nozzle above her head and soaking herself clean. Pointing the nozzle directly into her face for the moment it took her to realise doing so hurt like hell, then holding it above her like a showerhead and directing the water through her hair, down her back, across her legs, and down her front from collarbones to crotch. Dropping the hose and waving to Anson to crank the handle back and cut the water.

“Are you okay, Alexis?” Anson asked as he hurried back to her. She stared at the ground as she held her hands between her knees and shivered. On the verge of feeling much better than okay, but too drunk to feel her lips or most of the rest of her body. Cursing her condition and thanking God for it simultaneously.

She watched as Anson approached her, trying to look away from the parts of her body that were excited even though she didn’t get to experience the pleasure. Wondering if she was showing him too much and then remembering she didn’t care anymore.

Seeing Anson’s feet stop in front of her she looked up. Gulping as discreetly as possible as she noticed he was aroused—A state she didn’t expect she’d be able to elicit from him only a few minutes ago—and forced her eyes to continue rising to meet his gaze as she felt the wet between her legs fill with warmth.

She smiled as their eyes connected. “I’m so sorry, Anson.” She wiped at her mouth again with the wet sleeves of her dress. “You wouldn’t be willing to run inside and sneak me some mouthwash from the bathroom, would you?”

“For—?” Anson pointed to himself and looked around. No one else was there, just like no one else had been when they’d begun their scattered conversation.

Alexis continued to hold his stare as she nodded and smiled more brightly. “Not that the power-sprayer didn’t wash every single inch of me. I just want to be sure.” She paused, taking in Anson’s

dumbstruck expression and giggling again. “And, no, I’m not fucking with you.”

Alexis held up her hands, Anson pulled her to her feet, and she stumbled back a step. Collecting her hair in her hands, making sure it ran down her back. “Dance with me, Anson.”

“There’s no music, Alexis.”

“You said my name again. There is now.”

Anson put his hands on his hips and looked at her. Amazed at how beautiful she looked, sopping wet from head to toe in a slightly-yellowed dress and shivering as she fought to maintain her balance.

“I should take you home, or you should stay here. Inside.”

“No.” She shushed him with her finger. “We should stay here. I want my first real kiss while I’m still wet. I mean, with water.” She giggled again.

“How about I promise you a kiss? We can go on a date. Another night. So it can be special. You shouldn’t waste a lifetime on a night you won’t clearly remember. You can barely stand. And you’re slurring your words. You should be able to feel your first kiss, don’t you think? It would be a shame to taste it with numb lips.”

“Oh, I’ll feel it just fine.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his chest. Dizzy, and thankful she didn’t have anything left in her stomach to reject.

“You really need to sleep this off, Alexis.”

“No. We should kiss. For a long time. To make up for the last however many years. Then I’ll sleep.”

“That isn’t a good idea.”

“Bullshit. It’s a great idea.” She lightly bumped his crotch with her lower abdomen. “I have solid proof you think so too. Don’t overcomplicate this, Anson. It’s simple.”

Anson blushed, rubbing his thighs together. “It’s a bad idea, Alexis.”

“Quit being a party pooper.” She made a pouting face and chuckled. “You know how many boys have tried to kiss me? Something I’m going to do with you for as long as you like, Anson?” She began counting on her fingers. “One, two, three... A lot.”

Rather than argue, Anson put his right arm around Alexis’s waist and guided her toward the front of the house. “Let’s get you home.”

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“No,” she said, her lips drooping and her eyes becoming more bloodshot. “I want you to kiss me, Anson. Like I’m yours, and you love me. I’ve wanted that since elementary school. I mean, not back then, that would have been wrong, but... You know what I mean. Just, please, kiss me. I didn’t mean for it to happen this way, but I think maybe it’s how it was meant to be. And that’s better than good enough. The circumstances don’t matter. You’re the only—”

“We have to go,” Anson interrupted. “And don’t be embarrassed. I’ve loved you since elementary school too.”

She looked into his eyes, confused. “So what’s the issue?” She rubbed his chest. “You’re not going to kiss me because you love me? That doesn’t make sense. Are you saying if you didn’t, you would?”

“No, Alexis. This just isn’t right. You’re drunk. I’m not. You need to, at least, stop and think about it. Really think. If we do this, we’ll never be the same again.”

“We’re not the same now.”

“I don’t get why you’re—”

“You say you love me,” she said as she looked down. “But you think I’m disgusting, I know. Puke and piss. I get it. I fucked this all up.” Then she looked back into his eyes. “But, if you really do love me, like you say, would you please kiss me anyway? This may be the worst you’ll ever see or taste me. If you think about it. It’s the perfect way to start.” She bobbed her eyebrows and grabbed Anson’s forearms to steady herself. “Then it can only get better.”

“No, you didn’t do anything wrong. It’s okay. I just don’t want to ruin us, Alexis.”

“Really? You don’t?” she asked. “Then kiss me. Like I’m a real person. A real woman. I know you can. Only you can. You don’t look at me, or treat me, like an object. I love that.” Her eyes began to drift. “Kiss me?”

“It’s not... What I’m trying to say is—”

“Kiss me?”

“I want our first kiss to be special. Just like you do.”

“It will be. Kiss me?”

“Alexis, please. Really, it’s okay. I want to, but this isn’t—”

Alexis’s eyes misted as the words came from her mouth in slow, clipped whispers. “You made me feel special. Really, truly

beautiful. Inside and out. My whole life.” She pushed him and stumbled back a step. “Just to humiliate me?”

Anson held up his hands and began to reply. Not quickly enough.

“Answer me,” Alexis said, her voice low and primal as she cried. “Say that’s not true. Please, Anson?”

“Look, Alexis. I don’t mean to say—”

“I don’t mean to say,” she snapped, mocking him. Wiping away her tears. “The hell you don’t. You can’t, or you won’t. And quit saying my name. Every time you say ‘Alexis’ it’s like nails on a chalkboard. Normal people call me Alex. You..”

Her voice began to rise and Anson gestured for her to lower the volume, which she ignored as her sorrow turned to rage.

“You’re an insect. You’re a little... something small. I should step on you.”

She smacked him in the face and turned away. Before he could say a word, she spun back.

“You know... Everyone was right. I can’t believe I never saw it. Alison had you pegged from second one, but I thought you were different. Technically, I was right because you are different. You’re a son of a bitch. You’re worse than all the other boys. You’re meaner than my brother ever could be. And why? Because you love me? No. You’re a scumbag, like she always said. A loser. A lowlife snake.”

“I—”

“Shut up. You don’t exist to me. Go away.”

Lights began turning on in neighbouring houses. Anson slowly walked backward. “Calm down. I’ll leave if you don’t want me around.” He stopped for a second as she grabbed her stomach and winced. “I thought I was doing the right thing, Alexis. Being respectful of you. I guess I was wrong. All my life. I was wrong.”

Anson turned and walked away.

“That’s right,” Alexis called after him, stopping for a second and looking confused. “Get the fuck out of here. Leave. Run, Anson, run, you little bitch. Run, you hear me?”

He waved, indicating he understood, and picked up the pace.

“And don’t come back,” she yelled. “Don’t show up where you’re not welcome. This is a small town, but you can avoid me,

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and I expect you to. I never loved you, Anson. I never even liked you. I pitied you, you spastic, creepy, stupid fucking piece of shit. I hate you. Fuck you. I hope you die, you fucking inbred faggot.”

Alexis doubled over, dry-heaving as pain ripped its way up her spine. When she stopped and caught her breath, she noticed she couldn't see Anson anymore. She moved from the patio and looked both ways down the street, but he was gone.

She lurched back to the keg, pumping the tap, but the keg was dry.

Then she sat in the chair Anson had been sitting in, feeling his body's warmth on her wet bottom and holding her head in her hands. Rubbing her temples, stopping, and staring at the ground as she began to sob.

“I love it when you...”

And, as miserable and clichéd as the thought sounded in her head, she felt he'd never say the one thing she adored hearing him say to her, ever again.

“Say my name?” she asked, not wiping her face clean as she wept. Not caring about that anymore. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of that. I don't know what's wrong with me.”



# X

John and Doe took a right at the end of the block, and walked toward the municipal parking lot where they'd left their car.

Doe pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pants pocket, offering one to John and scratching at the scar on his neck. John shook his head, and Doe lit up.

"What is it with the yokels in these Podunk towns nowadays?" Doe grumbled. "Even the ugly ones think they're something special."

John laughed. "Alex wasn't ugly."

Doe begged to differ, but he kept his counter-argument to a grunt.

"I'd pay to tap her bouncy little ass. She's just stuck up. Too good for any man, not to mention the Cro-Magnon hell-spawn in this armpit of the world. Besides, she's marked for torture, mutilation, and death. Buckwheats. So I'm fucking her—any way I want, as long as I want—for free."

"Sure, enjoy. Maybe, next time we go fishing, we could spread our net before the sun starts setting."

"Relax, Doe. It's daylight out. We don't got to leave today. We can still find a bitch to sell on the side. Look." John pointed down the street at a couple walking toward them, a block away. "Didn't I tell you?"

Doe squinted. "God damn. That is a cute piece. And those hips sure do move. She could bring in nice paper."

"Take a mental picture when we pass."

Doe nodded.

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“You can leave her bound and gagged in our motel room for a bit. Put her on a drip. Just take it slow. The minute you snatch her, we’re on the clock for the buckwheats. Best we do both the same night.”

John coughed and they both nodded, tipped their hats, and smiled as they passed the couple and continued on their way. Doe looked back to eyeball the girl’s ass, grunting in animal appreciation.

As the girl’s male friend began to turn his head to look behind him, they faced forward again.

“She’s got to be good,” Doe whispered.

John nodded. “So long as we don’t forget who we’re here for.”

“Don’t worry about me. You—”

“I’ll case Jane’s unfortunate relative, now that introductions are over. I’m going to finish the bitch by scraping her insides clean with a knife. Pop her cherry, if what they say is true. Make her first time her last. Make her regret ever wanting it. That’s a hard, slow way to go, yeah?”

Doe nodded, listening to the sound of the girl’s fading voice.

“You keep eyes on the potential talent. Nothing obvious. You get stuck, what’s the magic phrase? Humour me.”

Doe snorted. “Can you please help me? I’m not from around here and I got to find a place to stay the night.”

“That’s the stuff, champ.”

John and Doe parted ways. Not looking at each other. Not waving goodbye.



# XI

**V**ictor DeFranco looked over his shoulder as Alison Ross continued walking at a steady pace, moving ahead of him. He didn't recognise either of the men they'd snubbed, but noted they were heading toward the municipal parking lot. Just passing through. Like everyone these days, except locals like him and Alison who seemed doomed to never leave.

His eyes drifted back to the tight-fitting jeans Alison wore, though the temperature was too high for them to feel comfortable. He preferred her in black spandex, but thanked God she'd stuck with light denim. Tight, dark Lycra made her lap look delicious, but it didn't keep the goods fresh.

She turned her head and his eyes darted to meet her gaze. "See something you like?" She stuck her hands in her back pockets, giving her cheeks a squeeze.

"You know I do. And if you don't stop teasing, I'm going to take you down the alley behind the diner, peel off those spray-on jeans, and make you scream."

Alison's expression turned ugly. "You keep your eyes glued to these babies." She gave her ass another two-handed pat. "And don't think about the diner until we're there."

She looked at him like she wasn't an idiot as he replied, "I don't know what you're talking about. There's only you."

But he knew what she was talking about. It had only been a few weeks since Charles started dropping by his place, while Alison was there, bragging about how he was 'this close' to making Alexis



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Woods his woman. And only a few days since he'd begun showing up with her there.

It didn't help that Alison and Alexis were best friends from school. Insomuch as anyone in town was friends with anyone else. More like inmates in a prison with no visible bars. Alison stilled her tongue when they came to visit. Especially since Charles and Alexis never held hands or kissed. Like barroom buddies. Never intimate in their interactions.

The second time they came over, the next night—still treating each other like acquaintances—Alison wondered if Alexis knew how Charles boasted about her. Wondered if she thought she was hanging with friends and had no idea she was 'this close' to being Charles's woman. Wondered if Charles considered how it made her feel when he went on about Alexis. Wondered if he'd written her off completely.

Worse still, Alison noticed, Victor enjoyed Alexis's company more than Charles appeared to. Alison had to leave early the first night, but when she'd stuck around to see Charles and Alexis off after their second evening of television watching and beer drinking, Victor didn't make love to her like he usually did. He fucked the living shit out of her. She didn't complain, because—though she relished the tenderness of slow lovemaking—she wanted Victor to use her like she meant nothing to him every once in a while. But she also noticed, as he made her orgasm to the point of exhaustion—spending ample time with his face buried between her thighs—he never appreciated her, or her body. When she looked into his eyes, she saw Alexis reflected back in them. And, while she didn't let that get in the way of a night in bed to remember, it wasn't something she would forget.

Though she never brought it up directly, she felt sure Victor was aware of the hurt she carried from that evening on. And she was right, though he never confirmed or denied it. He just told her she was crazy, which didn't make the facts untrue.

Still, she let it go. Because the thing she was angry with Victor about was the same thing she despised about herself, with regard to Charles. Though, when she fantasised with a partner, the embodiment of her deepest carnal desires, whose given name she

vowed never to speak, dominated her so thoroughly he made every man she'd slept with believe they were amazing in bed. And she lost all concept of space and time when she thought of him while pleasuring herself. Even then, she never let his name escape her lips.

They rounded the corner, heading to Miss Daisy's Diner. By the time they neared the front windows, Victor had tugged her long brown hair enough times that she stopped one store down—in front of the haberdasher's that closed sometime between noon and when the owner felt like going drinking—and made love to his mouth with her own.

In that small time, they forgot all the petty jealousy and vindictive innuendo. And they forgot the two scary out-of-towners who walked like they'd just filled their bellies at the only eatery in town.

"Hey," a voice commanded. Alison adjusted her clothing as she watched Jeffrey's eyes ogle her behind and breasts, practically drooling on his uniform as he simultaneously turned up his nose. "Let's keep it in the bedroom, kids." Jeffrey stared at her crotch as the door to the diner closed behind him, ringing its bell. "Stay safe." He pointed at her, making a mock pistol, and walked around the corner in the opposite direction, his eyes drifting back to her body. Never meeting her gaze.

"You too, Jeff." Alison made a gesture indicating he should go jerk himself off, as he waved without looking back.

When Jeffrey disappeared from view, Victor said, "I think Deputy Jeff wants to give you a good frisking."

Alison giggled as she began walking. "Like I'd go near that loser. I hate cops. And him?" She shuddered. "I'm sure there's more than one reason Jennifer left him. If he fucks like he makes small talk, it's a miracle he got her pregnant. Plus, you see the way he looks at me. Aside from the leering. He thinks he's better than me. Screw him. I don't need that from anyone, much less a cop."

Victor gave her ass a squeeze and she slapped his shoulder. "You want him to lock you up and teach you a lesson. I know."

She slapped his shoulder again. "If I ever sink that low, give up on me, baby. Because you can bet I'll have given up on myself."



# XII

Victor headed into the back of the diner, giving Alexis's breasts a lingering look while she put on her name tag. Alison was too busy fumbling in her jeans pockets for lip gloss to notice.

When Alison realised she hadn't brought any make-up with her, she sat at the dining bar. Resting her elbows on the counter, listening to Charles and Victor as they stepped out the door into the alley, and fixing her eyes on Alexis.

As good as Alison felt, her vibe wasn't helping Alexis, who looked like she'd hit the wall. But Alison didn't care, and it suited her fine to see her friend looking like she'd taken a whirlwind tour of hell. Though Alison appreciated the extra attention in bed from Victor, after Charles brought Alexis by his apartment to show off, she didn't like that great sex came with those attachments. She was as good-looking as Alexis. Better looking, according to some, and she'd lived through rough times. Alexis had a big brother to keep the wolves at bay, even if he treated the rest of the world, including her, like dross. She rarely felt sorry for her. Even when she held Alexis as she cried, and told her she understood. Which, in a much worse way, she did.

"Where is everybody?" Alison asked. "It's almost six." She avoided Alexis's stare. "Maybe this town really is dead."

"It's five thirty." Alexis looked at the clock, smoothing her skirt, covering as much of her lower half as possible. "People will be coming in. Just a slow night on a generally slow day is all."

“So...” A knowing grin spread across Alison’s face. “How’s Jeff doing?”

Alexis forced a sigh. She’d known Jeffrey Goines since they were kids, and she didn’t dislike him. But he’d married Jennifer Harrington after high school and they’d divorced a few years later, with a son they’d shared custody of before the bad thing happened. Still, she entertained the notion of being with him from time to time. He was one of only two men she believed could take care of her brother—like that—if he came home. “He’s Jeff.” She looked down. “Grabbed a few deep-fried doughnuts, made them disappear, went on his way.”

“That’s it? He didn’t suggest you ‘call him any time?’”

The sing-song tone of Alison’s voice rubbed Alexis the right way and the wrong way simultaneously.

“He was awful laid back when he saw me and Vic outside. Didn’t even give us a hard time.”

“Maybe he’s done for the day,” Alexis said. “I know I am. Besides, we were out of coffee—”

“You are so going to hook up with him.” Alison prayed they never did so she wouldn’t have to suffer his company. “No coffee and he still didn’t give Vic attitude? And you’re turning every shade of horny. Look at your face in the mirror.” Alison glanced at the window. “He’d go for it. You should give that colt a ride, at least. Put him through his paces.”

“Shut up,” Alexis snapped, slapping Alison’s hand with her order pad, smiling. “He’s—”

“Only three years older than us,” Alison interrupted as Alexis’s eyes rolled. “If I wasn’t attached, I’d take a run at him.” She looked away as she felt the transparency of that lie on her face. “You wouldn’t have to wipe his ass for long before you were both in hospice.”

Alexis stood, arms crossed, as Alison finished listing the reasons she and Jeffrey should be an item. Wondering why Alison was so hot to see them together. Wondering if she just wanted to see them tank. She tapped her foot when Alison’s drone became annoying, figuring she was trying to fix her up with someone—anyone—so Victor would stop encouraging his brother to hang

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with them constantly. So she wouldn't ever have to deny she would always have a thing for Charles.

"That wasn't what I was going to say," Alexis said as Alison stopped to take a breath. "He's cute, I guess. He's got a nice body. We get along. It's just weird."

"Everything's weird when you grow up in a small town, ice queen. Throw the dog a bone. Maybe he'll throw you one back."

"I didn't mean it like that. Just... His history with my brother."

Alison held up her hands, momentarily disturbed. "Save it. I'll put money on you and the beefcake getting cosy within the month."

Alexis shook her head and wrapped her arms around herself.

"Chuck will live if your weekend romance crumbles. Do what you always do. Make eyes at Jeff while you pretend you don't know Chuck's watching. Your go-to move. It never fails."

"Why are we friends again?" Alexis's skin flushed pink, but not because she was embarrassed by Alison's talk. The two out-of-townners' comments still stuck with her. The way they'd treated her like trash. The verbal abuse she'd taken with a smile for what she pretended was the big tip, but knew deep inside was the fear of what two men, who acted the way they did, might do if she talked back.

"Because we've known each other forever and you love me." Alison smirked and her eyes drifted. "If you don't make a move for Jeff soon, I know some girls who definitely will." Alison sold her bullshit well, failing to note she wasn't one of those girls. Alexis's face flushed again and she rocked herself in the cradle she'd made of her arms. "I'm just playing."

"It's not that. It's—"

"I know. None of my business, but, oh..." Alison looked around excitedly. "We passed a couple mean-looking dudes, headed to the town lot, on the way here."

Alexis's stomach tensed, but she kept her breathing steady.

"I swear they stripped me with their eyes. It felt like they wanted to snatch me up and run."

Alison grabbed the inside edge of the bar.

"Can you imagine if those two started something with you?" Alison held her hand to her mouth and blushed. "Jeff would have

sent them packing. Kicked their asses out of town with a warning to never come back. There's another reason to be with him."

Alexis's smile compressed.

"You could have draped yourself all over him, thanking him and whatnot. Then, not only would Chuck get the picture—" Alexis waved her arms, palms down, and Alison stopped talking. Content to sit and grin.

Alexis smiled, somewhat genuinely, thinking how, if she'd known Jeffrey was coming, she would have let those misogynists feel the full breadth of her wrath. A good verbal bashing and a solid slap or two, even if she had to take a few in return before Jeffrey came to her aid.

"I hate you," Alexis said.

Alison made a heart with her hands, blowing her a kiss through it.

"You always know how to make me feel better."

Alison smiled.

"Not good. But better."

"Screw you." Alison giggled. "You are such a hard-ass." Then she turned serious. "Did you want me and Vic to stay here? Until some customers come in? What with those out-of-towners maybe hanging around."

"No, I'll be—"

Alexis jumped as Victor's voice boomed from the back, bringing the house phone to the dining area entrance. She hadn't heard him or Charles come inside, but she'd been lost in some ugly, hot, confusing daydreams. Alison could take anybody's mind off anything.

