



Malicious Pacts

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Category: Romance, Adult, Action, Mystery

Description:

Total Pages (Source): 48

CHAPTER ONE

TEMPERANCE

Acough clawed its way out of my chest before I could even open my eyes. Smoke burned my nose and throat. Screams cut through the choked air all around me, but I was paralyzed. I couldn't wake up. Something sharp pressed into my ribs while something hard and dull pressed into my back. My chest ached, and as I coughed again, those things dug in even more.

What the hell happened?

Where am I?

I can't remember...

Hushed, angry voices came from above me as they moved around. I could hear their quick footsteps as they approached. They spoke, but the incessant ringing in my ears wouldn't stop long enough for me to make it out. Not that I could have anyway with my clearly rattled brain.

Even as I lay there, trying like hell to focus on the obvious dangers around me, strange images danced in the darkness behind my closed eyelids. Part of me wondered if I'd suffered brain damage while the other part could only speak to me in hallucinatory lights, shapes, and even faces. Random pieces of even more random memories played from my subconscious as darkness tried to swallow me down again, but I couldn't allow it.

Ihaveto wake up.

Rough hands grabbed my face, turning it side to side before something pressed against my neck. Apparently, that was all I'd needed. I could feel it. Adrenaline pumped through me, waking me, but I was terrified of what I'd see when I did. My fingers twitched on their own free will, but I willed my eyes to stay shut a little while longer. Just until the person touching me moved away. Something deep in my gut told me to stay still, and I wasn't about to disobey.

The person above me finally stood, their footsteps moving away. My chest burned even more, and I fought the urge to cough, but it soon became too much. Another cough tore free, this time forcing me further onto my right side. My eyes involuntarily shot open as a scream exploded from my throat when the sharp object pushed further into the sensitive skin over my ribs.

"Move out!" a man with a deep, terrifying voice shouted.

Finally. The ringing had calmed enough for me to hear words, and my brain had come around enough that I could understand them. I was no doctor, but the evidence of brain damage looked optimistically lower by the second.

Danger, however, was still very much all around.

My eyes searched directly around me, but all I saw was ruin. Smoke obscured my field of view, but I made out at least three shadows, maybe four running down the aisle. My vision swam from dizziness. I must have hit my head hard, but I certainly couldn't remember it. I couldn't remember anything.

The crackle of flames along with whimpers and few screams echoed through the building. I forced my right elbow under me, which only shoved my ribs down harder onto the object stabbing into them. Unfortunately, rolling in the opposite direction

wasn't an option. There was too much debris under my left side for me to roll over it.

With a pain-filled yell, I threw my left arm over the bench next to me. I pulled, jerking myself away from the offending object in my side and managed to get my right hand under me. Slowly, I made my way to my knees and looked around.

When my eyes focused enough to take in the ruin around me, I stopped breathing for what felt like an eternity.

I was in a church. The object I'd used to pull myself up on hadn't been just any bench but instead was a destroyed pew. Stained glass littered the floor, and the smoke billowing into the air was illuminated far too much to be inside a dimly lit church. The windows must have been gone, allowing the sun to shine through, but I didn't remember how that happened.

Bodies lay everywhere. Some strewn over pews. Some in the main aisle. Some hunkered down between what had once been clear rows. Blood soaked everything, and it made my stomach roll. As I tried to push myself to my feet using the destroyed pew next to me, I looked one row ahead, and my chest clenched.

I recognized that long, perfectly curled blonde hair anywhere—even when stained a red so deep it looked black. I swallowed hard and limped forward. My leg wouldn't move the way I wanted it to, but I felt no pain. Whether that was from shock or nerve damage, I had no idea. I didn't care right then. I had to know what happened to Miss Sunbury.

I choked back a horrified sob as I rounded the end of the pew and looked into her cold, lifeless eyes as they stared toward the ceiling. Two drops of blood had created two perfect trails down her forehead to her temple, one of them stopping at her ear. Another thicker trail fell the opposite way. All three originated from a single hole in her forehead.

Someone had shot and killed her. She was only twenty-four. She taught the special ed class at my high school. Caroline Sunbury was one of the sweetest souls I'd ever met—and someone fucking killed her.

As I looked at the busted pew behind her, I noticed the blood spatter and brain matter that had sprayed there. How had she died so close to me and so violently, and I didn't remember any of it?