Victor laughed. "You do what you got to do. We'll meet you on the main road in front of your mansion at nine." He paused as a voice on the other end of the line said something Alison couldn't make out, but seemed to agitate her. "You'll be there, Ants, or I'll drag you." The voice said something more softly, and Victor finished. "You faggot. Too bad. I'm bringing the bitches." Victor hung up the phone and winked at Alison, then at Alexis.

"Ants?" Alison asked, her smile quivering. "Were you seriously just talking to him?"

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“Come on, Alison,” Charles said, startling Alexis as he popped his head through the kitchen area window. “I don’t like him, but he’s okay.”

“It’s okay for him to creep on my best friend? I think not.” Alison got off her stool, walked behind the bar to put her arm around Alexis’s shoulder, and looked at Victor. “Everyone knows what he’s capable of, especially you. And please don’t tell me we’re ‘the bitches.’”

Victor chuckled. “Just an expression. Don’t mean nothing—”

“So you were referring to yourself and your brother in the third person?” Alison laughed as Alexis looked away, grinning. “Far be it from me to keep you boys from having fun.” Alison made a phone with her hand and gave it a shake. “Give me a ring when you’re done decorating Ants’s farmhouse with pretty pink lace and playing with your Princess Ponies.”

“You should come with,” Victor said. “It’ll be fun. At nine, it’ll be spooky.”

“Hmm,” Alison mumbled. “A night in the middle of what could be one giant three-hundred-plus-acre cemetery with that sex-starved animal. No. Ants and that farmhouse will have me worked up all night.”

Victor’s eyebrows bobbed. “Whatever it takes.”

Alison slapped his arm, flustered and aroused as she replied. “You know what I mean. But, out there with Ants? Who knows what he’ll do. He’s been ‘this close’ to raping my best friend for the last few decades, and I think, given chance, he’d make me—”

“He’s all right,” Alexis interrupted. Charles bumped her shoulder with his hand, his eyes expressing concern, and she brushed him off. “I’m serious. You make it sound like he’s been harassing me my whole life, but all he’s ever been is sweet on me.”

Charles laughed, making Alison smile. “Ants is going to wear your skin for a Halloween costume one day.”

Alexis whacked at him, banging her hand on the counter and sucking up the pain. “He’s never been anything but considerate of me.” She looked at Charles, Victor, and Alison in turn. “And of you, and you, and especially you, Alison, the way you bad-mouth him when he can hear.”

Alison scratched her nose. “You’d think Ants would defend himself against the ‘accusations’ at some point. Yet he never does, Alex. He’s frustrating, to say the least.”

“His name’s Anson, and you’re being mean.” Alexis faced away from everyone, tapping her feet again. “He didn’t do anything.”

“Alex?” Charles asked. “You really believe Ants didn’t—?”

“She knows,” Victor interrupted. “She lives here. No news gets out alive. Ants never admitted it, and they couldn’t make charges stick, but everyone knows he smoked those out-of-towners last year. The man and the woman. That shit was ice cold. Ants is quiet, tolerant. But he’s got mean in him. You remember school.”

Alison’s lips went loose and she covered her mouth with her hand.

“His name is Anson.” Alexis shook her head. “The lunatic who beats the life out of big, burly lumberjacks and their women. The same ‘murderer’ who took regular whippings from my brother.”

“Well, he loves you.” Charles came out front, giving Alison a wink. Singing an infantile song about Ants and Alex sitting in a tree and giving Victor a high five. “I’ll bet he’s waiting for you to realise you need a big, strong man like him. A real tough guy who takes beatings for his woman to protect her.”

“You don’t know,” Alexis said, looking off as the sun set.

While Charles, Victor, and Alison ignored her and argued the logistics of the evening’s trek to Anson Williams’ family home, Alexis prayed to the Lord a customer would come in and run them off.

Her mind drifted, and she remembered the time a vile man and his woman came to town, and only one of them left. It was all the talk. Jeffrey couldn’t get enough of it, and Wilson set Anson up as the doer before what happened was clear.

The two lovers spent the evening down the block at the town bar, The Diving Hole. The man was built like a tree, and his woman was a blue-ribbon beauty. Though the men in town called her something Alexis didn’t want to think about any more. Pie was the word they used. ‘Cherry pie’.

The woman, who craved strong, silent types once her blood alcohol level reached critical mass, threw herself at Anson, who just wanted to drink a Coke and be left alone. Folks said he was reading a book in the corner. Something about the Nazi concentration camps and World War II. She ended up giving him a lap dance and her man didn’t take kindly to it.



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The man dragged them both into the alley and beat the tar out of Anson while everyone watched and did nothing. Even Anson didn't lift a finger to defend himself. Not from the woman's advances and not from the man's physical assault, which left him bloodied, his face smeared in a pile of week-old garbage.

The man, and his woman, ran as soon as he'd finished kicking hell from Anson. Everyone knew where to, since the town generally only had one of everything, including a motel. Anson walked off in that direction after a few of the bigger, badder boys from town gave in to the complaints of their feminine company and helped him get to his feet and find his bearings. They offered to take him to the hospital, but Anson left on his own.

The next morning, that big man and his sexpot woman didn't leave by check-out time and the motel manager went to wake them to the hangover from hell they deserved.

What the manager found turned most folks' blood cold. Though the door and windows were in perfect condition—locked from the inside—and the curtains drawn, the room was a disaster area. That wasn't the bad part.

The man, as capable as he'd been the night before, was helpless. Bleeding from the side of his head, a chunk taken out of his stomach, and beaten to within an inch of his life. Someone had taken issue with him the hardest way possible. His fingers were broken and his teeth were spread across the bedroom, bathroom, and inside the back closet. His skull was fractured in several places and his knees—and parts of his ribcage—were like ground-up wood. If he hadn't passed out from the pain, folks assumed he would have gotten worse, like his woman.

She was alive when the manager found her begging her mother for help, but didn't last long enough for Emergency Services to arrive. She'd been violated repeatedly, violently enough the patch between her legs looked like bloody quicksand. The only semen inside her was later found to be her man's. Her body was disfigured too. Beaten savagely. Fingers also broken. Ribs cracked. Knees bent backward and her left shoulder torn from its socket and splintered like a branch from a dying tree. Eyes blacked and her cheekbones shattered. Her jaw suffered additional trauma, after

dislocation, and the consensus was, even if she lived, they wouldn't be able to put that part of her back together again. She'd drink her meals through a straw until the end of her days and never even be able to scribble she'd once been a beauty queen.

No one, and everyone, was a suspect. But local law enforcement set their sights on Anson, seeing as he had the clearest motive and was the only remotely identifiable suspect—since the man lay in a vegetative state, only startling when asked about his mother or the one-sided fight.

They drilled Anson for days. Though he was a quiet, peaceful man, they figured the shit-kicker who'd come to town and laid him out in public pushed him past his limit. But Anson never admitted to anything, no matter how many times he was denied a lawyer or how many times he was threatened with cruel and unusual punishment.

He took the law's abuse the same way he'd taken the physical abuse he'd suffered in the alley behind the bar. The same way Alexis had seen him take abuse from her brother, simply because he liked her. Because he said kind things to her and never expected anything in return, physical or verbal.

Though Alexis kept her lips sealed during the ordeal, she felt great sadness for Anson while her brother, and most of the townsfolk, were sure he'd done it. Most believed it still. That 'poor young man' who'd been shamed in front of half the drinking population of their hometown was a 'stone-hearted murderer'. The only thing that made her feel good about Anson's situation was no one gave him trouble after that. She was still afraid of her feelings for him, but her heart rested easier knowing he was being left alone, like he wanted. Even if it came at the expense of one woman dying, one man living as a vegetable, and an unknown person—or persons—getting away with murder, never knowing a minute's worry.

Alexis's attention drew back to her immediate surroundings as she heard the front door's bell ring.

"You have to leave," she whispered to Victor and Alison. "And you. Get in the back," she said to Charles.

Turning, her eyes went wide as John walked to the bar and took a stool. "How's tricks, kids?" John scanned the room and grinned. Turning to Alexis and smiling, he asked, "You got fresh coffee, Jane?"

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Charles tried to get Victor's attention without being obvious, but Victor was busy wrapping his arm around Alison and pretending John didn't put him off for a reason he could only feel.

Charles began to move to the front area, and Victor held Alison tighter as she began to open her mouth, when the front door's bell rang again.

"Alex," John continued. "Is it time for pie?"

"Ants?" Victor asked as Anson entered the diner.

Anson took a seat beside John. "Is now not a good time? Too busy?" He looked at Alexis. "Are you leaving early tonight, Alexis?"

"Only if you're asking." She poured a cup of coffee for Anson as John looked around. Feeling a protective vibe coming off everyone, including the only other customer. Laughing inside as he considered how he'd kill all of them if they tried to stop him doing what had to be done.

"I'm Anson." Anson extended his hand. John took it and shook it. "Where are you from? You look like you belong somewhere else."

Alison whispered to Victor as she used her arms to cover her erect nipples, "I swear, Ants gives me the sweats."

John looked at Anson. "Just passing through. You know?"

"I do?" Anson looked into John's eyes.

"God, he makes me bothered," Alison whispered again, as she cursed the damp warmth between her legs.

"Yeah." John looked puzzled. Slightly disturbed.

Though Alexis didn't dare speak, watching Anson chat up a guy she was sure wanted to do horrible things to her made her feel safe and relaxed. Things with Charles were definitely over. If they'd begun.

"I love pie," Anson said. John's smile weakened, but he nodded, looking at everyone again. "Cherry's the best." Anson patted John hard on the back, startling him. "I eat it a lot. It's better if you wait."

"I'm waiting for some myself, um..."

"Anson. I told you already. And the pie won't be ready for a good while. Did you know most folks forget other people's names the first time they formally meet them because they're thinking more about the impression they're making than what they're being told? What's your name?"

"John."

“You take the coffee, John. I’m jacked enough as it is. The night. Am I right?”

John nodded. Anson sniffed the air.

“The cherry pie is cooling. Nobody eats pie until after seven.”

Alexis flashed John a comfortable smile.

“I don’t mind waiting. We could talk.”

John stood and moved to the front door, much to Anson’s apparent disappointment. “It’s okay, Anson. Thanks for the offer.” John glanced at Alexis. “I’ll come back when the pie’s ready.” Alexis didn’t look the slightest bit worried anymore.

“Bye, John.” Anson waved as John left. “I’ll see you later.”

As soon as John disappeared from view, Anson stood, downed his coffee, and pocketed a napkin from the counter’s dispenser.

Charles giggled. “Did we make a new friend, Ants?” Alexis squinted as Charles laughed. He was out of the picture completely.

“Who? John?” Anson asked as he handed Alexis the cost of his coffee and a tip. “He was an asshole.” Anson patted Victor on the cheek as he waved goodbye to Alexis. “Never as big an asshole as you or your brother, but damned close. See you at nine?”

Victor ignored the ugly look from Charles. “Me and the bitches.”

“That’s not a respectful thing to say.” Anson closed the door behind him and stood on the sidewalk, surveying the street.

Alexis watched Anson as he looked to his left, his eyes focussed. Watching John leave. Her chest felt light as she saw him nod and walk away in the same direction. Feeling comforted, knowing Anson would be watching if John, or Doe, returned to torment her after the quickly-approaching supper rush was over.

“Fuck, he’s just so...” Alison jammed her goose-pimpled hands into her jeans pockets, rubbing her thighs together. “But he does love you, Alex,” she added, her smile forced. “You be careful around him. He only wants one thing. From you, he wants it bad. I can tell. It’s in his eyes.”

Alexis took Alison’s words incorrectly, on purpose, looked away from everyone, and smiled.



# XIII

**A**nson Williams sat alone on a bench in the park outside his small town's only school, reading a book. When he finished the chapter he was on, he reached down and grabbed the bookmark from his backpack, slipping it into the book and noticing Alison Ross standing no more than two feet from him, staring and shaking her head. Tapping her feet and crossing her arms in front of her chest, which made her white crop top seem as revealing as her jeans skirt.

"Hi, Alison," Anson said, closing his book and putting it in his backpack. Looking away.

"Why don't you look at me, Ants?" Alison asked. "What's your deal?"

"How do you mean?" He looked her in the eyes and felt their souls bump into each other.

"What makes you think Alex wants to have anything to do with you? I assume that's why you're sitting here. Waiting for her to walk by so you can wave to her. Like that's getting you anywhere."

"Where am I supposed to be getting?"

"You see?" She moved closer to him, not lowering her defences. "That's what I mean. Why are you here? Why won't you leave Alex alone?"

"I'm not bothering her. I only—"

"Yeah, you only," Alison interrupted. "You only run home to jack off thinking about her once you've seen what she's wearing, I'll bet."

Anson shook his head.

“Question. Aside from your mommy, have you ever touched a woman before?”

“Why? Are you offering?”

Alison marched to him and extended her middle finger, waving it in his face. “Fuck you, loser. The only way you’d get this is if you killed me first. Alex feels the same way about you.”

“No. We’re friends.”

“We’re friends,” Alison repeated, mocking. “You wish. She doesn’t like you, so why don’t you read books somewhere else? All you’re doing, sitting here reading every day, is begging Mar to kick your ass again.”

“Firstly, I love my parents, but they make me do chores the minute I get home. That’s why I read here. No other reason. Secondly, thanks for looking out for me. I appreciate it.”

“What are you talking about, retard?” Alison asked, her voice getting louder. “I don’t care if Mar beats you up. You deserve it. I’m asking—No, I’m telling you to keep your distance from Alex. You creep her out but she’s too nice to say it. She thinks you’re special. Not ‘good’ special. Special like you need help getting dressed.”

“You know,” Anson said, still looking Alison in the eyes. “On the outside, you’re not an unattractive girl.”

She pulled on her crop top’s bottom hem. “I don’t blame you for wanting me. Every guy does, but that’s never happening. Whatever you say to Alex to make her not totally reject you won’t work on me.” She moved her face directly in front of his. “Because when I’m close to you, I get as dry as the desert. You’re a loser and you’ll end up marrying one of your cousins, if you’re lucky. But you’ll never land a hot girl like me or Alex. You’ll never get anyone as good-looking as Alex and you’ll never get anyone half as sexy as me.” She slowly pulled up her skirt, her eyes turning into slits as Anson’s eyes didn’t break contact to peek.

“But on the inside,” he continued, “you’re the ugliest girl I’ve ever met. You’re so incredibly vacuous, I can’t comprehend how you manage to barely dress yourself.”

Alison opened her mouth and Anson held up a finger.

“You may be happy, in your little world. In this small town, in this small school. You may think you’re special, but you’re not.

You're average. You're boring and you're plain-looking. You might pass for above average here, where you don't have much competition, but you're not beautiful and you're certainly not 'hot', as you like to point out. You're lukewarm at best. Why don't you run to whoever can stand your company and leave me alone? I'm minding my business. You're intruding. Why are you still here?"

"Because I want to see your face when Alex walks by and totally blows you off. She'll wave. She'll say hi. But all that means is she doesn't want to come near you. And I want to see the look in your eyes when you realise that."

"Why are you cruel to me? I never did anything to you."

"I guess I enjoy it," she said. "I like seeing your nobody ass suffer. Poor Ants. Alex doesn't love me. Boohoo."

"You should stop that. It's not doing anybody any good." Anson looked around, seeing no one. Noting that the low bushes nearer the school blocked his view of it, which usually made the area a relaxing place in which to read. Not hearing the sounds of people anywhere, though Alexis would be done with her after-school activities soon.

"Too bad," she said, shoving him to the side and sitting next to him on the bench. "And don't even think of getting closer to me. Or touching me. You do that and, if Mar doesn't beat your ass, I'll make sure Vic and Chuck do."

"I didn't force you to sit here, much less an inch away from me."

"I'm sitting because we need to get some things straight," she said. "And it's going to take a while to get through that thick skull of yours, so listen up, creep. These are the new rules for you regarding my best friend, Alex. You are not to—"

"Please leave. I don't take orders from you. Go away. Go to Vic, or Chuck or whomever. I don't care. Just go."

"No. You're going to listen and listen good, got me?"

"Yes," he said, still looking her in the eyes. "I understand." He put his hand on her knee.

She smacked him across the face, hurting her hand and turning his expression mean, and her eyes went from squinting rage to wide open and afraid.

“Don’t take that tone with me again,” Anson continued as Alison looked around for signs of life and her inner thighs trembled. “The only reason I put up with you is because Alexis is your friend. But make no mistake. I don’t like you. I never have and I probably never will. Not if you keep on being you.”

“I’m sorry I hit you. I only did what I did because—” Alison touched Anson’s hand, trying not to shake.

“Did I say you could touch me?” Anson asked.

Alison withdrew her hand, the fear drawing lines in her face.

“That’s right, I didn’t.” The calm in his voice unsettled her more than anything else. “I try to avoid you because of Alex. I’d avoid you even if she didn’t exist. My point is, I don’t interfere with your life. And I know everyone thinks I’m a creep or a weirdo, but I fend for myself. There isn’t a problem I can remember I didn’t fix on my own. That doesn’t mean you can’t say what you want about me to Alex or anyone else. It just means you don’t interfere with my life. So I ask. Are you a problem?”

Alison shook her head, a tear welling in her left eye. “No,” she said, keeping the volume low to hide her choppy breath. “But I—”

“Good answer.” Anson patted her knee, gripping it again as her other knee moved away. He still didn’t look. “And knock it off. I have no interest in what’s between your legs. You getting the picture?” He moved his hand from her knee to the back of her neck, under her hair. She nodded slowly, her knees touching immediately, looking into his eyes. Not crying, but definitely falling apart inside. “So, the next time you see me minding my business, what’s your plan?”

“I’ll,” she said, shaking. Feeling Anson’s thumb pushing into the muscle of her neck. Not hurting her. Not molesting her either. “I’ll just... leave you alone?”

Anson nodded.

“I’ll leave you alone. I promise.” She began to stand. “I really am sorry. I was being stupid. I just—”

Her ass hit the bench hard as Anson pushed down, moving her like she was a piece of paper and he was the weight. The look on her face one of deep sadness, no longer fear. “Sounds good. And you’re going to quit bothering me forever.”



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She nodded, sniffing, as a single tear spilt down her left cheek and she wiped it away.

“You’re going to go meet your friends. You’re not going to breathe a word of this conversation to any of them. Do you know why?”

She shook her head.

“Because if I have to kick any of their asses, or I end up having to take a beating in front of Alexis again so she doesn’t have to watch her brother get asphalt permanently lodged in his face, I’m going to know you didn’t do as I asked. Then I’ll get angry. And, this is crucial. Remember this. I’m not angry yet.”

She began to squirm.

“I’m not a nice guy, like I’m being with you now. When I’m angry, I get downright mean. And, if you believe the stories about what I’ve done to other people—which aren’t true—you’ll realise, if you make me angry, that’s what you have to look forward to. Yes?”

Alison nodded. “I... I don’t believe that stuff. I know.”

Anson sighed wistfully. “That’s a step in the right direction.” Alison’s face flushed with embarrassment and fear. “We don’t have to be friends, but we can tolerate each other in a friendly manner, yes?”

She nodded like she had an overwhelming desire not to, though she didn’t look frightened or angry. Emanating sorrow Anson didn’t understand.

“That’s all it takes. You keep your mouth shut about this and don’t antagonise me. That’s all I ask. You do that and we’ll get along fine.”

Anson removed his hand from Alison’s neck. He stood as she stayed stuck to the bench, looking into his eyes. Waiting for instruction.

“You can go now,” he said. “You don’t need my permission to live your life.”

She stood slowly and began to walk away.

“Bitch.”

Alison stopped for a second as Anson’s final word hit her. She turned to look at him and walked away, backward, avoiding his gaze. Lost. Hurt. New neural pathways burning themselves into her brain.

Then they heard the sound of laughter.

Looking in the direction of the school, they saw Alexis, Victor, and Charles walking toward them, waving.

“Leave.” Anson saluted Alison. “Make someone else’s life miserable.”

She stood still. Lips twitching. Not replying. Desperately wishing she knew what words could describe how she felt. Woken from her daze when Alexis bumped into her moments later.

“Hey Anson,” Alexis said. “See you later, okay?”

Anson turned to look at her smiling face. “Definitely, Alexis.” He watched her skin turn pink as she bit her lower lip before turning and smacking Victor’s hand off her ass.

Anson began to walk home and, a few moments later, he heard footsteps rushing toward him. “Anson. Wait.”

He turned to see Alison, Victor, and Charles looking in his direction as Alexis ran to him, grabbing his shoulders to stop herself.

“Whoa,” he said, “take it easy. People are going to get ideas.”

“Good,” she said. “Maybe it’ll keep them from groping me.” She giggled. “Let me ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“Alison said you shoved her around.”

No shock or surprise registered on Anson’s face.

“You didn’t, did you?”

“Come here, Alexis,” he said, turning her away from the crowd and putting his arm around her shoulders as she unconsciously rested her head on his chest. “This is what happened. I was sitting by myself, reading a book, and your friend Alison stopped by to say a few nasty things and tell me to stay away from you.”

“She just worries about me. You know how that is, right?”

“Not in the manner she does. Look, she called me a creep, a loser. I lost track. But you get the gist. And she wouldn’t stop. She thought she could say Vic’s, Chuck’s, and Mar’s names and I’d put up with it. She was wrong.”

“You hurt her?” Alexis asked, dumbfounded. “Really?”

“Depends on the definition, Alexis.”

“She said you asked her to sit with you, then you smacked her and told her to stay away from me or you’d do worse,” Alexis said. “That can’t be true, can it?”

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“No. I was minding my business. She invaded my space. She told me you didn’t want to have anything to do with me so I should never sit in the public park, since you might pass by. And, what I told her? I told her, in no uncertain terms, she could do or say whatever she wanted as long as it didn’t involve randomly assaulting me verbally or physically. Maybe I scared her. I meant to. For that, I’ll apologise, but I’m not sorry. And I didn’t harm a hair on her body.”

Alexis looked at the ground and put her hands around his waist. “I know she treats you bad, but... I think it’s because she has a major crush on you. I don’t blame her. She’s just acting like a child because she doesn’t know how to deal with her feelings. And now she’s upset I caught her eyeball-raping you.” Alexis gave Anson a squeeze. “I wish you two got along. But you don’t get along with anyone but me. Why is that?”

“You’re honest about who you are and what you want. And you don’t treat me like I’ve got a disease you’re deathly afraid to catch.”

“That’s the thing, Anson,” she said. “You are a catch. Or you would be if you were more sociable. If you were more like that, then people would see the ‘you’ I see, see?” She giggled.

“Yeah.” He rubbed the back of her head as she held him tighter and purred. “I think the problem is no one wants to be sociable with me. You’re the only one. Since we were kids. It’s the size of this town. Once a few of them make up their mind you’re a nothing or a nobody, that’s how the rest treat you. And a girl like Alison? She’s popular. She tells everyone I’m a sick joke and that’s it. I don’t think she realises how damaging words are. I guess, in a way, I tried to teach her words can be. I don’t know if she understood. But, if she quits giving me the finger and calling me names, I’ll take it.”

Alexis looked into his eyes. “She does tend to exaggerate, and I’m even more sure she wants you now, though I’m the only girl you have eyes for. So... try to be nice to her, okay?”

Anson nodded as Alexis’s eyes glazed over.

“Thank you, Anson. You realise you didn’t deny you have eyes for—?”

Anson nodded again and Alexis grinned.

“I wish there were more people in this town like you and less like them.” She nudged her head in the direction of Alison and the boys, who were walking toward them. “You deserve better. And you’re... well.” Her voice became shaky, and her face turned different shades of pink. “I’d miss you if you were gone. I don’t know. I—”

“I love you too, Alexis,” he said. “I mean, I like you a whole lot.”

She smiled. “Love is okay. I don’t mean to say... I guess I must love you in some way. I can’t think anymore, you bastard.” She punched his chest as they stopped holding each other. “You always were—”

“What’s your problem?” Victor shouted, causing Alexis to jump. “Yeah, Ants. That’s right. I’m talking to you. What’d you do to Alex? I heard her call you a bastard. You think you can do whatever you want to women because you’re bigger than they are?”

“He didn’t—” Alexis began.

“I didn’t do anything to her,” Anson interrupted, apologising to Alexis with his eyes and watching hers appreciate it. “We were just talking. Having fun. That was a playful punch she threw.” Alexis walked to her friends and nodded, smiling. Still blushing as Alison rolled her eyes and threw up her hands.

“When we throw punches, they won’t be friendly,” Charles said. “You faggot-ass freak?”

Anson looked at Alison and her eyes went dead, her head shaking slowly. Mouthing something he couldn’t make out, but seemed uncharacteristically soft and kind.

Alexis grabbed Alison by the arm harshly. “Stop them. This is your fault. I love you, but you need to tell them to quit it. I know you like Anson, but that doesn’t mean he deserves to get beaten up.”

“Like I’d ever,” Alison said, adjusting her top. “Just because Vic and I are taking a break doesn’t mean I want to give Ants a ride. I wouldn’t French him with someone else’s mouth, and he can take care of himself.”

Alexis gave her an evil look.

“Okay,” Alison said. “I’m sorry I made him angry, all right? Make sure he knows that. I mean... I just... I don’t like him. Not the way you think. Not at all.”

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“You might want to tell your body that,” Alexis said.

Alison stared at Anson, trembling and absently touching herself through her skirt.

Alexis whispered in her ear, “Call the dogs off, okay? If you love me, do that.”

“Okay,” Alison said. But it was too late.

When Alexis turned to look, Charles had his arms wrapped around Anson’s body, disabling him, and Victor was swinging.

“Stop,” Alison screamed a second after Victor’s punch landed. Thankfully, the blow didn’t do any damage.

“We got this,” Victor said. “You and Alex can rest easy. This fucker ain’t going to be bothering you no more.”

“Really?” Anson asked. “You’re not going to stop?”

Charles laughed, and Victor nodded. “That’s right. You picked the wrong day to piss us off.”

“It’s both of you, then?” Anson asked as he saw Alexis holding her hands together. Begging him not to do anything, though she knew he had to or they’d beat him to a pulp.

“Yeah,” Charles said. “Get ready for the ass-whipping of your life.”

“It’s okay,” Anson said, looking at Alexis. “I’m sorry, Alexis. For you, I’ll only do what’s necessary.”

She looked at him and nodded as Alison put her arm around her and she shook it off.

“Do what you have to,” Alexis said.

“Get ready,” Victor said.

“I’ve been ready for the last... How long have you guys spent threatening me and how long have you guys spent hurting me? You’re expending too much energy on the former and not enough on the latter.”

“Laugh it up,” Charles said. “You’ll be crying while you pick your teeth off the ground.”

“I suppose,” Anson said. “If you ever get to it.”

“Just hit him some more,” Charles yelled at Victor. Victor looked at Alison and Alexis, who shook their heads. Women. First they want this, then they want that.

As Victor cocked his fist to throw another punch and, hopefully, draw some blood, Anson peeled Charles's arms off him, turned, and punched Charles in the nose. Dropping him to the ground.

"You mother fucker," Charles cried, pawing at his bloodied, bruising face.

"Do we continue?" Anson asked Victor. "I had to do what I did. You put me in a position in which I had no other option except take a beating." Anson pointed toward Alison and Alexis. Victor glanced at them, keeping his guard up. "We've reached a point where you have to make a decision. You have two options. Either try to hit me, in which case I'll be forced to break your hand so you can't do that to me, or anyone else, for a good while, or go see to your brother and watch me walk away. Choose. Then decide. Does this afternoon end with you crippled? Yes or no?"

Victor looked at the girls. They were still shaking their heads.

"Fine," Victor said, spitting on the ground at Anson's feet. "No. Only because the ladies don't want me to. Otherwise, I'd kick your ass from here to the outskirts of town. You got me, weirdo?"

"I understand," Anson replied. "You chose wisely."

Alexis smirked as she heard Anson's reply. Ignoring Alison's swat and watching Anson walk away. Her eyes lost in a dream.

"Bye, Anson," she called. "See you again soon?"

"Of course, Alexis," Anson replied. "Whenever you wish."

Anson disappeared slowly and quietly as Victor and Alison helped Charles stanch the flow of blood from his broken nose. His shirt looked like a barbecue bib.

"Why do you lead him on?" Alison whispered as she looked at Charles's face and felt her lips tingle. "He's dangerous."

"All you have to do is be nice to him and you might get what you want."

"What?" Alison asked. Whispering even lower, looking suitably nauseated. "Me? Him? I already told you."

Alexis nodded. Whispering more softly, as well. "Quit pretending. I won't tell anyone."

Alison scoffed. "He's so... No."

"Whatever," Alexis said. "I've always wanted to understand him. Like the way he understands me."

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“Well,” Alison said, flustered. “Don’t tell Mar you’re holding a torch for his ass or he’ll kill him. And you’re wrong about me.”

“Sure. I could smell how ‘wrong’ I am when I bumped into you and your eye-boner.” Alison looked at her, confused. “Leave him be if you really don’t like him. He’s not hurting anybody.”

“But he can,” Alison said, shivering.

“When his only other option, to paraphrase, is taking a beating. No, he’s a good man. And I like him. So do you, whether or not you acknowledge it. Don’t tell Mar about this either.”

Then Alexis cranked up the volume. “Listen, boys,” she said. “If you want to keep spending time with me, you’ll keep your mouths shut about what happened here today. If I find out either of you told Mar, you’re out of my life. I can’t make Alison not hang with you anymore, but—”

Alison interrupted. “You boys keep your mouths shut about this if you want to hang with either of us.” She didn’t want to choose between Victor—and Charles—and her best friend any time soon. And she didn’t know what to do about Anson. The other boy in their lives.

Marlon never heard a word about the incident, and Alison never set the boys on Anson again.

Alison never spoke of the incident either. And she never would. Not to anyone.

# XIV

“S eriously?” Alison Ross turned away as she noticed Charles eyeing her stiff nipples through her shirt. “No offence, Alex, but he’s got a nerve.”

Alexis shrugged and shook her head.

“He didn’t even say goodbye to me. I’m not invisible.”

“No doubt.” Alexis’s gaze floated to the front windows and the darkening sky that blanketed nothing. “He was here with another dude before. Both out-of-towners. Chuck can tell you.” She glanced at him. “They made some really hurtful remarks and... I don’t know. They’ve got ‘bad’ written all over them.”

“Who?” Alison asked. “The coffee guy, John, with the lame ‘cherry pie’ line? He’s just some lonely loser. He can’t even talk to a waitress, for God’s sake. I meant Ants.”

Alexis looked at Alison’s chest. “We can see.”

“Take it easy, you two.” Charles walked out of the kitchen and stood with his back to Alexis, facing Alison. “Ants isn’t worth it.” Alexis smacked his arm. Not smiling. Not frowning. Just looking ahead and spacing out while Alison fumed.

“Fuck this.” Victor grabbed Alison’s arm. “Come on. Let’s go watch television. Something scary to get your head ready for our visit to the Williams’ haunted farmhouse tonight.”

Alison pulled her arm back to her side and gave Charles a wink. “No thanks. I’d rather shack up with Chuck than spend the night anywhere near that farmhouse. Ants is so fucking.. He’s fucked in the head. You know that, right? Probably has souvenirs in that place. Parts of those folks he ‘didn’t do anything to’.”



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Victor nodded in agreement and shook his head in frustration.

“You know he did it, Alex. You’re too stupid—I mean blind—to see it, but I can. No way I’m getting stuck in the middle of some field with him.” She shivered and crossed her arms, covering her swollen areolae. “God knows what he’d do to me.”

“I’ll go with you,” Charles said. “I’m not a big fan of the Ant-man myself, but I’ll go.” He bumped Alison’s shoulder, glancing at her chest again. As Alexis watched out of the corner of her eye in disbelief, he then leant back to check out her ass. “You should come, Alison. Me and Vic will be with you. Worst case, you can run like a little piggy, all the way home, while we keep him busy brutally murdering us.”

“You’d do that for me?” Alison asked, stroking Charles’s arm, not hiding the fact she was looking for a reaction from Victor. “Three—Two big, strong, hunky men keeping me company?” She bent over to pick something non-existent off the knee of her jeans.

“Well...” Charles stammered as Alexis walked by him to wipe down the already-clean tables and gave him the finger. Letting it linger so Alison and Victor got a taste. “Maybe not. Alex and I—”

“It’s all right,” Alexis interrupted. “Go. Jeff’s down the block working the night shift. He’ll take me. It doesn’t get much safer than a ride home with a cop.”

“And that leaves me...?” Alison looked back and forth between Charles and Victor. “On my own with three sex-crazed man-children? Acres from town? I likely doubt it.” She walked to Alexis, tugging her arm until she looked back. “You’ll come, won’t you?”

“What did I just say?” The hair on the back of Alexis’s neck bristled as Charles popped over.

“Give her a break, Alison. I can take you home, Alex. No problem.” Charles looked back at Victor and winked, as Alexis wondered how much more clueless he could be. “We get off nearly the same time anyway.”

Alexis turned and put her arm around Alison, who made a pouting face. “But you always finish before me. Then you do nothing while I make sure everything’s taken care of on my end.”

Charles looked at Victor, who shrugged—wincing at the sexual innuendo Alexis used to figuratively castrate his brother.

Charles didn't notice and, though Victor was as devoted to Alison as he was to ice cream, he didn't want to give Alexis cause to hate him. Though he often used Alison's body as a proxy to have the one girl in town no one ever had, he still wanted the real thing.

Alexis tilted her head, looking up. "Fine. I'll come, Alison."

"I thought you didn't like Ants, Alex." Charles's voice sounded desperate. Pathetic.

"I don't like ants," she said. "If you mean Anson, I don't know what gave you that impression. As long as these two are with me"—Alexis spread her arms, touching Victor and Alison's shoulders—"things will be even." She rubbed Victor's chest quickly, as Alison cleared her throat.

"Okay," Victor said a little too eagerly. "We'll get out of your hair." He put his hand on the small of Alison's back. She pushed it down and away immediately, grimacing as Victor gave her ass a pump.

"Yeah, we've got some television to watch. Let's go. Fuck Ants for a while." Alison dragged Victor to the front door, moving behind him and pushing as she grumbled, upset Victor picked up Alexis's sexual intimations. Wondering if he thought he was going to be getting some of 'her' soon.

"See you." Alexis smiled and waved as they left. Wishing Alison felt worthy of a better man, while loving the fact the entire male side of the DeFranco family tree—including their father, who was old school and had goosed her on several occasions—wanted her. Cold comfort, since she'd heard sexual attraction, and everything fun that came with it, never lasted longer than five minutes after intercourse, but better than none.

Charles stood by the door to the back, scratching his head, watching Alison's ass, catching her bittersweet backward glance and wondering what everyone was talking about. "Maybe I should come tonight, Alex. It can't hurt to make Ants a fifth wheel."

"Yeah." She ran the index finger of her right hand down his left arm. "You should. At home. Alone. With a magazine."

She tugged down on her uniform's skirt and got ready for a long night avoiding Charles, to the degree that was possible. Wondering where else she could get a decent job, besides the bar or grocery. Thinking it was time she left town, like her brother. Before

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her looks went. To see if she really was attractive or just the best-looking girl in the room. Small towns had a way of messing with people's heads, making them feel important when—out in the big world—they didn't matter all that much. She didn't want to believe she was insignificant, but she didn't want to live a life of delusion either. Like the beauty queen who'd been turned out, turned ugly, and turned cold in the motel down the street. Not knowing your place could get you killed on a bad day. On a good day it could permanently damage your self-esteem.

“Did you just suggest I go home after work and jerk it?” Charles's voice trailed off and sprung back. “You want to be alone with Ants?”

Alexis scoffed and gave him a condescending smile.

“Vic and Alison are going to prank him. You too, if you go. And if what they say is true...”

Her look turned stern.

“You could end up buried in his backyard. There could be hundreds of bodies buried in those dead fields and you'd never know. No one would, because no one wanted to deal with Ants's old man, and now everyone's afraid of the place. Scared if they go there, they'll disappear. Turn into out-of-towners like all the... out-of-towners.”

“I won't miss that wit.” Alexis smirked.

As she turned her back, Charles looked at the windows, noting it was getting darker outside and seeing her cruel smile in their reflection. Pretty soon, anyone on the street would be invisible, but able to see them clearly. “Why are you fucking with me?”

“I'm not,” she said, holding in laughter.

“What the hell?” He spun her around by her shoulders and held her steady. “Are you doing your thing now? Is that what this is?”

“Thing? What thing? Is there a thing I do?” She smiled, chuckling. “You and your brother, I swear.”

“What about him?” Charles gripped her tighter and gave her a shake. “I get you've got a problem with me tonight, but what's your issue with him? Or is he the problem you've got with me?”

She smacked at his arms. “Loosen the chronic-masturbation grip.” He freed one hand to brush back his hair and she flinched.

“I don’t have a problem with your brother and, no worries, I only climb one branch of a family tree.”

“You think that’s what I’m pissed about?” he asked. Sure she was breaking things off with him to be with a town cop who couldn’t protect his own family and dangling Anson in his face to confuse him.

“No.” Alexis wriggled her other shoulder out of his hands and began to move past him. “That’s not even close.”

Charles’s arm stopped her, and she looked at him, rolling her eyes. “Alex. I’m not upset about you and my brother, all right? I would never suggest—”

“It’s okay.” She shook her head. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what?”

“Do I have to spell it out?”

Charles nodded, his face turning redder than she’d ever seen.

“Fine.” She faced him and crossed her arms in front of her chest. Spreading her legs out and standing firm. “Here’s what’s happening, since you don’t get it.”

Charles gritted his teeth. A look she’d seen him give another boy when they were younger, just before that boy broke his nose. It didn’t frighten her at all.

“I know you think you’re something.”

Charles leant against the wall, scratching his chin and listening to Alexis continue from her place behind the dining bar.

“And I don’t need anyone to tell me what you’ve told your brother. I see the way he’s changed around me. I’m not blind. And I see the way he looks at you. It’s different. You want to know why?”

Charles nodded.

“It’s because you’ve either told him we’re something or we’re almost. Maybe you told him you slept with me, or I’m yours now. Whatever it was, you had no right. We’ve never even held hands or kissed, much less had sex. And the look on your face? I know you told him something like that. Hell, you probably told Alison. She knows it isn’t true, but I’m sure your brother thinks it is, since you brought me to his apartment as evidence.” She looked at the front door, making sure no one was about to enter as she finished. “And I know what Alison knows because she told me, on the way-down-

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low, she's seen improvements in Vic's bedroom performance since you started bringing me there. That's what I meant."

"You're a bitch." Charles walked into the back.

Alexis chuckled. "You and your brother. All us women just for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Like I don't notice you both ogling Alison while you treat me like eye-candy? That's what I'm talking about. I flat-out told you the score and you didn't put up one ounce of fight. Unless the 'bitch' comment was argument." She twirled her finger in the air. "Maybe for you it is. I don't know. Let's—"

"What do you want from me, then?" Charles stormed behind the dining bar, pulling her toward him by the shoulders. "You want me to commit to a relationship in which we don't—as you noted—kiss or even hold hands? You want me to say goodbye to Alison?"

"No." She looked him straight in the eyes. A bit angry, a bit sad. "I like you. I always have, and a part of me always will." She looked down for a moment, then met his gaze. "But that's all. And if you want to keep the eggs between your legs from getting cracked, you'd better back off. Because, though I wouldn't wish it on anyone, I've got no problem turning you into a eunuch." She grabbed a steak knife from under the counter, scoffing. "And don't pretend you wouldn't drop your pants in a second if Alison wanted you. Even if we were 'committed' and she was with your brother."

Charles backed up, shaking his head, not looking scared. Just looking hurt, like he'd already been neutered. "You can put the knife down. I'm not a rapist." Alexis placed the knife on the counter, near enough she could grab it before Charles could close the distance between them. "I don't know if your daddy, your mommy, or your brother ever told you this, but you're not the grand prize. You're not premium stock. You're just a thirty—"

"Don't you dare bring up age." Her bark sounded more like a yelp as she felt vulnerable again. "We're all the same age and you can't keep your eyes off Alison."

"Whatever." Charles put his hand on the doorway to the back. "But it's true, and you are getting older, like everyone else, so get used to hearing it. You're barely a looker. You're in so-so shape, but

your beauty is an illusion, and your act is getting stale. The fact is, when you next look in the mirror, you'll remember what I said and you'll realise I'm right. You're a washed-up, used-to-be-something-special. Nothing more. You're mean, petty, useless, and you can kiss my ass if you think I'm putting up with more of your bullshit, talking to me—and treating me—like I'm some dumb farmhand just done with home-schooling. We never got started? Fine. The less I hear about your sob-story of a life, the better. Enjoy your looks while you've got them, Alex, because they're all you have. Everyone knows it except you. Even your best friend. And, if you ever find someone to be with, he'll get sick of you as fast as you bore of any man's attention, and you'll be alone again. Poor Alex. The whole world wants me, but no one understands me. Give me a break, you pint-sized prude. And keep telling yourself you don't wear shorts under your uniform because it's comfortable. Everyone knows why you do it. Almost none care anymore."

Alexis stood, waiting for the next insult, as Charles finished ranting. Holding her hands together, kneading her work uniform between them. A single tear dropped from her left eye as she shook in place. Feeling more like the piece of trash he so vividly described the longer she mustered the strength to open her mouth without sobbing. "You don't know how I—"

"And I don't give a shit about your feelings, either." Charles walked into the back. "Go cry Ants a river while you continue to string him along. Cry to Vic and Alison. They still like you, though my brother just wants to fuck you, and Alison only keeps you close so she can eat your leftovers. Think about it. She's comforted a lot of your admirers, hasn't she?"

Alexis bit her lower lip, almost snarling.

"Tell Ants to fuck off out of your life permanently. Do it while she's around. Wait and see what happens."

"You're a bastard," Alexis said as she cried. "I hate you, you mother fucker."

Charles opened his mouth to lay on more, but she continued, silencing him.

"You have no right to talk to me like that. You don't know me. You never will. And... fuck you. I'm off."

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“What do you mean, off?” Charles asked as Alexis marched to the front door.