Someone called for help, but my brain couldn't seem to process it. It was like I was on that floor all over again. Part of my brain was on autopilot, seeing but not understanding, while the other part was off somewhere else. Maybe somewhere happy. Somewhere beautiful. I hoped somewhere where there was life instead of endless death and carnage.

“Temperance!”

I gasped slightly, only a tiny little thing, but it was enough to send pain shooting through my side again and bring me out of my daze.

“T—Temperance!”

I turned at the sound of my name. My head throbbed, and my vision doubled again from the position change, but I needed to find the voice.

“Pastor Montgomery?” I called out.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

“Over here!”

I followed the voice as the crunching of glass below my feet also filtered through my ears. One thing I was surprised about was the lack of sirens.

Where the hell are they? I wondered.

With the windows broken, the worst of the smoke was much higher and flowed toward the sides of the building. I clutched my injured right side with one hand and kept my shirt over my mouth with the other. It didn't help much, but some relief was better than nothing. I could breathe, and that worked for me.

“Temperance! Oh, Temperance. Hurry. Help lift this. It was thrown onto me in the blast,” Pastor Montgomery said.

“The blast?” I asked.

I stood behind the pew and leaned forward, trying not to scream as I did. I placed both hands on the wood and prepared to lift. It was in pieces from what I assumed was the blast Pastor Montgomery had mentioned, but it was still a large chunk. It would weigh a couple hundred pounds at least.

“Yes.” He looked at me with concerned, narrowed eyes. “There was an explosion. You don't remember? Get this off me. I need to check you out.”

Increased worry filled his face as he examined me from his place on the floor. Trying not to think too much about my own injuries, I said, “Okay. On three. You push. I

pull. Ready?" He nodded, and I continued. "One. Two.THREE!"

A sharp, ear-piercing sound cut through my ears as the heavy pew moved. I didn't know how far we needed it to move, so I just kept pulling. Arms wrapped around me, and the pew fell, but the sound didn't stop. When I was roughly turned and stared into the terrified eyes of Pastor Montgomery, I realized the sound had faded. And as I closed my mouth, I realized the ear-splitting noise had been me screaming from pain.

He wiped tears from my face, the coolness of the air caressing my cheeks as it brushed across the wet spots left behind.

"Tempe, we have to get you out of here," he said. "You're hurt very badly. You're soaked in blood."

I sniffled and looked down at a large hole in my side that seemed like something was still in it. When my fingertips brushed against jagged edges of something foreign, I knew I was correct. Part of the pew I'd been on earlier must have splintered off into my side.

What I hadn't realized was the object wasn't in my ribs at all but just below them, and for that, I was grateful. Had it been any higher, I might have bled out already. However, I assumed the pain in my ribs meant they were broken.

"Don't touch it. Leave it in," he said as he stilled my hand.

"Where's my father?" I asked, my brain suddenly remembering I'd been there with him. "He wasn't over there with me." I looked around, realizing then that aside from the sounds of the fire blazing in the back of the church, there were no longer any whimpers or screams. Only dead silence. "What happened to all the screams?"

Pastor Montgomery's mouth turned to a straight line as he looked at me. "We need to

get you out of here.”

I shook my head and pushed him away. As I turned to walk away, determined to search for anyone still alive, I tripped over someone. Someone who was quite dead. I managed to catch myself, but that didn't stop the pain that radiated through my head and side. At that moment, I realized it was pure shock and adrenaline keeping my eyes open and my feet under me. I probably wouldn't have long.

I needed to find my dad. I needed to find anyone still alive.

“Dad!” I shouted as I walked down the aisle, looking for any signs of him. “Dad! It's Tempe! Is anyone alive?”

My head throbbed as I tried my damndest to remember. Something. Anything. We'd come together. I remembered that. We'd sat together. I remembered that.

But where did he go?

Why wasn't he there with me when I woke up?

The sounds of fire engines, ambulances, and police cruiser sirens all blared in the distance. Relief flooded through me. Help was on the way.

While looking around, a sea of death stared back at me. Some familiar faces. Some random limbs strewn about from the blast. Some people full of bullet holes. Tears burned at my eyes as I forced myself to register nothing while seeing everything.