“Goodbye, Chuck, you...” She looked back, her face red and puffy. “You son of a bitch.”

“Hey.” Charles chased Alexis, bashing into the door as it slammed shut. Opening it to hear her running toward the police station. “Who’s going to serve the customers?”

The only answers he got were the whisper of the breeze and a low cough.

Charles stepped outside, seeing John walk off the street onto the corner sidewalk, having a smoke.

“Women.” John took the last hit of his cigarette, dropping it to the ground and smashing it with his foot. “You can’t live with them, you can’t...” He paused, chuckling. “Well, I guess you can kill them. Fuck them all, I say. Can I ask you a question?”

Charles nodded.

“You fucking them all, Chuck? Or just trying?” John’s face broke out in an evil smile, reading Charles’s reaction. “Too bad for you. She’s a ripe one.”

“Hey. You can’t—” Looking around the rest of the block and seeing no one, Charles locked the diner’s front door and ran past John to the police station.

“That’s right. Run, you fucking faggot,” John yelled. “Run as fast as Alex is going to spread her legs for me. I can’t wait to see her pie’s filling spray all over the mattress while she watches and screams.”



# XV

Deputy Jeffrey Goines sat on a dirty old wooden chair behind the counter in the police station's front area, dressed in a tee shirt and jeans. No one was being processed, everything in town was closing within the hour, and there weren't many tourists to deal with. As much as the job bored him, he took comfort in being able to read the newspaper and get paid for it. Wondering what it would be like to move someplace he didn't know the victim or perpetrator of every crime. Then remembering why he stayed.

His ex-wife Jennifer and their son Frederick.

Years ago, when they were a happy family, their hometown seemed the perfect place to stay and raise a family. No worries about the drugs and violence of the city. At least not on the same scale. Schoolyard fights, drunken brawls, public intoxication, and the odd out-of-towner acting up was all he had to occasionally deal with. He got to do his job, train on the latest weaponry, coach little league, and take the time he needed to be a good dad.

But, as good a dad as he was, he wasn't a good husband. He never thought of it the other way. That Jennifer wasn't a good wife. In his mind, she was a perfect wife and mother. They just grew apart over the years. And, as they did, the creases tore. They didn't separate easily, like he expected them to. Perhaps he was as deluded about the emotional process of divorce as his colleagues insisted he was. Whether not or whether so, he didn't plan on finding out. There was enough missing in his life. Enough holes revealing the emptiness inside him. Holes that hadn't existed before he tied the



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knot. Holes he created. To his logical mind, missing people he'd been doing fine living without before they came into his life made no sense. His emotional and irrational mind couldn't imagine how he'd ever lived without them.

His ex-wife. There was a chance they could work it out, if she came back to town or stayed in one place long enough for him to visit her. To call her or see her so they could talk.

But his son was gone forever. Hit by a train. In some city, somewhere. Wherever Jennifer had been living at that time. It didn't matter. The things he remembered most about Frederick were his thoughts just before he heard the news. While he waited for the bus and prayed Jennifer had put him on it, though she had yet to. Wishing the little bastard dead so she couldn't use his welfare to treat him like a lapdog from a distance.

The front door banged open and he stood, touching the billy club and gun on his belt. Ready to kill, though he was probably about to ask someone to fill out a form and calm down.

Craning over the counter to see Alexis unsnagging her waitress uniform's zipper from the door's knob, his hands moved from his belt and he took a step back. As expected, nothing was going on that required immediate attention. Though there might be trouble soon. Hopefully, those out-of-towners had become a nuisance and he'd get to beat the shit out of a couple folks he wouldn't have to say hello to every day after, for once.

"Who's there?" he asked, not wanting to embarrass Alexis more than her uniform already was.

She walked out of the entranceway a moment later, waving and giving him a smile. "Hey, Jeff. How's tricks?"

"With a John on every corner, it's non-stop action." He noticed the shine on her cheeks. "You okay?"

She rubbed her face and sniffled. "Yeah, no. I'm fine. Chuck and I had an argument. That, on top of those creeps earlier. I took off." She looked down, grinning. "I may not be serving you coffee much longer. Left Chuck holding the bag."

"Did those guys come back?" Jeffrey asked, excited.

“One came back, but he left again.” She waved him down. “I hoped to ask a favour. Nothing big. If you’re busy, that’s cool. Or I could wait if it’s all right.”

“It’s not a problem,” Jeffrey answered before enquiring what was being asked of him. “You need a ride home?”

“You read my mind.” She smiled, letting out a weak laugh. Jumping as the front door crashed open and Jeffrey’s hands went back to his billy club and gun.

“Hello?” Jeffrey asked. “Is there a problem?” He motioned for Alexis to come behind the counter and stay out of sight. She did. “Enter the station slowly. Show me your hands.” He felt Alexis hold his leg. “Now,” he barked. Wondering if he was trying to impress a cute girl or if his body was seeking an outlet for the emotional sewage his mind dredged up before she came to ask for help.

Charles slowly walked out of the entranceway, shaking. “Jeff. It’s me, Chuck.”

Jeffrey freed his hand from his gun and let out a deep breath, motioning to Alexis, who was already standing. “You gave us a scare.” Charles looked at him funnily, then at Alexis, his confusion turning into resentment. “We’ve got a couple mean out-of-towners wandering the streets.”

Alexis walked out from behind the counter. “What do you want?” she asked Charles.

Charles dropped his arms to his sides, gave her a quick, demeaning glance, and addressed Jeffrey again. “There was a dude outside the diner and he threatened to—”

“Seriously?” Alexis threw up her hands, unaware her mangled zipper was quickly turning her waitress uniform into a risqué nightclub dress. Jeffrey pointed to it and opened his mouth to speak, but Alexis and Charles weren’t done hashing out whatever their differences were, and he didn’t want to get involved.

“What?” Charles looked at Alexis and shrugged.

“I just left there. After you finished broadcasting what you think of me.” She stamped her feet. “No one was outside the diner, Chuck. So, stuff the histrionics and keep shoving my face in the dirt.” She looked at Jeffrey, who appeared concerned. “Not literally. We’re having it out.”

## HOME

Jeffrey nodded as Charles wedged his words in edgewise. “And I came after you. I had to turn off the ovens and that, but I knew where you went.” He nudged his head in Jeffrey’s direction. “And how are you planning on saying thank you, with me out of the picture? Don’t you generally have the good grace to drape yourself over whoever’s available in front of the guy you’re dumping?”

“Excuse me?” she asked. “I dumped you? You wiped your ass with me. Flushed everything about us down the toilet. If anyone did the dumping, it was you. Though no official words were spoken—Fuck it—we’re done. However you want to remember it. You told me off and reduced me to a puddle of tears? Fine. I broke your heart—the insensitive man-eating bitch I am? Fine. I don’t care anymore. The second you shredded into me, we were over, because I don’t need that from you or anyone. I should kick your ass, you piece of—”

Alexis lunged at Charles, tearing his shirt as he held her shoulders and looked to Jeffrey for assistance. “Calm down, Alex. That’s not the point. We’re over? Fine with me, too. I’m not invested in possibly holding hands with you. Don’t expect me to—” The words caught in his throat as Alexis kned him in the balls and flailed him with open hands. Raining a slap-storm down on him as he dropped to his knees and sucked in air, trying not to puke.

Seconds later, Jeffrey pulled her away. Unable to stop her from landing a few parting kicks to Charles’s chest and face. “Alex. Calm down.” He held her firmly, forcing her body into a relaxed, compliant position. “You need to ease up.” He looked at Charles. “You were saying? A man outside the diner threatened what?”

Charles whined in pain, trying to form words as his hands cupped his crotch and tears welled in his eyes.

“A man outside the diner,” Jeffrey continued. “You said he threatened someone? Is he one of the out-of-towners from earlier?”

Charles nodded, getting his bearings back.

“You’re sad, Chuck.” Alexis shook her head. Calmer, but still spewing vitriol. “You closed the diner early? To make sure I was okay and wasn’t being bothered by some guy who wasn’t there?”

“Please,” Jeffrey said, rubbing Alexis’s shoulders as she snuggled his leg and watched Charles’s eyes go weepy. Not with

pain, just jealousy. Wishing Jeffrey's leg was his waist or some other part of his body. "Explain, Chuck. We need to act quickly."

"The guy? He'd been by earlier with another dude. His name was John, the other guy's name was Doe. Out-of-towners. Nasty fuckers."

Jeffrey nodded. "Keep talking."

"They made remarks about 'cherry pie'. Didn't care if everyone knew they were talking about Alex's..."

Jeffrey nodded and Charles proceeded.

"They made vague threats. Asked if Alex was Mar's sister. Kept calling her Jane. Said they could use her or something. I don't remember exactly. Then, later, Alex and I got into it and she left. When I went outside—after locking up—that John guy was standing there. And, when he talked then, he was a lot more specific. Said he couldn't wait to see Alex's 'pie's filling spray all over while she watched and screamed'. That got me worried, so I came here. The guy was talking crazy. He's from out of town. He's mean and he likes Alex. I assumed he meant to do something bad to her. That's why I came here." Charles pointed toward the diner. "If he's as cocky as he's been all day, he's on the corner by the diner's front door. Waiting for Alex to come back. He's going to jack her in the street. I don't know for sure, but it's the feeling I got."

"The same guy who stopped by the diner earlier, Alex?" Jeffrey asked, as she looked up from her place on the floor and nodded.

"Sorry." She sniffled. "I didn't think he'd come back again."

Charles jeered. "You believe me?"

Jeffrey held up his hand. "Keep it together. You two can continue your spat after we make sure you're not in danger. Or we determine you are and take care of it." Jeffrey looked down and noticed Alexis's zipper was slowly, surely breaking in two. An inch from giving the world a show. He pulled her up, pointing to the back of her uniform as he stood in front of her. "We need to get you a quick change. Before you fall apart."

Alexis reached around her back and felt her zipper. "Oh no."

"Oh yes." Charles clapped. "How convenient. Why wait for a guy to tear your clothes off when they'll do it for him?"

"Hey, eat me, Chuck. My zipper got stuck coming in here." She looked at Jeffrey. "I would never—"

## HOME

“I know.” Jeffrey looked down, sucking one up. “It’s okay.”

“No,” Alexis said. “Not because... I didn’t mean to put you in an awkward position.”

“Why don’t you two fuck and get it over with?” Charles asked. “By then the bad guys will have either gone away or they’ll have to come through you to get that ‘cherry pie’ morning, noon, or night, Jeff.” He looked at Alexis.

“Hey,” Jeffrey shouted, lowering the volume of his voice immediately. “Take it down a notch.”

Charles raised his hands in surrender and took a step back. Jeffrey looked at Alexis and pointed to the back, near the evidence room. “Alex, you know where the ‘lost and found’ is, right?”

She nodded.

“Go on back. There’s clothes there. Jeans. Shorts. Shirts. They’ve been washed. Not your style, but they’ll keep you cosy until you get home, and they won’t burst at the seams.”

He smiled and Alexis ran into the back.

“There you go, girl,” Charles yelled after her. “Finally, new clothes.” He turned away as she flipped him the bird.

Jeffrey approached him and placed his hand on Charles’s shoulder. “Listen. I get this is a tough moment for you and I’m sure you’d rather be doing it anywhere but here. But it is what it is. Let’s focus on what’s important, okay? Some guy’s making threats and you think he wants to hurt your girlfriend. Let’s find that son of a bitch and run him out of town. What do you say?” Jeffrey nodded.

“Yeah, okay.” Charles looked into Jeffrey’s eyes. “We’ll make sure that little tramp gets home safe.”

“What did I just say? Don’t you want to make things work between you two? I’m trying to help you here. That kind of talk isn’t going to win her back, if you think you’re losing her.”

“No.” Charles brushed Jeffrey’s hand off his shoulder. “I don’t think I had her to begin with. And what do you care about ‘us’, anyway? If that sounds like anything, it sounds like an angle.”

“Chuck—”

“Don’t ‘Chuck’ me, okay? Don’t pretend you don’t want her too. Clothes in the back? Really? What’s back there that’s respectable?”

No, here's what I think. I think you're being the good guy. Not because you're a good guy. Because you want a piece of Alex."

"That's not true. You know—"

Charles moved closer. "I'll tell you what I know. You've wanted her since school. Then Jennifer snatched you and—"

Jeffrey's face turned crimson. "Watch it."

"Alex was off limits. No biggie for you, no biggie for her. But then what happened?" Charles rubbed his chin. "Oh, yeah. Then Alex's brother started stepping out with your wife behind your back. It had to hurt when she left you for his dumb, country-outlaw ass. And took your kid with her."

He paused as he saw Jeffrey's fists clench.

"Wouldn't it be sweet if you could turn that around? Nail the sister of the guy who nailed your wife? Tell me the thought never crossed your mind. Tell me it didn't kill you when Mar—"

Jeffrey slammed Charles into the wall by the neck with his forearm. Keeping him quiet, putting his weight into it. Looking around the side of the entrance hallway to make sure he and Charles were out of Alexis's line of sight.

"Say one more word about Jennifer, you cock sucker," Jeffrey demanded in a hushed tone, his teeth gritted. "Say one more word about my ex-wife and that piece of shit who convinced her to walk away from a happy marriage."

"I just—"

Charles choked as Jeffrey applied more pressure.

"You just nothing, you punk." Jeffrey looked back again. Alexis was taking her time. Not necessarily a good thing, but better than having her walk into the middle of this. "I tell Alex I don't hold her brother's actions against her and I mean it. Not because I'm trying to snatch your tail. Because she's a decent woman who got stuck with a brother I'd take into the fields and pop any day of the week."

Charles's eyes went wide as his face turned redder. Feeling light-headed as Jeffrey intensified the choke bar.

"You think that bad mother fucker blew town because it was best for Jennifer or my son? No. He did it because he knows I don't like him. Didn't like him before, and sure as hell didn't like him after

## HOME

I got the divorce papers. That scumbag knew he was dead if he stayed one more day here. Did you know they moved away at night?"

Charles tried to nod.

"Now you know why. And you can bet, if he shows his face here again... Hell, if I meet him in an assisted living facility when we're teetering on the brink of death, I'll give him that little push. I'll blow his brains out on the street in the middle of the day and call it an accident. I'll take my forced retirement. I'll do time. I don't give a shit. Because he's dead. In my head, he's already gone. And you, with your talk? You're writing your name in my bad book. You don't want your name in my bad book. People in my bad book go away. And that's exactly how they stay."

Charles wheezed as Jeffrey looked around—noting Alexis's absence with relief—and finished.

"There's a reason people come to me when they have trouble with lowlife out-of-towners who think this little piece of sod in the middle of nowhere is a great place to do terrible things. They come to me with their problems because I make them go away. Guys like your John and Doe. When I get done with them? If they're a threat, they won't come back. You might say they'll never leave. There's a lot of empty fields around these parts. Lots of shallow graves in thinning soil. You remember that the next time you think of talking about my ex-wife. Or Alex, for that matter. Don't say anything that gets my pen wet. Because my book's open and it's hungry for a name. And if you end up in it..." Jeffrey chuckled. "Hell, I'll put you in the appendix. Where I put everyone who's still walking. Fucked beyond repair but too damaged to talk about it. You keep this up and, on a good day, you'll go to sleep and never wake. Understand?"

Charles nodded and Jeffrey pulled back his arm. "I liked you a lot better when you smoked," Charles said, rubbing his neck. Doubling over immediately when Jeffrey gut-punched him. Dropping to the floor.

"Off your knees." Jeffrey stood Charles up and made a shushing gesture with his hand. "And be cool. You can spill what I told you to Alex or anyone else, but no one will believe you, and then things will go horribly wrong. Your family and friends will weep. But it won't make a difference to me."

They heard the sound of metal hitting concrete and looked to see Alexis hopping back from the evidence area, dressed in a pair of jeans shorts and a plaid top, buttoned up to her collarbones. “Hey guys, what’s going on? Sorry I took so long.” She pretended to look embarrassed. “I kept changing my mind.”

“Whatever gets us out there taking care of your problem works for me.” Jeffrey smiled, putting his hands on his hips, noticing Charles eyeing his billy club and gun, and slowly shaking his head.

“Yeah,” Charles agreed, looking at no one.

“Okay.” Alexis grinned. “I’ll go comfortable.” She giggled as she turned away and unbuttoned her top from clavicle to sternum. Turning back and raising her hands in the air. Showcasing her style. The plaid top was risky above the stomach. Showing enough that anyone could see she wasn’t wearing a bra. Hiding enough that no one could see her areolae. “What do you think? Cool?”

“Works for me, as I said.” Jeffrey looked at Charles.

“Yeah, good. That ought to get any John’s attention.”

Alexis scowled and Jeffrey pulled out his billy club, tapping Charles on the shoulder hard enough to hurt, but not so hard it would make him scream. “Let’s be a gentleman, Chuck. Tell her how nice she looks.”

Charles snapped to. “You look nice, Alex.”

“Gosh, thanks.” She looked at Charles with evil in her eyes. “And thank you for eliciting that thanks, Deputy.” She smiled at Jeffrey and walked past him. Touching him on the shoulder as she drifted by, noting he didn’t ogle her. Giving her ass a shake, as a reward for being gentlemanly that Jeffrey, as a gentleman, would never see. But Charles would. And he did. Taking a good look at Alexis’s shapely bottom and feeling primal.

“Let’s get down to the diner.” Jeffrey used his billy club, directing Charles to walk behind Alexis. Opting to block her from view rather than torture himself by not looking at what was clearly being offered up for scrutiny. “Button your shirt higher, Alex. We don’t want to give John any reason to go crazier than he already is.”

Alexis looked back and giggled as she opened the front door of the station, and they left to clean the streets of their outwardly-pleasant hometown.





# XVI

Alexis walked at a quiet pace, ahead of Jeffrey, as she neared the corner by the diner. Charles had gone home, much to her indignation. He'd run away like a scared little boy. Even with an armed and dangerous policeman by his side, squaring off with John was too much of a gamble for him. And she couldn't give herself to any man whom she couldn't respect at the most basic level. She was better off alone.

Goosebumps rose on her flesh as she drew closer and saw John emerge from the blinding glare of the corner street lamp. Thinking she should have done as Jeffrey suggested and hidden her cleavage when she'd had the chance. Wishing her desire to make Charles jealous hadn't overcome her common sense.

"There you are." John took a big drag on his cigarette. "I saw you leave earlier. What a disappointment. No 'cherry pie' for me tonight." He chuckled. "I thought, anyway. But you're back. And I like the new uniform. Suits the interior. That outfit will snag you tips."

Alexis smiled meekly at him. "I'm sorry, sir. We're closed for the evening. I was just checking we were locked up before I went for a nightcap." She stopped a moment, hoping she didn't look as confused as she was, and continued to walk around the corner. "You have a real nice night, sir."

"Sure thing." John stamped out his cigarette, approaching her. "That boy you work with was leaving when I came by. Pardon my saying, but he's an insensitive jerk."

“Tell me about it.” Alexis kept her fake smile up. Confused by John’s demeanour. Wondering if he knew he was being watched. Waiting for the next insult.

“You two. You’re together, no?”

“Well,” she replied, considering honesty, but going with the second-best policy. “We’ve been seeing each other for a while. Every relationship has its bumps.”

“You don’t got to tell me.” He moved closer. “I knew this girl once. A travelling salesman—person—like me. Town to town. You’d think that would keep the relationship from falling into a rut, but nothing can, I don’t think. We had some rough patches. But she stuck with me through everything. A good woman. You’d like her if she was still around.”

“What happened?” Alexis shrunk back as John advanced.

“Cancer. Like they say, the clock’s ticking for us all. She was young. Not much older than you and your friends. No one saw it coming. A nagging cough we chalked up to walking pneumonia and—next thing you know—she’s in an oxygen tent and we’re counting the minutes.” John looked down and rubbed his forehead.

“I’m sorry.” Alexis stopped short of giving him a hug. Feeling lost again. “No one should suffer like that.” She coughed as she heard Jeffrey shift positions in the dark down the street. Scuffing the sidewalk with her shoes. Remembering why she was there in the first place. John was a lot smoother than his pal, Doe. But he’d verbally assaulted her in public before. John’s act was all she was engaging with now. She gulped silently as she wondered when John would say something else damaging.

“It’s okay.” He brushed her hair lightly away from her face. “You’re sweet to say that.” He looked at the empty streets. “Let me walk you home? It’s dead out. God knows who you’ll run into.”

Alexis shook her head, cradling herself in her arms. Not very good at pretending she was someone she wasn’t. “I shouldn’t.”

“Right.” John smirked. “Go on. I’ll make sure this corner stays safe. When you disappear, I’ll head back to my room.”

## HOME

The confusion in Alexis's mind grew. She could see John could see it. Was he going to let her walk away after the harassment earlier? Or was he playing it cool? Knowing his friend Doe waited in the distance to make her 'disappear'? She leant against the diner's front window, positive Jeffrey could see her with the lights out inside. "You seem like a nice guy now. Why were you and your friend so disrespectful this afternoon?"

"You mean Doe?"

Alexis nodded and John threw up his hands. Pushing away the night. "That guy's a mess. Between you and me, he's been on the sauce too long. Probably at the bar working on tomorrow's hangover. He didn't mean nothing. Whatever he said."

"He rubs off on you when you're with him."

"Yeah, he does. Imagine having to put up with that attitude day in, day out. He'd have you cursing the world in a week, tops. You smile now, but I'm telling you, he's the devil. Evil incarnate. He could have a nun turning tricks."

Alexis smiled. "I guess I'll be going. Maybe you'll come by tomorrow? Show me what you're like without him?"

John nodded, smiling back. "Definitely."

"I'll see you then." She made what she assumed was a regal gesture and walked away slowly. Feeling strangely comfortable.

"Hey," John said as she reached the edge of the light. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." She stopped, anticipating the humiliation.

"You forgetting something?"

"Not that I can remember."

His smile broadened. "Then you're still open?"

"No," she said, making funny eyes. "We're closed. I told you."

"Because, while you may have glanced at the door, you never checked the lock." He smiled wider, and Alexis tried to keep up.

"Oh, I'm—"

"Blowing me off? I don't blame you." He pointed at himself and scoffed. "Who am I, right? Some John. You're a nice girl. But, next time, please don't patronise me. You want to be left alone. I get it."

"It's not that." She moved closer to John. Feeling the cognitive dissonance and aching to resolve it. With another lie. "I'm just—"

“What?” He smiled as he watched her crumble. “Bored? Am I not lavishing you with enough positive attention?”

“It’s not that, Jesus,” she said, snapping and pulling on the front door, showing John it was, indeed, locked. “I’m going—” She composed herself. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bark at you.” She bounced her palms off her head. “It’s been that kind of day, you know?”

“Can’t say.” He paused as she pressed her lips together and waved a slow goodbye, still standing and facing him. “Why do you do it?”

“Do what?” She brushed her hair, feeling control slipping away.

“Tease the boys. Come on. I’m a stranger. You’ll never see me again. Tell me. Be honest.”

“I don’t tease the boys,” Alexis said, her smile looking weak. Her lips trembling.

“That’s not what Chuck says. He didn’t have one nice thing to say when I asked after you. While he gave me the brush-off.”

“Really?” She held her hands in front of her crotch, pulling her shoulders together. Not faking the look of concern with regard to her reputation.

“Yeah, he said something about you being a self-absorbed brat.”

“Well, you know—”

“To tell you the truth, once I got him talking—which took four words about you—he wouldn’t stop. Cursed you while he stormed off. That’s what it was. Nothing, really.”

“I’m sure he didn’t mean it.” Alexis smiled sympathetically. “I’m going through some stuff, and I—”

“Yeah, yeah. I tell you about him and all you got to say is ‘what about me?’. He was right, I guess.”

John turned to leave.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked as he stood with his back to her. “John?”

He turned and walked toward her, smiling as she stood shivering in the heat. “It means your little world revolves around you.” John reached out his hand and curled his left pinkie around her right, watching with disinterest as she placed her other hand in her jeans shorts’ pocket. “Come on, I’ll walk you home.”

## HOME

Alexis followed him, dragging behind, looking over her shoulder. Seeing Jeffrey in the shadows. “Okay. But you don’t—”

“I know I don’t got to, cherry. It’s my pleasure. It’s rare I meet someone nice and wholesome I can take for an innocent stroll. Like back in the good old days when this world wasn’t a sewer.”

“I guess. If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. Like I said, I can’t remember the last time I escorted a beautiful young lady to her door.” He pulled her to his side. “Especially one who looks like a movie star.”

She released her pinkie and playfully batted him. Blushing as they both smiled.

“I’m serious. I believe in you. You’re going to be a movie star. Whether you like it or not. By tomorrow, former friends of your fuck-up brother will be watching you on video. Getting slapped around. Bruised from head to toe. Raped repeatedly before you’re beaten so bad you can barely breathe. Then they’ll watch you take a knife up your prize snatch. Bleeding out slow, while I punch your pretty face in and you beg for a death that seems like it’ll never come.” He winked. “Orders are orders.”

Alexis turned to scream and John covered her mouth with his hand.

“Quiet, bitch. You play nice or I open you up now. Keep walking.”

“I’m sorry,” Alexis said, her voice muffled underneath John’s hand. He looked into her eyes, saw she wasn’t lying, and eased his grip.

“That’s a good girl. If it helps, you can take comfort in knowing it’s not your fault. Marlon did this to you. He gave you up, along with everyone he knows and loves, to try and save his own ass.”

John watched her face tremble, smiling all the while. Then his face turned red and he dropped to the ground like a stone.

Alexis stood above him with a balled fist, nicely decorated with a knuckleduster she’d found lying in the evidence room at the police station.

She looked to see Jeffrey running toward them. “That’s right, John. No movie roles in my future, but I’ll see you in the pictures.”

John was on his feet and sprinting away before she could look back down.

“Sorry. I could barely see or hear what happened.” Jeffrey stopped beside her, running in place and handing her a set of keys. “Go back to the station, lock yourself in. Don’t come out until I come get you.”

She nodded and Jeffrey tore off, chasing after John.



# XVII

**D**oe stood well away from the street lamp on the corner, a block down from the apartment building he assumed his girl lived in. Trying to put Alexis Woods out of his mind. Hoping John had a backup plan to complete the hit.

He rubbed his cheeks, feeling drowsy from lack of action. Being on stakeout was a drag. As a younger man, on the job, patrolling the streets, he welcomed the all-night sits. Waiting for some dumb-fuck parolee to come back from the city with enough drugs to make it worth the while to shake him down. But that went cold faster than he expected. His methods were frowned on by his betters. And when drugs went missing after the raids, while cash came in short from the busts enough times that people started asking questions, he'd resigned. Because, the more corrupt he became, the more he realised he'd go down sooner than later. What he hadn't counted on was the drug dealers he'd gone into business with being the ones who left him for dead. But they had. Literally. When he was released from the hospital, his first order of business was getting as far from home as possible. And, from that point on, he only worked for outfits that didn't need to know names.

He scratched the scar on his neck, about to light another cigarette, when he heard voices. A man and woman. Hopefully saying good night, because he recognised the woman's voice. And he remembered, vividly, how well she filled out her clothes.

By the time he got in position, he saw her standing alone in an open doorway, with no light on, in one of the town's two apartment

buildings. Looking off in the distance as she slowly backed inside, and he hid deeper in the shadows.

He couldn't make out the number, so he noted the location of the apartment.

Seeing no one else in the area, he put on his pleasant face. Repeating the lines in his head. He was from out of town and had lost his way. Knocking on doors, no one answering. Sorry to be a bother at such an hour, but could she point him to the town's motel, or—if it wasn't too much trouble—allow him to use her phone? Terribly sorry for the inconvenience.

Thoughts of what he'd do to her, after she took pity on him, flooded in fast. Once he'd smuggled her out of town and had her on the dope, filming her being seasoned at least once a day. Fantasising about what he'd do to her when she became useless—assuming she didn't overdose before then. He was a fair man. He believed in keeping his women living the lifestyle to which they'd become accustomed.

Fourteen minutes later, he began marching to her apartment, ready to take her home. Then he heard more footsteps and hid again. Watching.

Alexis Woods—their target—headed up the stairs of the apartment building and knocked on his girl's door. The door opened and the young man he'd seen his girl with earlier welcomed her in.

Though he was disappointed with John, he was thankful. Engaging his girl with a witness present wasn't the plan.

He began walking—avoiding the lights—to the deserted farmland across town to regroup with John. He'd get his girl later that evening. If her boyfriend didn't leave, he'd put the kid to sleep and take her. Best case, she'd be alone. Worst case—and last resort—all three would stay the night and he'd perform the buckwheats hit, cowboying it by taking out his girl's boyfriend too. What folks in his line of work called a mess.





# XVIII

Jeffrey walked at a furious pace back to the police station. Shaking his head, rubbing his right temple and cursing under his breath. As he approached the corner by the diner, he saw Alexis holding herself in her arms. Looking at the ground and spacing out.

Hearing footsteps, she turned to run. Scared John was back to make good on his promises to her. Seeing Jeffrey's face, she stopped.

"What are you doing?" Jeffrey asked. Not angry, but disappointed. "If he'd gotten the better of me, you might—"

"I'm sorry." She pulled his head down by the neck. "What happened to your eye? There's a cut above it. Are you all right?"

"It's nothing. John gave me the slip. I chased him through the apartment complex, and over the fence. Figured he was heading for the main lot. I thought I'd lost him, then he bum-rushed me. By the time I could free my gun to tag him, he was in the shadows. I couldn't chance shooting blind. Took a bad hit when I bounced off the asphalt. Dumb luck for him. Bad for me."

Jeffrey looked away while Alexis licked her thumb and smeared the blood from his eyebrow.

"I don't think he's going to be a problem anymore. Right after, a car tore out of the municipal lot. I couldn't see, but I'm pretty sure it was him. Wouldn't bet my life on it, but I think you're safe." He shook his head, looking down. "I'm sorry."

"No. Don't apologise. You saved my life."

He gave her the best smile he had in him, touching at his temple. "I didn't save your life."

“Yes, you did.” She stroked her fingers down his cheek. “He threatened to kill me. He said it was because of...”

“Your brother?”

“Yeah.” Her left hand rested on his right shoulder as their eyes met. “I know. I’m wonderful.” She looked down. “Just kidding. Now that you know, does it bother you? That you risked your life because of him? I know you’re a good man, but you can’t tell me you’ve never thought about it. All you’d have to do to cripple my brother is let me get hurt, or—”

He brushed her chin with his left hand, and she felt the hair on her neck bristle. “No, Alex. You joke, but you’re good people. I couldn’t let you get hurt—or killed—to punish him. Even if I am dying to pay him back for robbing me of my son.”

“And Jennifer?”

“She’s gone. We’re finished. None of it’s your fault.” He paused and looked more deeply into her eyes. “And I’m not your brother. I would never hurt you to hurt him.” He looked to the side and down. “That being said, if we met again, I’d bury him if I could.”

Alexis pulled Jeffrey in for a hug, resting her head between his neck and left shoulder. Stroking his hair as he reciprocated. Feeling their bodies touch and her mouth go dry. The thought of Marlon being executed by a man she found physically attractive making her itch. “I don’t blame you.” Feeling Jeffrey’s fingers stroking her hair, she shivered and continued. “I’d feel the same way. I don’t want you to resent me. For being a problem.”

“You’re not a problem,” he said. Feeling her breath on his neck, as she felt his on hers, and they folded together. “I don’t resent you.”

“You should,” she whispered into his ear, feeling him tense. Imagining the confused look on his face almost correctly. “So everything would make sense.” She sucked in a breath. “Thank you for being there like you said you would. I love you for it.”

His hand dropped down her back and she pressed her body more closely against his. “I care for you too. I—”

“Not now, please?” After an uncomfortable silence, she pulled her head back and kissed him on the cheek. Loosening her hold and fixing his gaze. “What just happened was... intense. We’re still

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shaken. Let's not say anything that might ruin what we are to each other." She made a sad face. "Not until we're thinking clearly."

Jeffrey released his hold and they stood, looking at each other. "We'll find out in good time. If it's meant to be." He glanced around. "Until then, we'll just stay friends."

"Better than acquaintances." She blushed. Wondering if Jeffrey knew how she sometimes thought of him. Seeing in his eyes he had no clue.

He chuckled and nodded. "And, someday, who knows?"

"Someday." She reached into her pocket and handed him the keys to the station. "Someday maybe you can lock me up or something." She blushed harder. "God, I'm an idiot. I should go." She patted him on the shoulder and headed toward Victor's apartment.

"You're not an idiot," he said. "Someday sounds perfect." They smiled. "Take care of yourself, Alex. Stay with friends. And call me if you see John again. Not just for your sake. For the next girl's."

"Okay. I'm going to hang with Alison and Vic tonight. Boring." She waved to Jeffrey. "Thank you, Jeff. Again, I'm sorry about what happened with Jennifer."

He nodded, and they walked away in their respective directions.

Jeffrey played with his keychain as he strolled. Thinking about slapping the cuffs on Alexis right then and there. Saving her from a tiresome night as a third wheel. Locking her up, giving her the night of her life, and locking her down. But he kept walking as he fantasised, not believing anything like that could happen. Only trusting in the time he'd spend filling out forms and calling in the incident.

Alexis stopped, looked to see Jeffrey gone, and stood in place. Wanting to run to him with everything inside her. Knowing it was only the safety of his presence she wanted to feel. That it wasn't Jeffrey she yearned for. Wishing she knew what her heart truly desired. Feeling like she did, though the hunger she'd have to acknowledge, to get what she needed, was one she'd been too afraid to face most of her life.

She stood in place, barely breathing, for a good while.

# XIX

Charles DeFranco stood in the shadows, across the street from the diner, watching Alexis approach the corner and walk away with John. Then seeing Jeffrey bolt into the black like a lunatic.

Not enough time passed between Alexis's return to the corner, holding a set of keys, and Jeffrey coming back—looking beat-up, stumbling like a drunk—for anything to have happened between them, as Charles was sure it would or had already begun to.

Charles watched them talk to each other. Noting how Alexis used Jeffrey's wound as an excuse to initiate touching, pawing at his head and smearing her saliva into his flesh with her thumb.

Then he saw them hold each other. Jeffrey's height overshadowing Alexis's as Charles tried to see what was happening. But Alexis was almost perfectly barred from view.

His fists clenched as he saw the look on Alexis's face when they hugged. Her eyes open wide for a moment and then closed in bliss, while Jeffrey appeared to grope her like an animal who enjoyed the catch more than the chase.

And, when they separated, he saw her give Jeffrey a lingering kiss on the cheek. Assuredly followed by a full kiss on the lips. Mouths open. Tongues touching.

When Jeffrey left, Charles noted the confusion in Alexis's posture and her tense, nervous manner.

After three minutes of watching her stare dreamily in Jeffrey's direction, he walked across the street to her. She didn't hear him.

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“Snap out of it,” Charles said, and she jumped in place—almost screamed.

“Damn, Chuck,” she said, gasping. “You scared the hell out of me. Where did you—?”

He moved into her space. Looking like he meant to strike her but feared the reprisals. “We’re over. What difference does it make?”

“What? We never really dated and—”

“Spare me.” He glared at her. “I knew you were a man-eater, but could you give a guy four minutes before you’re on to the next?”

“Look.” She held up a hand as his tirade waned and she talked over him. The fact she’d side-stepped death, forgotten in her anger. “I’m not sure how any of this is your business, since you chose to run, but whatever you think you saw, you didn’t see it. And where do you get off coming at me like this after what you said to me in the diner? Just... If we’re going to remain friends, you have to let this paranoid fantasy go.”

“Just like a woman.” Charles turned and walked away. “Always have another guy waiting in the wings, in case your current relationship goes south.” She tried to interrupt and correct him, but he wasn’t listening. “Jeff is only after your treasure so he can fuck your brother the fun, easy way. Stop kidding yourself.”

“Oh no, Chuck, you don’t get to—”

“Don’t worry. I won’t ruin your evening at Ants’s.”

She shivered as she heard Anson’s nickname and covered her stomach with her hands. “Nothing happened between me and Jeff, okay? I understand you’re upset, but we were a mistake. I would take it back if I could. We’re still friends, right?”

He looked at the ground. “I’m sure Deputy Goines was a gentleman. It’s just... you’re right. I shouldn’t have taken our friendship there. Or tried to. Not that you’re a second choice.”

“For you I am.” She touched her forehead to his. “And, while we’re being brutally honest, admit you’ve only ever wanted to be with one woman. And she’s not me. Do the best thing for yourself for once. Tell her how you feel. Believe me, she’s—”

“If you know, then you know I can’t. But, you’re right. We never were anything. I shouldn’t have tried to force it. I’ll forget us. You forget us. We’re still friends. It’ll be weird for a bit, I guess. But,

again, if you do know, please be a good friend and don't tell her we had this conversation."

Alexis looked at him as she nodded, and he walked away. Sadness in her eyes, but stunned, still. Charles was gone as quickly as he'd appeared.

After a few more moments of contemplating one mother of a day, Alexis made her way to Victor's apartment. Unsure if her being with anyone would ever be a good idea—though it might mean finding happiness and a person she could call home. Trying not to hate Charles for making her feel that way. Hoping he found his own sanctuary before it was too late, as well.

## XX

Alison Williams walked into Miss Daisy's Diner halfway between the lunch and supper rush. He was an unusual guy—though most people used more demeaning descriptives to illustrate his character—and his eating schedule was no different. He didn't eat breakfast, though he woke up busting ass on his father's farm. And he never got hungry until the time folks in the food service industry took their breaks.

Alison was finishing her shift and Alexis was starting hers. Charles had been on all day, prepared to work through the evening.

"Oh God, Ants," Alison groaned with what sounded like painful pleasure as she heard the bell on the front door chime and stared out the kitchen window, fussing with her hair and looking no one in the eyes. "It's like I can never get off without him fucking me."

"That's an intriguing complaint." Charles bumped Alison, pushing her gently toward the door to the dining bar. Not noticing her cheeks blush while he made sure to check out her ass as her feet skidded on the floor. Unable to see through the uniform, but able to see enough his imagination could fill in the blank spots. Especially since Alison had purposefully requested a uniform one size too small for her when she'd applied for the job years ago.

"What?" she asked, scoffing and thanking God for the stink in the kitchen as she felt her knees go weak.

"Hey Alison," Alexis said, set to work. "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of him. You relax and head out. We're good."

Alison gave Alexis a hug and whispered, "Thanks, Alex. He just makes me so..." as she rubbed her nose. "I'll sneak out the back."

“I heard that,” Charles said, chuckling.

“Really?” Alison asked. “What did I say?”

“You love me and can’t stand to be without me,” Charles replied, smirking.

Alison’s eyes glazed over for a moment before she smacked Charles on the shoulder and shushed him. Alexis gave him a frustrated look as she walked out of the kitchen. In her mind, Alison and Charles were married and had kids already. Over many years, she’d seen the way they acted together and, if it wasn’t for his brother Victor, Charles and Alison would be together. And her best friend wouldn’t be miserable in a loveless relationship. She didn’t see the situation changing any time soon, but she hoped she was wrong because—though she’d never even kissed a boy, thanks to her brother’s continued over-involvement in her life—she still believed in true love. And true happiness.

“Hi Anson.” Alexis walked to the bar and leant against it, directly in front of the seat Anson had chosen. Drawing his attention from the menu on the wall above the kitchen window to her eyes—never her body—immediately.

“Hi, Alexis. How are you?”

“You know,” she replied. “Same old different.” She smiled as Anson chuckled and she heard Alison say goodbye to Charles. “Haven’t seen you in a while. Everything all right?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Mom’s not doing too well, but dad’s hopeful. They’re getting on in years. It’s...”

“I’m sorry.” Alexis leant farther down, moving her feet back. Stretching. Getting comfortable. “If you ever need a shoulder.”

Anson leant in. “It is what it is. I’ll take you up on your offer when the time comes.”

Alison blushed and smiled faintly as she winked. “Just one shoulder, though. Don’t get greedy on me.” She turned to the kitchen window and yelled, “Hot turkey sandwich. Lots of gravy and mashed potatoes. Bacon. Incinerate it.” She reached under the counter into the refrigerator and pulled out a can of Coke, popping the top for him.

“Thanks, Alexis,” Anson said. “Nobody knows and loves me the way you do.”



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Alexis's eyes softened, like they did every time she saw Anson. Increasingly less over the years which—while it might have been a relief for Alison, though her choice of words told a different story—made her feel the void when he was gone. Like one of the few good parts of her childhood was being ripped from her slowly. And like she didn't belong anywhere. "I do love you, Anson." He took a sip of his Coke and their eyes stayed connected. Another thing only he did with her. One of the things she missed. Right up there with the way he addressed her.

"I love you too, Alexis," he replied, calling her by her given name. She wasn't sure it was pathetic that something so simple made her feel so much joy. He never punched her on the arm or gave her a slap when he said those three—four if he was replying—words. Like he was speaking a truth. The part that hurt was, the only reason she could think why she wasn't with him had nothing to do with the fact almost everyone in town disliked him or found him creepy. The part that hurt was, she wasn't with him because her brother had driven them apart. And he'd done it so many times she unconsciously rejected the thought of 'them', no matter how much her conscious mind and body wanted 'them' to happen. How she'd dream about it sometimes. How she sometimes couldn't fall asleep unless she remembered the way they used to be with each other. Or the way she dreamt they could be. The way she still dreamt, sleeping and—sometimes—awake.

It wasn't until Anson's order came up that she realised they hadn't spoken a word to each other for at least five minutes. They'd just been staring into each other's eyes. Another thing Anson did that unnerved most people, but she loved. Being there and not saying a word. Bringing peace into her world. A world where—when he was there—nothing was required of her. Not even speech. A world where she could be quiet and still have fun. A world where no one could live all the time, and a world she could only visit when Anson was with her. And no one else, she knew, would ever understand that. At best, they talked behind her back about how she led Anson on. At worst, they whispered how, maybe, there was something wrong with her too. Still a virgin at her age. Never had a steady boyfriend. Lost in her head. Never sticking around to chat

when she, inevitably, became disinterested in the routine commiseration and cattle-like submission to the herd mentality that was all anyone had to offer her. Dumb animals living their lives the same—day in, day out. Content with their suffering.