“Don't identify them,” I told myself. “Don't identify them. Just look for Dad. Just look for Dad. Just look for Dad.”

Over and over, I whispered to myself, reminding myself not to notice the family of

four huddled together several feet away. All slumped lifelessly together.

Fear threatened to take me over, but I couldn't let it. Not yet. I was almost there. I just had to find my dad.

“Dear God in Heaven,” Pastor Montgomery said.

I followed his slack-jawed gaze nearly ten feet away and landed on a familiar face—a face that wasn't supposed to be there.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

My eyes widened as tears filled them. “Momma!”

Painful as it was, I rushed over and knelt on the ground, my side screaming at me the whole way down. As my eyes focused, my brain fully processed what I saw.

My mother, who wasn’t supposed to be there, lying under the lifeless body of my father. The man she’d left. The man she’d abandoned. The man who I could only assume had given his life to protect hers, but still failed anyway.

What the fuck happened here?

His white button-up shirt was stained red in three places. Three spots... three shots. He’d been killed with a gun. The same as Miss Sunbury had, only he’d been shot in the back. My mother, however, suffered the same fate as the poor special ed teacher.

A single shot directly to the forehead.

Another wail bubbled in my chest, and my entire torso tightened as I prepared to release it. I bit my lip hard enough that I tasted blood to stop it. The pain was too intense, and I could feel the world fading away. I knew that any moment, strong men and women would rush inside to drag me out, and I’d never get the chance to say goodbye.

My eyes were filled with so many tears, I could hardly see. I put my hands on the floor and slowly moved my feet out from under me as I scooted closer. Laying on my left side, I stroked my mother’s hair for what I knew would be the last time.

“I know you weren’t always there for me,” I choked out. “You were a terrible mother.” I inhaled sharply, and the pain almost took me. I had to hurry. “But I know you loved me. You loved me in the only way you knew how, and I loved you, too.”

Pulling myself closer with my left arm, I kissed her cheek. It was still warm. I could smell her shampoo and her perfume. I committed that scent to memory as I laid my head on her breast, my forehead against my father’s.

“Daddy.” My eyes squeezed shut as tears poured. This one hurt the worst. My right hand cupped the side of his face. “I love you. Thank you for raising me the best you could. I’m strong because of you. I’m smart because of you. I know what a good man is because of you.”

My thumb stroked his face as I tilted my head enough to kiss his forehead. Like my mother, I inhaled deep the scent of his hair. My eyes closed again, and this time I didn’t fight it. I willed away the thoughts of reality. I forced away anything having to do with that day.

I pretended it was one of my sick days from school. One where I was too sick and in too much pain to want to be alone, so I asked my dad to stay home with me. I imagined him sitting on the couch with me laying on it, my head in his lap as his fingers combed through my hair the way mine combed through his right now. As sick as I’d felt, he’d made me feel safe.

Every time I hugged him when I was sad or when I cried on his shoulder, he’d made me feel safe. I continued to inhale through my stuffy nose, smelling his familiar scent and letting the last bit of comfort I’d ever take from that wash over me as my consciousness faded.

I knew when I finally went under, I’d never again smell them. I’d never again look at their faces. My mother’s death broke my heart, but my father... His was a devastation

I couldn't yet begin to process.

"I love you, Daddy," I whispered as my body went limp.

"Temperance? Temperance!"

My mind registered the voice, but it wasn't enough to pull me back. As I lost consciousness, I knew that whether my body lived or died, my life as I knew it was over, and the old me was certainly dead.

Nothing would ever be the same.

CHAPTER TWO

I groaned as consciousness took hold. My entire right side felt like it had gone through a woodchipper. My bed was harder than usual, and I didn't remember my sheets being quite so scratchy, not that they were unbearable. Before I even opened my eyes, I tried to shift, and that proved to be a big mistake.

"MMMfuck!" I cried out as my eyes opened. My hands shot to my right side, and I tried to breathe through the pain. When I finally got it under control, I took in the room around me, a stab of fear shooting through me like a bolt of lightning. It was then that I noticed the consistent beeping next to me and noticed the sterile scent. This was not my bed or my bedroom. "What the hell?"

Slowly, things started coming back to me. This was a hospital. I'd been injured in the church.

The fire.

The bodies everywhere...