She grabbed the hot plate off the shelf and held it back from Anson. He looked at her and her eyebrows arched, the hint of a smile on her lips.

“Thank you, Alexis,” he said as she placed the plate in front of him, waving her hands.

When she’d cooled her hands enough, ignoring Charles as he made fun of her, she whispered, “I love it when you say my name.”

Anson whispered back, “I love it when you say my name too,” and watched a pure smile overtake her face, as he smiled just as sincerely.

Charles knocked on the shelf. “Let’s go, Alex. We need to prep for the supper rush. This isn’t a break.” Then he looked at Anson. “Eat it while it’s hot, boy. And please tell me you have the money to pay for it, because I don’t know where Vic is and he can’t spot you.”

Alexis watched as the subtle dig wormed its way under Anson’s skin. Being called a deadbeat in a town where the general population was poor. Being called a deadbeat by someone who was poor himself. Watching him eat that indignation, swallow it whole. Worst of all, having known him her entire life, aware he was doing it for her.

“In a second,” Alexis said. “The customer comes first.”

“Well let’s hurry it up, okay.” Charles gave Anson an admonishing glance. “We have paying customers on the way.”

Alexis squinted as she listened to Charles, and she whispered to Anson, “You don’t have to take that.”

Anson looked back into her eyes and whispered, “For you, I do.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay. Don’t be bad to yourself because of me. If you do, then I’ll feel bad for making you have to feel bad. Just like, if I keep telling you it’s all right, my next few sentences are going to be impossible to understand.” She smiled as she breathed out. “It’s okay. Say what’s on your mind. The customer is always right.”

“Eat up, Ants,” Charles said. “This isn’t your home.”

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Anson saw Alexis's nod and replied, "I'll be done when I'm done and"—He pulled a twenty out of his pocket and handed it to her—"I'm paying for my meal so, please, let me eat it in peace and enjoy the company of the better half of this establishment."

"All right," Charles said. "Calm down. Just don't spend all day hitting on the waitress."

"Shut the fuck up." Anson looked past Alexis and into Charles's eyes, his face emotionless and his voice calm, but scary as hell, which turned her on as much as when he was soft with her. "And watch what you say next."

Alexis looked over her shoulder to see Charles disappear into the back.

"Sorry," Anson said to Alexis, keeping his voice down.

Alexis put her hand on Anson's as he cut his sandwich into squares. "No worries. I enjoyed it. And I tell everyone not to call you Ants, but it never sinks in."

"I know you do," he said, still a little upset. "You always have. I listen to you."

"It's okay." Alexis ran her right hand through his hair as he began to eat. And, like that, she felt his tension release. Calming her right down with him but dropping her farther, through the floor and down to the cellar where she kept her oldest, most treasured memories and secret desires locked away and covered in dust. Landing smack on her ass in an ocean of wood chips. Unable to stop herself from reaching over the counter, pulling Anson's head forward and giving him a peck on the cheek. "Forget about him," she whispered. "He doesn't matter. If he doesn't like you, that's his problem."

Alexis stayed and chatted with Anson as he ate his meal, not once looking back to see if Charles needed help, nor offering any. Just enjoying talking with the one person she knew understood her no matter what she said. The one person who could tell when she was kidding with a straight face and when she wasn't. The one person she'd been avoiding—at a close distance—her entire life. Afraid of losing him, but more afraid of letting him near, lest he become another dejected and doused flame. Though that thinking didn't make sense to her, she never let him get too close. Even as she watched him eat and wondered what it would be like to be the

food in his mouth. How she'd wondered, since they were children, what his lips would feel like pressed against hers in a kiss. A real kiss. Wishing she didn't blame her brother for making her life impossible. Wishing she'd take the first step and stop keeping it complicated, like she'd been disciplined to by Marlon and her father all her life.

Hearing Charles coming back toward the front of the kitchen, Anson looked up. Watching him stand with the dining bar out of his view, yet visible to them through the window to the kitchen. Pressing himself against the wall by the door and eavesdropping.

Anson nudged Alexis as she finished telling him another story about things in her life she found interesting, pointing to where Charles stood and holding his hand to his ear, winking. Motioning with his hand for her pen and order pad.

Alexis heard Charles's breathing as he covertly listened to them, and slid the pad and pen to Anson.

She looked down as Anson passed her back her order pad, read the note that said 'Let's mess with him', crumpled the paper, shoved it in her pocket, winked back at him, and said, "Really? You don't have a girlfriend?"

"No," Anson replied, acting caught off guard. "I'm single. There aren't any other women in town like you."

Alexis replied. Knowing the lies they told each other were truths in large measure. "One day you'll have to give me a call. You've got my number."

"It'll be awkward, though."

"Oh, I doubt that," Alexis said. Slow and sultry. "A man like you. Any single girl who isn't draping herself over your big strong body is missing out. You're so smart and so kind. Any girl who gets a chance to be with you and walks away is a fool."

"The world is full of stupid people," Anson said, chuckling.

As she thought, 'Kiss me, Anson', Alexis replied. "If you're really still single, that must be true." She gave him another peck on the cheek, blushing on the outside and hoping Anson didn't take note of it on the inside. She rarely kissed anyone, and the kisses she gave Anson were sterile. Still, twice in one meeting gave too much away. More than she'd given away when she'd first kissed him on the playground. But, she thought, maybe she needed someone to take it

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from her. And he was the only person she'd let do that. At least she believed that was true. Nothing's known until it's been experienced.

Anson grinned, laughter and light in his eyes. "I sure do like you, Alexis."

"And I sure do like you, Anson." She smiled on the outside as she felt herself falling to pieces on the inside, knowing everything she said was honest, even if she wasn't sure she could deliver on it. "I'll tell you what. One day soon, I'm going to come find you. Wherever you are. At home or walking down the street. And, when I find you, I'm going to give you the best hug you've ever gotten in your life. And that includes the ones when we were younger. Then I'm going to give you a peck on the cheek."

"A whole peck?" Anson asked, wide-eyed and trying not to laugh as Alexis's mouth kept spilling gospel her mind didn't want it to. "Wow, that's a lot, isn't it?"

"Two gallons. But it's nothing compared to what I'm going to do after." She stroked his neck up to the chin and flicked her finger off it. "I'm going to demand you be the first man in this town—in my life—to give me a real kiss. And if you don't... On second thought," she added, "I'm going to stop you and label you right then and there. Make you mine. And, if the world's watching, that's fine with me. I'll give you a kiss you'll never forget and I'll take you with me everywhere. My very own Anson. Yeah." She sighed. "That's what I'll do."

Anson stood and bowed, holding out his hand. Alexis extended hers and he took it, giving it a quick, soft kiss on the top. She giggled as he did, to keep herself from truly enjoying the sensation. Letting a bit of it through as she felt the warmth, wishing it was on her lips and he was gently holding her head in his hands.

"Until that time." Anson tipped his imaginary hat. "And hopefully before. As always, it's been lovely talking with you, Alexis."

"Let me get you your change." She put her hand over her heart and let out a sigh. "I love it when you say my name, Anson."

"I love it when you say mine too. Almost as much as I love saying yours. And keep it. You deserve more."

She waved goodbye as Anson backed out the door. She watched him wave in return and walk down the street toward the grocery. Studying his face for signs. Seeing him smiling and feeling

how that still made her heat up inside, from a distance and through thick glass. Knowing she wouldn't stop feeling that warmth until the supper rush came and some out-of-towner grabbed her ass in expectation of thanks.

"You ready to work?" Charles called from the back. "If you think I'm hard on him, I'm sorry. He gets on my nerves. Always so happy to be here."

Always so happy, she thought. And Anson was. At least when she saw him. And she wondered if she had anything to do with that happiness.

"I swear, every time he comes in here, he's so damn chirpy. No one makes him a quarter happy as you, but, hell, if you think I'm mean to him, think about yourself. You may not call him names and get on his case, but playing with his feelings like that? That's not nice either. Some folks might consider it worse. It's not all your brother's fault."

Alexis dismissed him, knowing what he said was true and wondering if the way Anson allowed her to indulge her desire for meaningful human contact, while not pressing her to act on it, was a mean thing on her part. Thinking it wasn't. Hoping it wasn't, anyway. Because, though she'd been pushing him away most of her life, she'd always kept him close. No one else could give her what she needed. Not the way he knew how to. Making her feel like a beautiful, special, intelligent, fun, and witty woman without touching her.

And she hoped she made him feel some measure of good in return, though he'd never requested it and never would. Not if he was the Anson she'd always known.

And those thoughts, though depressing, made her smile and feel alive inside. A lightness to her she, sadly, let others believe their presence brought.

But, in the back of her mind—though she wore her mask well in public, even alone—she knew where those feelings came from and she wished her life hadn't made her feel so loath to return them the most genuine and beautiful way possible.

## XXI

John brushed the sweat from his forehead as he sped out of the municipal parking lot in his black sedan, looking down the street as he saw the police officer he thought he'd knocked out stumbling away. He'd played it way too cool to guarantee a clean hit and gotten burnt early in the night. If he'd been thinking straight, and not fawning over his target, he would have done a simple 'slightly-backward smash and grab'. Smashed her head against the glass window of one of the shops they passed while they talked, then grabbed her and run.

He came to a dead end, four country blocks down, and put the car in park, turning off the lights and looking back. Prepared to wait all night. Wondering if he should try his luck driving through the grass to the main road instead. He decided against it. He couldn't afford to get a flat and end up in the town gaol. If there was one thing he loved about small, dying towns, it was that the land was larger than the population by a good sight and, if your target lived in one, you could make them disappear easy. If there was one thing he hated about small, dying towns, it was that—if you got busted—the townsfolk might bury you before the cops took your picture. Even if you managed to get pinched properly, local police took a lot of licence with regard to the rule of law. They were as likely to book you and throw you a crust of bread as beat you half to death and drop you on the border. And—he'd heard tell—they just might kill you.

Ten-odd minutes later, he heard a banging on the rear of the car. Reaching into the glove box to grab his pistol, a knock came on

the passenger side window. He shielded his eyes, pointing the gun at the noise just before he heard a familiar voice. "It's me, damn it."

Keeping his gun raised, he saw Doe and opened the lock. As soon as he did, the door swung open and Doe hopped in the passenger seat, snatching the gun from him and putting it back where it belonged.

"Christ," Doe said, panting. "The last thing I need after chasing you down is a gun pointed in my face. What are you doing?"

John looked back again. The streets were empty. The cop he'd given the slip was probably trying to turn his incompetence into a one-night stand with the girl John was supposed to be taking all the way home. "You know what I'm doing."

"What? Fucking up? Leaving town without me?" His eyebrows cocked as he waited for a response. "Tell me what happened."

John listened to Doe grumble. "This is a small town. She's a waitress in a shithole restaurant and she's got her own apartment, I think. There's time. And don't worry, I won't abandon you."

"Whatever you say." Doe looked back. "You leave me behind and we got problems later. This hit has to get done."

John gripped the wheel. "Yeah, sure. I'll tell you, she was feistier than I expected."

Doe threw his hands in the air as his eyes rolled.

"The bitch had brass. And I don't mean she had attitude. I was this close to putting the fear of God into her. Least I thought I was. I'm just getting some feeling back."

"You let her bang up your stones?" Doe looked away, rubbing his temples. "What the fuck? If you can't control your target, we're going down the wrong road together. I got to carry this whole trip?"

"Look," John snapped. "It wasn't that simple. I had her locked, but she'd already made us."

"How could she—?"

"Shut up and listen, you ugly bastard." John looked around again. "She had a cop tailing her. We were walking and talking. I'd got to the good part. Where I go from polite and charming to casually telling her how I'm going to finish her."

Doe nodded.



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“She starts screaming, I cover her mouth before she gets half a note out the thing and—Bam—in the distance, I see a cop. He wasn’t dressed like one, but he was a cop. I see him coming for me. He’s a good block away, so I call it right there. In my head it was all worked out. I toss the bitch at him, break his jaw on the kerb, and make off with her. But, like I said, she had brass. Knuckles. The real deal. And she punched me in the balls with them. Smug about it, too. Letting me know I was going to be in the pictures. Like mug shots. A real wise acre. But I sucked it up, hauled ass and I’m sitting here now. Thinking we should hide this car, find a place to lie low—We can’t stay in the motel—nab the target, and take her down the road. Past the town limits. Somewhere we can do the buckwheats in solitude, dump her and catch a bus home.”

Doe scratched his neck. “You gave the pooch both inches on that one.”

John smacked him upside the head.

“You mother—I’m just saying.”

“Yeah? What? You saying you got your side action? Tell me that and I’ll listen to you run your mouth about how I’m losing my edge.”

Doe raised his hands in surrender and slumped in his seat. “Not that it matters but, if we leave by bus, she’s got to be doped-up good. That could get us busted.”

“Did I force you to come with me on this job? Did you hear me begging you?”

“No, just...” He spaced out for a second. “I think I know where she lives.” Doe looked back once more. “But we’ll need the car if we’re going to bring back my mint trick.”

“No new talent. Too risky. You didn’t leave nothing in the motel room, right?”

Doe shook his head. “Do I look like a cherry? The room’s empty. The camcorder—even the polyethylene—is in the trunk, along with everything else that traces back to us.”

“Nothing personal,” John said. “Just making sure.” He drummed his fingertips on the dashboard. “I’ll drive this thing around the dead end and into the woods. Far. We’ll take the plates and strip the VINs. We’ll grab our shit and move. I’d say burn the car, but this town’s too small and we’ll just draw more attention to

ourselves.” John drove the car off the road and onto the grass toward the woods. Making his way deep. Thanking God the trees weren’t too close together on the outer edges. “We’ll leave it. It’ll be here long enough for us to take care of our key business and get out of town by bus before anyone notices.”

“You half retarded? Or is it all the way?” Doe asked, smacking John upside the head.

John glowered.

“Don’t feel good, does it?”

John didn’t shake his head or nod.

“We can’t dump the car and catch a bus. You yanking my chain? If we dump this thing, we got to steal a new one.”

“Once I destroy Alex, all we’ll be walking away with is an eight-millimetre tape. Aside from that, we got nothing.”

“You got nothing,” Doe said. “Yet. And you got to hide. My girl is out there. Waiting for me to tie her up, tell her what’s what, and give her a test drive.”

“So I stay with the car? You’ll be back once you get your snatch?”

“No. We’ll leave the car here, but it’s best you ain’t with it. I’m thinking the deserted farmland on the other side of town.”

“Yeah, that works, I guess,” John said as he put the car in park and looked back, seeing nothing but trees and blackness. “It’s going to be a good walk, getting behind that place. This town is small, but it’s a long way around, and that farm—The woods back there?—it’s at least a hundred acres to the outside.”

“You know how long an acre is?”

“No, but it’s pretty long. Ain’t it? Maybe there’s not that many. Maybe there’s trees closer. I didn’t look before. I’m just saying, it’s going to be a pain in the ass.”

Doe got out of the car, motioning for John to do the same. “Suck it up, cheesecake. I didn’t make your mess. And the walk will give you time to think. I got a fish on the line could buy us some goodwill. Why I’m throwing you any—the way you treat me—is beyond my comprehension. I must be a good guy or something.”

“Yeah, that’s it.” John walked off to the right as Doe traced the car’s tracks back to town. “Just make sure you snatch your dream girl somewhere indoors. This dust bowl is too open.”

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“Don’t worry about me,” Doe said as he disappeared into the dark. “I got my zip-ties, I got my dagger, and I’ll get my bitch. She won’t be punching me in the sac or nothing. Not like our target did to you. Get behind that farmhouse. I’ll meet you there later and, maybe, I’ll let you give her a go.”

They parted ways, each cursing the other as the night grew darker.

# XXII

Alexis took off her shirt, flipped it inside out, and held it to her mouth as she re-entered Anson's farmhouse, keeping one eye on the front door and waving her free hand to get the air moving.

"Anson," she shouted. "Are you okay? It's Alex."

She heard an inhuman moan come from a shadow in the far corner and, "Back door. No knob. Stuck."

She moved through the room, crawling and breathing through her shirt, though even that was hard on her lungs. "I'm coming"

After feeling around, using the sounds of retching coughs as a guide, her hand found Anson's foot, which twitched involuntarily as she grasped it. When she grabbed his calves, the cloud cover outdoors dissipated and she made out his figure.

"I'm here." She rolled him over and saw what looked like black tar around his mouth, nose, and ears. "Oh my God." She wiped the mess away with her shirt and tried to lift him, but he was a solid boy. All muscle and dead weight. "Anson. You have to help me."

Anson rolled onto his stomach and began crawling in the wrong direction. Alexis pushed his right side until he started moving toward the front door. Feeling his lungs rasp and rolling him onto his back again, undoing the buttons of his shirt, and removing it from his torso. She tore his shirt in half as she apologized, placing half of it over her mouth and half over his, and helped him inch to the front door.

As she assisted Anson, her shoulder bumped into what felt like a table leg, and smelt like rotting eggs. Looking up, she saw what

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appeared to be a desiccated human body, its wrists and forearms mutilated, but no blood. Clutching what looked like a burnt note. Barely visible in the sooty air. Alexis's hands shook as she stopped to focus, and the clouds blacked out the moon, making it impossible to see. Not that she wanted to. More than anything, she wanted out. Convinced she was seeing things, that the poison she'd been breathing was more of a problem than she anticipated. She grabbed hold of Anson tighter and moved with him slowly, never letting go.

It took them a good thirty minutes to reach fresh air and, when they did, she was exhausted.

As she sat on the porch, she heard Anson stand and fall. She dragged him down the steps, pulling with all her strength until she reached the bare patch of ground.

The wind slammed the front door closed.

Anson lay on his back, looking at the stars, coughing in fits. "Thank"—He hacked up more rot—"you, Alexis. What happened? How did you get here?"

She sat next to him, indifferent to the fact they were naked from the waist up, and rubbed his belly. "Vic and Alison locked us in." She coughed violently. "My question is, who was inside with us?"

"There was someone inside?"

"Yeah," Alexis replied, flustered. "I think. I don't know." She paused. "I'm sorry to snap at you."

"It's me." Anson coughed. "It's okay."

Alexis looked at Anson's bare chest. "I know. I'm—I don't know if it was Vic and Alison, or just Vic. Probably just Vic. He thought it was hilarious, locking us in there and making us grope for a way out. Even if that place wasn't full of whatever, it should be condemned. We could have hurt ourselves. The floor could have collapsed. Even you don't know what's in there."

"There's a dirty old wooden chair," Anson said. "It's how I found the back door. I didn't see anyone else in there, but my vision's blurry and my head's messed up." His eyelids fluttered. "But Vic was just having fun. He didn't know. And"—Anson grabbed Alexis's right wrist and she petted his hand—"I was going to find you when I got the back door open. I wasn't going to leave you behind."

She stroked his hand more affectionately. “I know you’d never do that.” She let out another cough. “But there’s no back door, Anson. Never has been.”

Seeing life come back into Anson’s eyes, she removed his hand from her wrist and picked up her half of his shirt, wrapping it around her breasts like a cut-rate tube top, tying it off with a loose knot.

“Is everything okay?” He coughed loudly again, looking away as he spat up black and held his head in his hands. Alexis rubbed his stomach, concerned for his well-being, angry at what Victor and Alison had done to them—regardless of their intentions—aroused as she felt the muscles in his stomach contract, and despondent as she remembered Anson when they were children. Recalling every beatdown her brother had given him for having the unmitigated gall to breathe the same air as her. Feeling spoilt, pretentious, and utterly aware of her faults. Feeling sorry for Anson. Wondering if she wasn’t just feeling sorry for herself. Or feeling ashamed.

As they suffered together, Alexis’s mind drifted back to a simpler time. When they were in their pre-teens. Still innocent and impressionable. He’d never begged for her attention, but she’d given it to him. He’d never crowded her. And, as opposite as that seemed to her now, the space he’d given her made her feel safe when she was near him. Like a blanket snuggled in a baby. Nothing she did, or didn’t do, stopped him from being warm and accepting. She’d liked that. And, though she’d been too young to be certain of such things, she’d often imagined she’d found the one person she could grow old with. Even if that only meant holding hands, having fun talks, and taking long walks together. Perhaps a first kiss. Something soft and gentle, something innocent that couldn’t be forgotten. Something time couldn’t erase and no one could take away.

And, though it wasn’t Anson’s fault, when she looked upon him, it reminded her of what used to wait for her and her brother at home. How she and her mother stuck together—punching bags for her father when things weren’t going his way—until the day her father put her mother in the emergency room.

Her mother never came home. Died in the ICU. Brought in under false pretences. And her father walked away clean, back in the good old days when cops turned a blind eye to spousal abuse. When

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they pretended it never happened, because wives were like property and they'd never gaol a man for driving his car until its engine died, even if they knew he'd been running it into the ground for years.

That day, her life changed. When her father returned from the hospital and broke the news, Marlon didn't say a thing. Didn't complain when her father smacked him upside the head and threatened his life. Just calmly walked into his bedroom and locked the door.

Her father kicked Marlon's door and screamed, occasionally looking at her and pointing. Reminding her she was next. Making sure she heard and understood, with mother gone, she'd have extra responsibilities around the house, while he stroked himself through his pants. She didn't understand what he meant—or her mind couldn't comprehend it—but Marlon knew. And Marlon heard. And when her father broke through the wood, swung her brother's bedroom door open wide, and marched in with fists clenched, he exited a second later. Tripping backward, his head bashing into the wall. His face twisted and his jaw hanging loose.

Marlon followed after him, holding a chunk of wood, and he looked at her. Then Marlon told her something she'd never forget. "No one will ever treat you like daddy treated mommy. No one will treat you like daddy wanted to." And then, hearing her father's voice grumble something angry and threatening, Marlon let fly. Beating her father viciously as he tried to crawl away. Breaking bones with every blow until her father stopped moving. Stopped speaking.

After Marlon called the police, they, and an ambulance, showed up in record time. When it was over, her father was back from the hospital, and Marlon hadn't spent more than a few hours in police custody since her father refused to press charges. She hated Marlon for hurting her father the way he did, but she loved him for it, too. She felt awe, watching someone so young break an adult. Making her father live in horror of an adolescent. And, from then on, her father spoke to her with respect, even when Marlon wasn't around. Her father never hit her again, not even a whack on the wrist. And he never did what he'd been planning to. He never took out his sexual urges on her. He lived the rest of his life as scared of her as he was of Marlon. All she had to do was lie and

her father would catch another beating that didn't leave bruises. Her father was a good man from that point on. On the outside.

And seeing Anson hurt brought those thoughts, feelings, and memories back. She silenced them quickly, to the degree she was able. She wondered if Marlon knew, every time he re-enacted that scene from their childhood to keep the boys away, he was forcing her to shut down. Stop feeling. Die a bit more inside. She couldn't say it wasn't true for sure. She never discounted the possibility it was Marlon against the world and she was just another part of it.

But, with Marlon gone, she didn't know how to deal with her feelings for Anson.

"You're going to be all right," Alexis said as Anson's body spasmed again. He lay on the ground, coughing and choking out whatever he'd inhaled in the farmhouse. Her right hand massaged his belly as her left covered his shoulders with the other half of his shirt.

He rolled onto his side and she stroked his shoulders, calming him, and assuring him they'd go for help as soon as he felt well enough to move.

He didn't respond except to cough some more.

And, as she lay behind Anson, resting her right hand on his right side to feel his breathing and nestling her head on his back between his shoulders, she was still a virgin. Plenty of offers made daily before, during, and after her shifts waitressing at Miss Daisy's Diner, but no desire to take anyone up on their generous donations of places for her to sit. Why anyone would want her to use their face as a chair, she couldn't imagine. There were almost no good men in her small hometown. And the ones who passed through were worse.

Anson rolled onto his back and Alexis moved slightly, ensuring Anson's half of his shirt stayed wrapped around his neck, in case he had more mildew or sludge left inside him, though his stomach and rib cage moved more easily, and his breathing sounded clean. No more rasping.

Seeing him licking his lips and making an ugly face, she spat into her free hand, rubbed her saliva into the shirt-bib she'd made for him and wiped his mouth clean. Then she reached into her jeans shorts' front left pocket and pulled out a roll of mints.



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Popping two off the top and sliding the roll back into her pocket, she ate one and rubbed the other around Anson's lips until he took it into his mouth.

He looked at the stars as Alexis rested her head between where his rib cage split and his well-muscled, but tender, belly began, so as not to lie on his bib in case the coughs attacked him again. "Thank you, Alexis. The taste in my mouth. I can't describe it. It's awful."

"You just did." She chewed her mint, trying to get the taste out of her mouth, as well. Then she relaxed her jaw and let her saliva spill into all the places in her mouth the horrible taste might be hiding. "I don't know what's been growing in your house since your parents died, but, whatever it is, it's past its infancy. You should have an inspector check it out. Maybe a hazmat team." She giggled softly, a hint of a smile coming to her lips as she watched his stomach rise and fall.

"Thank you for coming back for me." He crunched the mint in his mouth in half. "Whatever happened to Vic and Alison?"

"Hell if I know." Alexis kept her eyes on his belly button, not wanting him to see the anger in them. Fearing the safety and security she felt in his acceptance might go away if he did. "I thought they were getting help." She coughed. "It's what I'd do. They're probably at Vic's getting high, laughing about us. Forgetting us." She let out a sigh. "Vic will do something when he realises we've been gone way too long."

"I'll talk to him later."

"He deserves a good talking-to," she said, trying to smile. "But I feel somewhat responsible. I should have known."

"No." Alexis's stomach tightened as she felt Anson's hands stroking the top of her head. "You didn't run. You didn't almost get me killed. You're a good person, Alexis."

"I'm not—" she replied reflexively, almost lifting her head to look at him, feeling him speak her given name. Like he always did. Alexis. Never Alex. "Thank you." Her eyes focussed on his stomach again. His breathing, though still clear, had become somewhat restricted and she felt his pulse quicken against her ear. Her mouth twisted into a grimace of confusion as she remembered, again,

whom she was talking to. The boy who'd never given up on her, though he'd always given her the distance she implicitly demanded.

"It's okay." He lifted her head from his stomach and she propped herself on her left arm, bent at the elbow, stroking his left cheek.

She looked deep into his bloodshot eyes. "Listen, Anson." She paused, trying to find the words that wouldn't ruin everything. Though the situation seemed impossibly muffled already and there were no good turns coming up on the road to whatever happened next. "I have to tell you something. Now that I'm hurting too bad not to. I wish..."

Anson rolled onto his side, facing her. Gently brushing her hair from her neck, so he could cradle her head in his hand, and moved to kiss her. Slowly, as her gaze flitted between his eyes and lips.

As his mouth neared hers, and the minty-fresh smell of rot mixed with her foetid breath, she pulled her head away, pushing off his chest. Knocking him onto his back and standing as she clumsily fought to keep the top she'd fashioned from half of his shirt in place.

"Wait," she said as he got to his feet and faced her. She wiped at her lips. "What are you doing?"

He looked around—as she did—noting the acres of empty land surrounding them and seeing something unfamiliar in her eyes. Dread. No brother to stop by and beat him senseless before Anson helped himself to every inch of her while she screamed and nobody heard. Feeling that anxiety flowing from her body, straight through his, he held up his hands to reassure her. "Alexis. I'm sorry. I thought you—"

"What?" She moved backward at a pace that would have her safely on the main road in a few days. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Doing what?" he asked, hurt in his voice. "I thought you wanted me to kiss you. I felt it." He shook his head, looking at the ground. "Maybe because of what happened. You saved my life. I wasn't trying to take advantage of you." His eyes begged along with his posture and he put his hands together in prayer. "I mean, for years you've been... I guess I really did blow it forever at graduation."

As she stood and seethed, Anson's words hit her hard. Forcing her to break down doors she'd kept locked for years. Every time he'd approached her. Spoken to her. Treated her with dignity. Made

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advances but never forced her into an uncomfortable situation. Treated her like a human being and not a stretch of land to plant his seed in.

He was everything she dreamt of having in her life. Everything she wanted in a partner. Everything the innocent young girl her father and brother had systematically destroyed would kill for.

She'd rejected him harshly when they were younger, regretted it immediately, steadily healed their friendship's wounds and now, with another chance to have what she truly wanted within reach, she was going to spurn him again. No matter if it contradicted her every desire.

"That's it?" she asked. Confused and angry. Willing herself to forget. Finding it unbearable, but refusing to be conquered by the one enemy she knew she could best. Herself.

"I swear, Alexis." He backed away as she moved closer. "I didn't mean to—"

"What?" She snarled. Making an angry face. Waiting for the physiological mask to mirror itself inside her head as she approached him. Feeling her heart break as she did as she'd been taught.

"I don't know—" Anson fought to keep tears from welling in his eyes. Feeling his dream being crushed. Worse still, by his dream girl. Again.

"Stop it," she screamed, her voice echoing in the emptiness. The words caught in her mouth for a second as she saw the reflection of moonlight in the moisture coating Anson's eyes, and she continued to say the opposite of what she felt. "You think I want to be here with you, lying in front of some poisonous death trap?" She shoved him by the shoulders as she advanced.

Anson looked down, shaking his head and mumbling he was sorry.

"I should have known you'd pull something like this. You cooked it up with Vic. Tell me I'm wrong. Why aren't you angrier with him? He locked us in that hole and we could have died. But you're okay with that, aren't you? Because here we are. Alone together. My brother would kill you both if he was around."

As she moved to push him harder, he swept her wrists to the side. Causing her to lose her footing and fall. "I'm sorry, Alexis." He reached out a hand to help her up.

She looked at him and laughed. Unconvincingly, but she was trying hard not to care. "I know what you're up to. So why don't you take it?" She pointed to the crotch of her shorts, as she stood. "It's what you're hungry for. Like all the boys. Strip me, spread my legs, and take what you really want. Be a man. Do it."

As she pursed her lips, Alexis felt the drain of her lengthy outburst. Bubbles of pain popping in her chest and shooting down her back and stomach. Spreading to her thighs and calves as she collapsed.

Anson rushed to her side and knelt. Grabbing her by the chin and shaking her head. Watching her eyes float as he listened to her breathing grow more laboured.

"Take it," she wheezed. Realising, as she spoke, she was begging him to. The only thing missing was a 'please'.

"No. We need to get you heated up." He touched the back of his hand to her stomach, then to her cheek. "Your skin feels clammy. There's lumber around back. I'll make you a fire to rest by. Hopefully get you back some strength. Then I'll carry you to town to get help."

He grabbed her legs and slung her over his shoulder, standing without difficulty and trudging the short distance to the farmhouse.

Anson's half-shirt fell from Alexis's upper torso as he walked and she reached to grab it too late. "Finally going to fuck me, Ants?" she asked, berating herself for fighting so hard to sabotage her one lifelong friendship. The only chance at love she'd ever wanted to take. Again.

He kept walking without responding. Unaware she'd lost her top. "Please calm down, Alexis."

Reaching the patch of dry land in front of the farmhouse's steps, Anson placed Alexis on the ground. She fell back onto her elbows as she spread her legs and cracked a weak smile, looking at her bare breasts, then into his eyes. "Take a good look. Are they everything you dreamt? I'll bet you can't believe—"

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“Enough,” he shouted. Shocking Alexis silent as her expression went blank, feeling Marlon’s violence in Anson’s voice. “Just, please stop.” He began to walk back behind the farmhouse. “Cover yourself.”

“Why? Did you finish already, you—?”

In that second, Anson was on one knee beside her, cranking her head back by the hair with one hand and grabbing her by the neck with the other. He spoke in a tone, and at a pace, that froze her face with terror and made her body visibly shake. “I don’t know if it’s what we were exposed to, or if you’ve been this nasty since the moment we first met, but you’re pressing it.”

She tried to chuckle, but his grip tightened. Her expression turned more panicked as she found it increasingly harder to breathe.

“And if you don’t quit calling me names? I took it from you after high school ended. You made your point well enough then, shit-faced and stinking of piss. Running everything about me down because I wouldn’t take advantage of your blind-drunk ass. But if you don’t quit pushing me now—for reasons I can’t fathom—I’ll do you a favour.”

Alexis glanced between Anson’s legs, noticing his lack of excitement. Feeling more frightened. “A favour? How big of—”

“No, Alex.”

Her eyes betrayed weakness as she heard him call her by her nickname. He continued. Slowly. Making her more afraid for her life than Marlon ever had.

“I’ll do you a favour by shutting that mouth of yours. Permanently. I’ll even go you one extra and rearrange your pretty little face. The bane of your existence. I’ll help you out and make it so no man bothers you again. I can do the rest of your body a favour too, if turning your face into a Picasso isn’t enough. I can break your arms, I can break your legs. I can displace your hips and dislocate any, or every, joint in your body. I can make you so physically repugnant your solitude will be forever ensured. Would you like me to do that for you? Alex.”

“You don’t have the—”

He spat in her face, flecks of thick black paste swimming in his saliva, sticky and warm, as she felt herself losing it. From man-crushing bitch to the verge of tears in minutes. “I’ve got the balls,

Alex. But I don't need them to take you apart. All I need is patience and will. And don't threaten me with your candy-ass brother. I'll let you in on a secret you already know." Anson whispered in her ear. "He's alive because I never chose to kill him. Because I didn't want to hurt you."

Alexis's lips trembled as Anson pulled his head back, and her gaze fixed and locked with his. Feeling his words doing the things he promised he could do to her. No pleasure. Just pain. Losing it more as she wondered why she'd turned on him so viciously after having reminisced so warmly about their past together. Damning herself for not being honest with him about her feelings, like the girl who knew him believed he deserved—the girl she kept locked away inside her, along with her bad memories. Forcing herself to remember their regular flirtation at Miss Daisy's Diner, how wonderful that always made her feel, and how much deeper she fell for him each time they shared their lives with each other.

"I'm—" She hesitated, trying to find the words to form a suitable apology. Her breath heavy with fear. And love. And confusion. Wondering if, given the night's events, she was meant to die that day.

"I'm not interested in hearing more about how little you think of me, Alex. Get up. You don't need me to carry you." He lifted her by her hair and neck, letting go when she found her footing. Looking at her exposed breasts, and the spittle she was too petrified to wipe from her face. Watching her body quiver as he shook his head with repulsion he'd never shown her before. "I thought you were special. You don't have to worry about that anymore. I'll be sure to never put you through the hell of suffering my company with a smile again. Now, quit acting like an infant and help me bring lumber from out back so we can make a fire."

She opened her mouth to speak.

"If what we've got requires medical attention, you're going to need me if you expect to walk out of here alive. You open that mouth one more time and I'll leave you behind to see what happens." He shrugged as he backed up, and she looked at him helplessly, rubbing her sore neck and following. "Who knows? Maybe it's harmless."

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As she followed him around the side of the farmhouse, Alexis wiped Anson's spit from her face. She considered making verbal amends as they reached the back but, watching him and seeing the look of hatred in his eyes, she decided not to. She'd thought, all her life, she'd known him well. She wondered if she ever had, or if he was only using hateful words to mask his true feelings, just as she'd done. Or if whatever they'd been exposed to was turning them into monsters.

Anson was well-mannered. And he'd never lied to her before. If he meant what he promised he'd do to her, she didn't want to find out by accident.

Hearing a footfall from the front of the farmhouse, Anson put his right hand over Alexis's mouth, cautioning her with his left to remain quiet as two policemen announced themselves, called out for her, waited a few seconds, called out again, and left. Doing the bare minimum.

Alexis's legs went weak and Anson sat her against the back wall of the farmhouse. The last thing Alexis saw, as she drifted off, was Anson testing his Zippo to ensure it could light the mouldering lumber stacked beside her.

# XXIII

**A**nson Williams walked along his hometown's main road, heading to the grocery to pick up food his father couldn't grow on their farm. It had been two months since Alison Ross's graduation party, and he rarely saw anyone from high school anymore. His only friend, Alexis Woods—if that was all she'd been to him—had ended their relationship with a drunken, one-sided argument and, though he was a patient man, there was only so much verbal abuse he would stand if he had the option to walk.

Yet he hadn't stopped caring for her that night. He felt sorry for her, but he also felt she had the right to feel however she wanted. No matter she thought it a joke, he did love her, deeply, and part of loving someone—by his definition of the word—was accepting them at their best and their worst. Being with them when they needed you and leaving them alone when they didn't want to see you. Though that had gotten him involved in a relationship where he felt, in the end, he'd been taken advantage of, he still loved her. If he didn't, because she hated him, then the love could never have been real. And, when it came down to it, his love for Alexis never belonged to her. It was his. She couldn't take it away from him. She couldn't steal his joy when he thought of her in better times. She didn't need to return his love, because he'd given it to her freely and, in doing so, had held on to it, as well.

As he moved to cross the road, he noticed a girl walking down the sidewalk toward the diner. Looking harried, with papers in her hands like she was applying for a job. As he watched her, he crossed the road, causing a car to nearly hit him, the driver honking



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his horn as he passed. The girl heard and turned to look. Though he was a fair distance away, he could see she was Alexis. And she looked like she was doing okay. He waved to her and tried to smile.

She stopped for a moment, then waved back, forced a smile, and moved away at a quick pace. Not running, but not ambling along like she had been.

When he crossed the street, he walked in the same direction she had. To the corner, then a left past the diner, where he saw her through the window and waved again. This time she smiled more genuinely when she waved back, but her eyes looked sad. Alison was inside the diner with her and a stout older man, staring at him. When he met Alison's gaze, she looked down and away, touching her hair as her expression went blank, shifting in her shoes. He continued walking, past the haberdasher's and to the grocery.

As he passed the haberdasher's, a hand gripped his arm and slammed him against the wall of the grocery's alley. Standing before him was Marlon Woods, the stalwart guardian of his sister's purity.

Anson opened his mouth, closing it when Marlon put a finger to his lips.

"You still bothering my little sister, you punk?" Marlon asked, shouting and looking mean.

Anson shook his head.

"Because I heard what you did to her at graduation. Everybody did."

"I didn't do anything to her."

"Yeah, and nothing's what brought her home in tears, right?" Marlon smacked Anson's face up, raging, as it drifted down. Anson thought about that night. Wondering if he and Alexis would still be friends, had he stayed longer. Thinking maybe she hadn't meant all the things she'd said, and it had been the alcohol—and a teenage lifetime of chastity—talking. Feeling bad he'd hurt Alexis's feelings when he'd tried so hard not to.

"I didn't take advantage of her. She was drunk, I was sober, and then she got mad."

"Is that your story? Because I heard, from Alison, you said some nasty shit to her before she tore you a new one." Marlon looked around, moving them farther down the alley. Nicely out of

sight. “And now I see you’re stalking her—and don’t deny it. I saw you follow her around the corner and past the diner. What was your big plan?” Marlon punched Anson hard in the gut. Anson sighed.

“I’m going to the grocery to shop for my dad. There is no plan.”

“You’re right about that.” Marlon bashed his fists together, looking confused at Anson’s calm. “My little sister don’t like me fucking with you, but I’m going to teach you a lesson that will get through that Neanderthal skull of yours. I’m going to beat you so bad, your kids will have nightmares about it. I’m going to—”

“It’s okay,” Anson said. “Did you say she doesn’t like you messing with me, still?”

“Shut up,” Marlon snapped. “Bottom line. She never wants to see you again.”

“She didn’t know this would happen? Or that we’re here?”

“Try to keep up, asshole. This is you and me. If you want to cry to her after, she won’t care and there’ll be more beatings in your future. Worse ones.”

“I’ll leave her alone if that’s what she wants,” Anson said, moving to leave. “I have been. I am.”

“No, pal.” Marlon chuckled. “You got to take your lumps. Sorry I got to do this. Shit, who am I kidding? I’m going to enjoy this. See you in the next life, Ants.”

Marlon threw a jab that Anson sidestepped, and his hand bashed into the alley wall. Pulling his fist back quickly, Marlon gave it a shake.

“We need to talk for once, Mar.”

“You’re a piece of—” Marlon threw a surprise hook and Anson ducked it, grabbing his arm by the elbow and twisting it back and up. Locking him in place with one hand, and walking him into the alley wall.

“We need to talk,” Anson repeated. “About this notion you have of ‘you and me’. I know your sister, but there is no ‘you and me’. ‘We’ don’t exist. Understand?”

“Let me go,” Marlon said, wheezing. “I’m sorry, all right?”

Anson let go of Marlon’s arm and Marlon’s opposite fist punched him square on the jaw.

Anson’s head barely moved as Marlon followed with an uppercut.

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“I guess not,” Anson said, cracking his knuckles. “Let me demonstrate what I mean. A practical, real-world example.” He winked at Marlon, who looked perplexed. “You didn’t think anyone knew?”

Marlon shook his head as Anson smacked him hard across the face. He reached to touch his bruising cheek as Anson dealt him another blistering crack.

Marlon delivered five more punches, not landing a single one. Throwing in a wild kick to knock Anson off his pace but missing with that too. Tripping himself and landing on the ground.

Anson offered his hand to help Marlon up and Marlon grabbed Anson’s wrist. Anson’s hand wrapped around Marlon’s wrist and held on tight as he punched Marlon in the nose. Crunching bone and cartilage as Marlon choked on his own blood, coughing.

“You piece of shit,” Marlon said, gurgling. “You’re going to wish this was any of the fifty times I kicked your ass before—”

“Listen to me,” Anson said. “There is no ‘us’. ‘You and me’, ‘we’ don’t exist. I refuse to acknowledge you.” Anson gripped Marlon by the throat, squeezing. “I’ll erase you from my life—from this life—if that’s the only way you’ll learn. Understand?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Anson noticed Alison and Alexis at the entrance to the alley. They’d heard the noise and had been standing there a while. Alexis had heard Anson promise to leave her alone if that was what she wanted, and that had her reeling. Because, if there was one thing she wanted for her life, but couldn’t find the courage to say, it was to have Anson back in it.