Oh, God...

My parents.

My head fell back against my pillow as my eyes closed tight, spilling tears onto my cheeks. Now that I remembered what had happened, images of lying next to their dead bodies took over my brain. They were gone. My parents were dead, and I'd never talk to them ever again.

I wanted to scream, but I knew it would hurt like hell, so I stayed quiet as more tears formed. I just wanted to go back to sleep. I was so tired, but my brain was on alert now, and there was no chance of that. Not until I was able to calm back down.

Forcing the horrible images away, I checked out my surroundings. I was hooked up to an IV and a lot of wires. Outside the bedroom window next to the door, a cop stood there talking to someone, but I couldn't see if it was another cop or someone who worked at the hospital.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I pushed the red button on the bed rail next to me.

“You’re awake! We’ll be right in,” the friendly voice said.

Within seconds, several people moved into the room. A doctor, a nurse, and what I assumed were two detectives based on their clothing. One man and one woman. The doctor came around to my right while the nurse walked around the room gathering supplies. Another nurse walked in and smiled briefly at me as she headed over to my IV. She had light blue eyes, dirty blonde hair, and high cheekbones. She looked familiar, but I couldn’t place where I’d seen her before.

A throat clear got my attention, and I looked over to the doctor.

“I’m Doctor Wyatt. Do you know where you are?” He seemed nice enough. His demeanor was serious, but not unpleasant. He had a gentle smile and kind green eyes. He had thick auburn hair that was about half grey, evenly spread throughout.

“County General, I’d imagine. It’s the closest to the church.” My brows knit together, and I looked down at my hands, which clasped together when I mentioned the church.

“Yes,” Doctor Wyatt said. “You had significant injuries and needed emergency surgery. There was the obvious injury caused by the piece of wood you had in your side, but there was also internal bleeding. The damage to the lower part of your liver was minimal. Leaving the wood in likely saved your life. Had you removed it, you would have bled out in minutes. We were able to get to it in time.

“I expect you to make a full recovery. You’ll be in the hospital for a couple of

weeks—maybe more. We just have to see how quickly you heal. Liver injuries are serious, and you need to be monitored until we know the risk of re-injury has passed. Once that happens, there will be restrictions in place, and those will lighten as you recover. You were very lucky. An injury like this could have been so much worse.”

I heard everything he said, but it was all like before. Part of my brain understood while the other part took the information in and spat it right back out. I was still in shock.

Still, that didn’t stop me from looking up at him as if on autopilot, and saying, “My parents are dead. Everyone is dead. I wouldn’t call that luck.”

The male detective at the end of the bed cleared his throat, the doctor becoming visibly annoyed.

“Not right now,” Doctor Wyatt said. “Let her rest. She’s been through hell.”

“We need to ask her some questions. Pastor Montgomery—”

“Not right now,” the doctor interrupted. He walked to the end of the bed with purpose, his shoulders rigid, and his hands balled into fists.

Pastor Montgomery! I needed to know how he was. I was wrong. Not everyone was dead. He’d been there and helped me. I helped him, too. He was probably a good part of the reason I was still alive. He was a combat medic in the military before he became a Baptist preacher.

“How are you feeling, sweetie?” the nurse messing with my IV asked. Her name tag said Angela, RN BSN.

I looked up at her as her eyes darted between the doctor and back to me. She

plastered on a smile, and I could tell she was uncomfortable and trying to distract me from the argument at the end of the bed.

“...almost died. She just woke up from a long surgery. Let her rest. The only reason you’re in here right now is because you agreed to no questions, and it was possible she might say something about what happened on her own. With no prodding.”

“I—I’m okay,” I responded to her, though I wasn’t looking at her. I stared at the foot of my bed with great interest.

Who almost died? Me?

“Well, she’s fine now,” the male detective said.

Doctor Wyatt pointed to the door, and he angrily walked toward it, the detectives right behind him. Even with the door shut, I could still pick up their argument.

“What would you rate your pain? One being barely anything at all and ten being the worst pain of your life,” the nurse said, once again trying to distract me.

I ignored her for a moment and focused on the door. “The surgeon lost her three times in there. That bleed was significant even if the laceration was minor,” Doctor Wyatt said. His voice radiated with passion and anger, which wasn’t something I was used to seeing in doctors around here. He was advocating for his patient—for me—and I deeply appreciated it. The last thing I wanted to do right then was relive that nightmare by answering all their questions.

“I almost died three times?” I asked, looking up at Nurse Angela.

A sad smile crept across her lips as her head tilted. Her hand reached out and rested on my shoulder. “Yes, sweetheart. When you came in, you were unconscious. Your

pulse was very slow. They did the tests and scans necessary to create a surgical plan that would give you the best chance of survival, but right after, you were rushed into surgery. It was touch and go for a while. You lost a lot of blood.”

I nodded. “Thank you for the honesty,” I said. I knew they’d sugarcoated it because I was just a kid to them, legal adult or not, and more than likely also because I’m weak right now.

“I know you’ve suffered a lot of loss. Is there anyone else we can call for you? You’ll need someone to take care of you when you get home,” Angela said.

I shook my head. “Just Pastor Montgomery. He and my dad were like brothers. They grew up together, so he’s basically my uncle. I’m sure he’ll help take care of me. When can I see him?”

Angela’s mouth opened slightly and then closed as darkness fell across her gentle features. Dread settled in my stomach, and I swallowed hard.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

“Where is he?” I asked. “He’s okay, isn’t he?”

“You need to leave—now,” the doctor ordered loudly.

The door opened abruptly as he made his way back in. He cleared his throat and forced a smile in my direction before heading to my right side again. He pulled up a rolling stool and sat next to my bed, grabbing hold of my hand.

He looked at Angela. “Thank you...” He squinted as he looked at her name tag across from my bed. “Angela. You new?” She smiled and nodded. “Ah. That explains why I haven’t seen you, not that I can see you now.” He laughed as he looked at me. “I’m just kidding. I’m a little near sighted with letters and numbers.” Turning back to the nurse, he said, “Vitals look okay? I can’t make out the numbers from here.”

Angela nodded again. “BP is 120/72. Heart rate is eighty-five. Oxygen is ninety-nine. Her IV looks good.”

He smiled down at me. “That’s what I get for leaving my glasses out on the desk before coming in here. I can’t see even five feet away. Those numbers are good, by the way. Nothing to worry about.”

He could have told me my skin had turned green and I’d started to grow feathers, and I wouldn’t have known the difference because my mind was only on one thing.

“Where’s Allan Montgomery?”

Doctor Wyatt took a deep breath and steeled himself. “When Pastor Montgomery

came in, he was talking and moving around just fine. He gave us all the information he knew about you. Because of how bad you were, you were obviously the focus, especially since he seemed fine. He refused to be checked out until you were in surgery and being seen to.”

My eyes were wide as I stared into the doctor’s. I already knew where this was headed, but I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t even move. My body was simply frozen as more tears spilled onto my cheeks. It seemed as though that was all I was capable of.

“Once you went into surgery, I was on my way across the hospital when I heard the call for a Code Blue.” He took another deep breath and squeezed my hand gently. “By the time I got to Pastor Montgomery, he wasn’t breathing. The other emergency physician and several nurses were already running a code. That means they do CPR, use defibrillation paddles, and whatever means are necessary to get a heartbeat. Unfortunately, they were unsuccessful. They were unable to revive him. I’m sorry.”

I shook my head as a painful sob took me. “H-how?” My voice came out so whiny and broken. I sounded more defeated in that moment than I thought possible. “How? He was fine! He was stuck under the pew, and when we got him out from under it, he was up and walking around. He helped me find my parents—not that that mattered. They were already dead.” I spat the word with such hatred. “He was fine! He can’t be dead, too! He can’t be!”

More tears came, and I openly cried. It hurt my side like hell with every sob that took me, but I didn’t care. Let the stitches tear open. Let me fucking die. I didn’t care. I had nothing left.

“We think...” He sighed heavily.

His free hand absentmindedly moved to wipe his brow. He was a good man, and I could tell how hard it was for him to talk about this after knowing what I’d been

through, but I didn't care. I needed answers.

"His abdomen was distended. It was full of blood. That means he suffered internal injuries that weren't obvious when he came in. Pews are extremely heavy, and if one landed on him in the blast, that would certainly cause a lot of internal damage. Had he allowed us to examine him right away, we might have been able to save him. However, to be honest..." There was a pause as he shook his head.