Alison looked stunned, shaken, and lost as she watched Anson knock Marlon around, her left hand absently rubbing her crotch through her pants, and her right hand touching her reddened cheeks, as she shivered. Aware the first man she’d ever seen handle Marlon knew she’d spread lies about him.

Alexis looked at them, her eyes indicating apprehension. She looked at Marlon, then at Anson, who met her gaze. When she looked at Anson, she nodded, putting her hands together in prayer in front of her face.

Marlon stood, not seeing Alexis or Alison, and took another swing, clipping Anson on the jaw, not hurting him at all. “You’re going to be sorry you—”

“You may never get it,” Anson said, looking into Alexis’s eyes as Marlon assumed he was spacing out. “Just remember. I never hurt your sister and I never touched her. If I hurt her feelings, it wasn’t my intention and I’m truly sorry. But I have to make you understand about this fictional relationship you believe we share. It’s a fantasy in your head. And this is the last time I’m going to afford you mercy, so do yourself the favour of paying attention.”

Anson punched Marlon in the face again, dropping him and drawing more blood. Then he picked Marlon off the ground and threw him against the wall. Punishing Marlon’s body with low hooks and crosses. Finishing with an uppercut to the jaw and a knee to the balls.

He grabbed Marlon by the hair and dragged him into the middle of the alley, so his back faced Alexis and Alison.

“I’m going to beat you so bad,” Marlon said. “You best pray—”

Anson punched Marlon repeatedly about the face and neck. Hurting him like he’d never been hurt before. Beating him half to death as he took the punishment, helpless. Kicking and grabbing at air as Anson brutalised him with his fists.

Anson looked into Alexis’s eyes. “This ends when you concede ‘we’ don’t exist, or indicate it if you can’t speak.” Then he continued to beat the hell from Marlon.

After a few minutes, her need for some measure of equity for the missed opportunities of youth satiated, Alexis waved Anson down.

“I don’t know you.” Marlon cried like a baby, spitting blood with every word as Anson continued to beat him. “I don’t know who you are. I’m out of your life, I swear. Just, please, stay away from Alex.”

“I’ll say goodbye to Alexis when she decides,” Anson said.

Marlon stared at the sky. Alexis and Alison moved out of view, to the side of the alley by the haberdasher’s. Alexis held Alison as she shook, wondering what was wrong but not daring to speak.

“I’m not a part of your life anymore and, with regard to me, you don’t tell her what to do. ‘We’ don’t exist. Understand?”

“Yes,” Marlon said as Anson raised his fist. “Please don’t hit me any more. I’ll leave you—both of you—alone, I promise.”

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Alison stumbled away on weak knees, biting her knuckles and trying not to have a breakdown as she thought of Anson dominating Marlon and began to cry. Feeling like she'd lived her entire life on the wrong side of the mirror.

Alexis stood—her back pressed flat against the wall of the haberdasher's—and whispered, "I love it when you say my name. I'm sorry, Anson. And thank you," as a tear poured from her left eye and she wished with everything she had that she could go back to graduation night. Knowing every fond insight she'd ever had about Anson's character was correct. That Anson had been taking all that pain for her so she wouldn't have to. That he did want nothing but happiness for her. Wishing she could go back and stop herself from repaying him with the ugliness and violence of her words. Knowing she never could and wondering if she'd ever hear him speak her name again.

She closed her eyes as she heard Marlon's body drop to the ground, and whispered all the words Anson had ever said to her—everything she could recall—and tried to commit them to memory. Praying some would last.

Feeling stubborn, weak, and alone, again.

Hoping that wasn't her lot in life.

# XXIV

Alexis came to in front of the Williams' farmhouse. It was late at night and the fire Anson lit for them burnt weak. Anson's feet sounded in the distance and she rolled onto her stomach, looking for the half of his shirt she'd been wearing as a top. Then she heard water splashing. She heard the fire hiss and smelt it give off smoke as it extinguished at a measured pace.

As her world came slowly into focus, she saw Anson finish dousing the fire as he looked in the direction of the main road. Cursing under his breath, probably at Victor and Alison, for having left him there and for hurting him. Possibly for doing so to her, as well, but her memory was clear and she still felt the acute pain of the wedge Anson's words had driven between them. As if he'd cut into and through her with an axe.

In the light of the moon, she could see Anson's body clearly. His jeans looked dirtied and his upper body was unclothed. Gleaming with sweat, or the clear spotted liquid that whatever lived in the farmhouse degraded to in fresh air.

She sat and crossed her legs, relieved to note her shorts were on and hadn't been tampered with. Her top was missing, so she cupped her breasts in her hands, with arms crossed. Feeling secure, sensing Anson hadn't touched her while she'd been unconscious, except to move her to the front of the house beside the fire.

"Anson?" she asked, as she saw him walk back to the farmhouse, stamp out the stray embers of the fire, and mutter. "Anson, are you okay?"

"Alexis?" His shadowy figure turned, one foot on the steps leading to the front door. "Is that you?"

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“Who else—?” She stopped short of prodding him, even if what she thought to say was intended as good-natured ribbing. She remembered what he’d promised he’d do to her if she insisted on belittling him and treating him like garbage. Wondering why she’d ensured things between them went so terribly wrong. “I mean, yes. Look, I wanted to say—”

“It’s okay.” Anson moved to her, extending a hand to help her up.

She looked at her breasts, safe in her hands. “Do you have anything I can cover myself with?”

He looked into the fields, toward the main road. “No, I’m sorry. I used both halves of my shirt to keep the fire going, but it wasn’t enough.” He rubbed his head with his left hand, keeping his right hand extended. “Mother told me the fire wouldn’t burn longer, but I had to try. She was right, though. She’s always right.”

Alexis looked at him quizzically. “It’s not that,” she said. Unsure what he meant. Or whose mother he was referring to. “It’s—”

“Don’t worry, Alexis. I’ve seen breasts before. It’s not a big deal. You could cover yourself with switchgrass. So you won’t feel uncomfortable now or when we go back to town.” He paused. “No. That might give you a rash.”

Hearing Anson tell her they were headed back to town made her feel more relaxed, but still a little tense. A lot could happen between now and when they returned. Knowing Anson had seen a woman’s breasts before oddly comforted her, making her wonder why she’d always assumed he’d never been with a woman, just because he’d always been there for her. Then wondering how many women he’d been with and if he was as patient a lover as he was a friend.

“It’s just,” she continued, “I don’t want you to think I’m teasing you.” She bit her lower lip. “By showing you my body. That’s what the other boys say. When I don’t wear a bra, or I wear a loose-necked shirt, or I bend over to pick something up. They call me a tease, and then they call me a prude when I won’t—”

“I don’t think you’re a tease, Alexis.” Anson moved closer, making it easier for her to grab his hand. “And I don’t think you’re a prude. I know what your brother did to you. And I know what your father would have done if he hadn’t suffered his accident.”

She peered into him, trying to make out his face and glancing at his outstretched arm, noting it was covered in the same liquid hers was. The little black spots turning into nodules covered with a fine, sharp coating of hair. Almost invisible but perfectly clear to her. She looked at herself and saw the same all over her skin. Whatever they'd been exposed to was growing, and the fire hadn't killed it. It appeared to have made it stronger.

She grabbed his hand, standing erect and immediately wrapping her arms around Anson's shoulders, feeling the bumps on his back and suppressing a moan of pleasure as the nodules on their bodies connected. The hairs twirling around each other, interlacing, and braiding themselves together in her mind's eye.

"I'm sorry for what I said before." She rubbed her head against his chest as she spoke, wanting to chew on it to soothe herself, but still afraid of offending him. "And I'm sorry I made you so mad you called me Alex. I'd forgotten how much I love that you call me Alexis. How you always make me feel like a woman and not one of the guys. Which, I suppose, makes all the men in town gay." She giggled.

"I called you that?" His head shook slowly. "I must have been scared for you. I would never call you that intentionally. It's demeaning."

She felt a tear well in her left eye, hoping he hadn't meant everything else he'd said when he'd broken down and given her an overdose of her own medicine after she'd laid into him for reasons she still didn't understand. "It's not demeaning. It's a nickname. It's not bad. I was... I don't know. I got confused and... I've never felt that angry before, I don't think. I said lots of ugly words. I don't know where they came from. That was demeaning. I'm sorry if I hurt you, Anson."

"What are you talking about?" Anson ran his fingers through her hair, sending rivers of warmth trickling down her neck to the small of her back. Feeling the liquid pool there as her insides heated up along with it. "Aside from your black-out drunk at Alison's high school graduation party, you've never been anything but kind to me. Unlike your brother. What he did was demeaning. To me. And to you."



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She quickly squeezed her eyes closed, opening them and letting her focus go soft. “How do you mean? Mar protected me from my father and the rest of the world.”

“And he called you...”

She giggled as silently as possible. “I know, but it’s a common nickname for girls with names like mine.”

“No.” Anson kissed the top of her head and her eyes closed as her body relaxed into his. “He programmed you your whole life. He wrote your story. He made sure it ended the way he wanted.”

“He didn’t end anything, Anson.” She licked her lips, noticing they tasted sweeter every time she said his name. “Ants,” she said, sampling her lips and puckering at their bitter flavour. “Anson,” she said, chewing her lips again and savouring them. More delicious than before.

“What are you doing?” Anson continued stroking her.

“Testing,” she said, considering explaining what she meant, then getting back on topic. “But, why are you talking about Mar that way? He only made sure I didn’t get treated badly by any of the boys. He was—”

“He was programming you,” Anson repeated. “He was—is—a smart man. You can’t hear your nickname and not act out the set of instructions you’re scheduled to perform.”

“Series of events I’m what?” Alexis asked, feeling confused but not angry like she felt she should when people spoke poorly of her only sibling. Even if she wished him dead.

“How old are you now?”

“That’s not a polite question to ask. And you know.”

“It’s been over a decade since grade school. That’s all I’m saying.”

“No,” she said, giving up fighting her impulses and chewing lightly on what little fat there was on Anson’s chest. “That’s not all you’re saying about Mar. He’s a jerk, but he’s my brother.”

“It’s okay, Alexis.” Anson dropped one hand to the small of her back, gently rubbing the liquid into her skin as her breathing slowed. “I’m a virgin too.”

“I never said I was—” She stopped, drowning in the sensation of his hand caressing dew into her flesh, feeling a million tiny hairs tickle the hairs on her body and mingle with them. “I’m not a virgin.” She bit

her lower lip again, feeling like things were getting too personal and like they'd never gotten personal enough. With anyone. "Technically, I've never had sexual intercourse. I haven't even done other stuff." She bit her lower lip hard, figuring she might as well say what she felt. If anyone could keep his mouth shut, it was Anson. "I've never done oral sex. Giving or receiving, I've never felt a man's naked chest against mine before, much less been kissed there. Or really, truly been kissed anywhere else. My sex life is hugs, kisses on the cheek, and pecks on the lips. But I do have a vibrator... And a dildo." She giggled softly, feeling embarrassed but also fourteen years younger. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lay that on you. I—" She felt herself fill with bliss further as she heard Anson whisper it was okay.

"Same with me, basically," Anson said, making Alexis's heart beat faster. Feeling every hair on his body bristle and experiencing the sensation double as the hairs of his black nodules gently caressed hers and they weaved together. "I've never done those things either. I've kissed a few women before. Cuddled. Apart from that, we're the same. Except for the vibrator... I only have a dildo."

She giggled.

"But I was holding out. For my dream. You were denied the opportunity to find yours. Or know what it was, so you could chase it. So much of your fear and pain isn't yours. Alex."

"That's not—No." She rubbed her head on his chest, her eyes opening wider as Anson's last word hit her. The crystal-clear view of the main road going fuzzy. An uneasy feeling inside her—invading every inch—of flight. Then she felt the urge to fight course through her veins, knowing whatever she was about to face was stronger than her. That it had always been stronger. That her only options were to run, hide, or do both.

"You see, Alexis," he said, as her body relaxed and her breathing slowed. "You've been programmed."

"That's—No. Everyone calls me Alex. He did too. Because it's easier to say. People are lazy. No one but you and... No one but you calls me Alexis." She gave him a peck on the chest and returned to resting her head against it. "If he made me into some robot, like you're saying, someone without a will of her own, wouldn't I be falling all over you? Since you don't call me... Wouldn't I have made

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us work out if that were the case? What with you calling me by my given name my entire life?”

“Not necessarily, Alexis. It’s not making you throw me to the ground and claim me now, is it?”

She shook her head, noting how detailed everything in town looked, even from so far away.

“You have free will. The ability to choose what you desire. You’re not a robot. You’ve just been protected—overprotected—by someone I assume loves you and whom you love in return. But your brother ruined you for everyone else. Think about it.”

“About what?” She chewed on his flesh some more, feeling the slime on it and licking it off her lips. Finding the flavour more exquisite with every taste.

“Even your name tag. The one you wear to work at the diner. What does it say?”

Her eyes widened again as she swallowed more of the liquid from Anson’s chest. “My nickname.”

“And what’s your name?”

“Alex.” She stopped and he felt her grip around his shoulders tighten. “I mean, Alexis. My name is Alexis.”

“But you’re not Alexis in your head. That’s what he did.”

“What? Do you think—?”

“He told you to wait by your nickname. He told you the boys you liked were off limits by your nickname. He told you all the boys wanted from you was the place between your legs. By your nickname. And he proved affection for you meant terrible, brutal pain. After he stopped making you watch him hurt everyone who felt for you, you kept on watching because you thought you needed to. Maybe you did. After he was done punishing everyone else, he told you he did it for you. Essentially, that it was your doing. He made his hate yours. And when he did, he addressed you by your nickname.”

“No,” she whimpered.

“Maybe your nickname isn’t the key. Maybe it’s something else. Or maybe he didn’t mean to do what he did. But he did it. He did it so well, you kept the key sacred. You internalised it. You wrote it on papers when you handed in homework at school. You used it when you applied for employment. You wear it every day at work,

where everyone can see, so they know what to call you. He did it so well he's been gone for—What is it?—two years now? He did it so well you still do what you've been programmed to. You hate the boys who like you. You can't help it, even if you like them. But 'you' don't hate them. Not 'you'. Only the 'you' your brother made owns that hostility."

Her nails dug into his shoulders. "He beat you up plenty, Anson. Shouldn't I hate you the most?"

"You do, Alexis. You forget how much almost every time you're near me. You hate me even more for telling you what I think of you and how I feel."

Her eyes locked open as she became aware of her state of undress, then they softened, not feeling the connexion of her body to his was sexual at all. Just two bodies touching. "Is this your move?" She looked up. "Is this where I realise I may have missed meeting the man of my dreams? That, though I don't know what I want, there's a part of me that does? And you're going to help me find it with your—?" She touched him through his pants, feeling his girth, confused he wasn't hard. "Is that what you're doing now?"

"No." Anson moved his opposite hand to her lower back—bringing the other up to cradle her head—sliding it up and down her body through the liquid, the nodules, and the hairs that grew in shape and size the longer they stayed connected. "I'm not playing games with you. If you want me to, I'll go. Forever. All you've had to do to make me leave you alone was tell me to. But you never have. All these years."

She giggled again, letting her head rest in his hand as she pulled away from his chest to look him in the eyes. "Maybe there's a part of me that needs what you have to offer." She looked down. "Maybe there's a part of me finds it sweet—romantic, even—she has someone in her life who keeps coming back to try and win her, though it always ends badly for him. Maybe a part of me wants to see you get hurt. Wants to see Mar beat you to a pulp, over and over again, so she can feel loved. If she even knows what that feels like. Maybe there's a part of me wants you to hurt, always, so her world—this life—makes sense. Do you think that's possible?"

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“Yes,” he said, bringing his other hand up to caress her cheek. “I think it’s possible. It’s not wrong, if that’s what you think. What girl—what person—doesn’t want to know there’s someone out there who will stay with them no matter how bad things get? Even if they’re the ones who sometimes make those things bad. Or worse.”

Alexis stepped back slightly. Aware of how swollen her breasts were and how hard her wet nipples had grown, dripping warm liquid inside her shorts and dampening the outside. The nodules growing thicker and forming more snake-like shapes. Still bristling with fine black hair that grew longer as she watched her body separate from Anson’s.

“I’ve never kissed anyone before, Anson.” She looked down, biting her lower lip again. Loving the taste more than ever. “You’ve got that on me.” She giggled lightly. “Who’d figure I’d be the less experienced one here?”

“I never assumed anything. But let’s get back into the farmhouse before it gets too dark out and the mosquitoes start biting.”

He looked at the front door and she reached her hand up, turning his face to look at her. “If there were mosquitoes out, we’d be eaten alive by now.”

He chuckled. “Or we’d be eating them alive. Whatever we are.”

“What are we?”

“Two people who’ve known each other a long time. Two people, acres from town, in no state to go back and walk the streets.”

She nodded. “We should get back before the sun comes up, then.”

“That won’t be for a long time, Alexis.”

“I know,” she said. “Jesus, will you please... In case I get lost again. Will you please just—”

“Go hunting for rags so we can get you home as inconspicuously as possible? Go to Vic’s? Take his clothes as payback?”

“You are so oblivious, you know that?” She ran her fingers through his hair, gulping. “All this time. Just, please—”

“I’ve been oblivious all our lives? Oblivious? It’s better than creep. Or Ants. What everyone else calls me.”

“I’m not calling you names, Anson.” Ignoring the voice in her head that told her she couldn’t have what she wanted, for the first time in her life, she gave him a peck on the lips, experiencing a little

pain. Feeling fortunate she'd never kissed any of the boys at school because, back then, word she didn't know what she was doing would have spread fast and made her life even more miserable. "I'm not afraid now. I don't know why—Maybe it's what happened to us tonight—but I know I will be again. I don't want to be afraid anymore. Not of this. Please?"

Seeing nothing register in his eyes, she continued, "After all this time, I'm here. This is difficult for me. I'm rejecting my programming, as you call it. I'm apologising to both of us for a lifetime of rejecting how I feel about—" She gulped again. "And I'm only going to kiss you once more. I know I'm terrible at it and you probably feel like you got labelled by a cadaver, but I've never kissed anyone before. Not the real way. Not the way I see other people kiss. Boyfriends and girlfriends..."

She looked into his eyes, searching for signs of recognition. Finding none, she felt a sadness grow inside her, along with a heat that raged everywhere her flesh was exposed to the night air and simmered everywhere it wasn't.

She gave him another peck.

In the second it took her to pull back, after bashing her closed lips into his, she felt the pain again. Worse. Wanting to die for putting herself out there. Only comforted by the thought Anson wouldn't tell everyone else she was a horrible kisser.

But, before she could pull away an inch, she felt the back of her head hit Anson's open hands. Not feeling pain, just pleasure, like she'd fallen on a pillow.

Her pulse quickened, smelling the warmth of the breath shooting from their noses, blanketing their lips with increasing heat as she tasted Anson's lips on hers. Mouths closed still, but much softer than she'd felt when she gave him a peck. Lingering as she felt her lips separate and the film between them pull into strands that disappeared, leaving her teeth exposed.

She closed her eyes and felt his lips press against hers again, softer still, and she accepted them, keeping her body steady. Allowing him to hold her head in place and letting go. When his lips pulled away, she felt her jaw loosen and her teeth separate, no longer clenching. And his lips touched hers again. Kissing her

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upper lip, then her lower. Finally kissing both as she felt the warmth of the tip of his tongue touch the tip of hers and she drew her tongue back into her mouth.

She opened her eyes to look into his and saw they were closed. She kissed him once more, still a peck but without brute force and with her lips slightly parted. Feeling him reciprocate her speed and rhythm. Feeling herself melt as she stuck her tongue out farther, slowly, and brushed it across his lower lip. Feeling anxious as his tongue touched hers and followed it along its journey. Noticing how his mouth closed and opened in agreement with hers. Letting go even more as their subtle movements began to feel natural. Letting it be what it was. Organic. Like a flower blooming in the dead of winter. Better late than never.

As their lips and tongues advanced and retreated, she closed her eyes. Fully experiencing the pleasure of being kissed how she'd dreamt kisses should feel. The kind boyfriends and girlfriends had enjoyed for so long, while she watched and wondered.

When they'd found their pace and learnt each other's desires and needs, when they'd synchronised and knew, without thinking, how to respond in the most pleasurable way possible to each other's every kiss and caress, those fragments of time became one integrated, indefinable act. As if Anson and Alexis had become one living being, attached at the mouth. Kissing each other more deeply and passionately than either knew they were able. Losing themselves. Letting time evolve into an abstract and becoming completely absorbed in the sensations of the flesh.

After she stopped to take a breath, overcoming the dizziness she felt from the excitement everywhere in her body, when they resumed kissing it was as if they had matured. No longer babies learning to crawl. Their kissing resumed perfectly and naturally. As instinctive as walking and, though they didn't stroll far, more intoxicating than any innate, or learnt, behaviour either had ever known.

And when their lips parted fully again, after a length of time neither could measure correctly, their eyes opened and they smiled. Naturally. Beautifully.

She, for the first time in her life.





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PART II

EARTH