"You think he still wouldn't have made it," I said, finishing his thought.

The doctor nodded. "With that much blood, I think his chances would have been less than ten percent. Again, I'm very sorry for your loss."

I nodded and pulled my hand back. He let me go, and I covered my face with my hands as the tears seized me.

"We need to do a wound check," Doctor Wyatt said softly. "But we can give you a few minutes if you need it."

I nodded again. It seemed to be the only thing I could do. Peeking out from my hands, I watched all of them leave. At that moment, I was struck with the full weight of being undeniably, soul-crushingly alone. I had no one left. No parents. No siblings. I was an only child. My parents were a little older, and their siblings had a ton of health problems and were under some form of care or had died early on. I had no one.

And that terrified me.

Nurse Angela stayed behind, waiting next to my bed as everyone else left. I looked up at her, suddenly panicked. "Please don't leave!" I said before I even knew what came over me.

“What is it, sweetheart? Can I get you anything?”

My face scrunched up, and my entire body trembled as my arms involuntarily reached out like a toddler asking to be picked up. Undeniable pity and sadness crossed her face as she moved to close the door and blinds before coming to sit in bed with me.

She squeezed herself in on my good side and wrapped her arms around me, placing my head on her chest.

“It’s okay. It’ll all be okay. Just cry if you need to. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Will you get in trouble?” I choked out between sobs.

She shook her head. “Don’t you worry about that. Nursing is a lot more than bandages and IVs. Besides, this is the one night we’re fully staffed with nurses. They won’t even notice I’m gone. You picked a great day!”

A small chuckle escaped me despite the darkness, and she pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

“You must be a mom,” I said. That little kiss was something a mother would do.

“Mmhmm. In fact, she’s about your age. Close enough anyway. I don’t get to see her much thanks to work. She has my hair and my eyes,” she said.

“If she’s your oldest, she did a great job training you,” I said.

This time, she chuckled. “She’s my only child, and she sure did. I know I’m not family to you, but until you’re strong enough to leave here, I will be. My heart breaks for you. You’re just a baby. You might legally be an adult, but you’re just a baby. This never should have happened to you.”

I nestled in closer to her, my eyes squeezing tight as more tears fell. I couldn’t hold her because of the pain, but I held on to the arm draped over my chest tighter.

“Thank you. When I saw everyone leave, I got scared. I’ve never felt so alone.”

“You know, when I was fourteen, my parents were killed in a car accident,” she said, her voice a little quieter.

I looked up, and she adjusted so she could look into my eyes. “They were? I’m so sorry. This must bring back terrible memories for you.”

She looked at me with kindness and smiled softly. “It’s incredibly sweet for you to think of me, especially when you’re going through so much right this very second and mine was almost thirty years ago, but don’t you worry about that. It does bring up some memories, but mostly because I didn’t have anywhere to go. So, I know the

alone feeling you're talking about. And when you looked at me like you did, I couldn't leave you alone."

"Were you in the accident, too? Did the staff leave you alone at the hospital?" I asked. I didn't know if I wanted to know out of genuine curiosity or if it was because I was terrified of the silence, but the sound of her voice comforted me in ways I just couldn't let go of. Not yet.

"Yeah. I was the only one to survive. I was in a coma for a few days, but I woke up after about a week. It was a different time back then. They kind of expected me to deal with it. It was a busy hospital. 'No time for hand-holding,' they said. So, I spent several days alone. It was scary. I didn't want you to have to go through that."

I sighed. "Thank you. I appreciate it more than you know." I paused. "Well, no, I guess not. I guess you know exactly how much I appreciate it."

"I do, and you're welcome."

Her fingers combed softly through my hair as she hummed softly to me. Her body gently rocked against mine. At first, I'd tensed, thinking it would be painful, but when I relaxed against her, I realized she knew just how far she could move without hurting me.

I felt a little childish, but my whole world had just exploded. I'd just lost my mother—a woman who was never much of a mom to begin with, but she was mine, and I still loved her despite that. This kind of affection was something I hadn't experienced since I was a little girl. Childish or not, I welcomed it. More than that, I needed it.

I knew enough about death to know this was the easy part. I had caring arms wrapped around me. Every hour or two, I'd have someone in here checking on me and talking

to me. I'd have cops in and out of here. Hell, I'd probably have random visitors stop by to wish me well. I wouldn't even doubt someone from the newspaper stopping by for a story because I was apparently the lone survivor of this horrific tragedy.

No, the hard part would come when I went home in a few weeks. When I walked into the house surrounded by my things. My parents' things. When I would finally be alone. Truly, devastatingly alone. No one to call and talk to. My friends from school all had family members who went to that church. So, they would have their own grief to deal with.

Right now... Right now, was the easy part. So, I'd take any solace I could. I needed something to hold onto when it was time for the bad to start. And as Angela ran her fingers through my hair, I fell asleep to the gentle sounds of her humming and my crying.

CHAPTER THREE

Angela stayed with me for an hour after that. I vaguely remembered someone coming in, but she shooed them away. That hour seemed to pass like seconds but also like days. Time felt like it flew by but stood still. Before I knew it, Doctor Wyatt had returned to do the wound check he'd mentioned earlier.

I got a look at the gnarly bruising on my ribs, a few of which that were broken, as well as the wicked surgical site. I'd only caught a glimpse of the wound in the church, but it was obscured by all the blood. I hadn't seen the actual damage and how bad it was. Now, I was able to see just how large of an injury it was.

They brought me food—not that I would call it that. For the next two days, all I was allowed to have were liquids. If I tolerated that, after forty-eight hours I'd be allowed to move to soft foods. After that, they'd just continue increasing consistency until I could tolerate food as normal.

Fun.

I had almost dozed off for a nap—only one of probably a billion I'd take throughout the day—when there was a soft knock at my door. I looked over and saw the detectives from the day before walk in.

“Good morning, Miss Wilder,” the woman said. “I'm Detective Carol Abbott, and this is my partner, Detective Dale Hauer. We heard you were feeling better today, so we wanted to stop by and talk to you about what happened.”

I pushed my tray farther away. The pain medicine kept me feeling relatively nauseated, and while the smell of broth was normally pleasant, it just made me want to puke.

“I figured you'd be back this morning. Look, obviously, I want to help. My parents were killed. A lot of people died. I almost died. But... I don't know how much help I'll be. I don't remember anything at all.”

They looked at one another before Detective Abbott took a step closer to the foot of my bed, pen and paper in hand. I was glad she took the lead. Her partner was a shit yesterday. I didn't care much for him. He even had one of those faces you just wanted to punch.

“You don't remember anything?” she asked, her brows furrowed.

I shook my head. “I remember going to church yesterday. I went with my dad like usual. Well...” I sighed and rolled my eyes. “I guess we didn't regularly go to church. We'd only recently started back up. We went a lot when I was a kid. My mom, dad, and me. After she left when I was younger, he just didn't care anymore. But the last year or so, we'd been going at least twice a month.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

She nodded. “That’s good to hear. I know how hard it can be to maintain things like that after a big change in the family. It takes a while to adjust. Divorce is rough.”

She smiled, and it was warm, though I knew she was trying to be patient and supportive. She needed to get out of me whatever she could, and rudeness wasn’t the way. A lesson she’d learned the day before with her partner. She was probably afraid Doctor Captain America would come back in here and kick her out.

“Okay, so you went with your mom and dad. So, what next? What do you remember after that?”

I shook my head. “No. I went with my dad. Only. Just him. I honestly have no idea why my mom was there. She wasn’t supposed to be. Hell, I hadn’t even seen her in probably six months. My dad definitely would have mentioned it if he knew, so it was a surprise.”

Just talking about it brought the images of my mother lying on the floor, a single bullet hole in her forehead, while my father’s dead body lay on top of her. Nothing in the world could convince me he didn’t die protecting her. I knew he did. He still loved her. He always would have.

“Maybe she wanted to surprise you both. Do you remember seeing anyone else there who normally wasn’t?” Detective Abbott asked.

I closed my eyes and thought. Try as I might, I couldn’t remember anything. I sighed again and shook my head.

“No. Everyone there were regulars in one way or another. They were either there every Sunday or like us, coming most of the time. No one stuck out.” There was a pause as I tried to remember up to the last moment before the blackout began. “I remember Pastor Montgomery welcoming everyone.”

“Okay, that’s good,” she said, coaxing me along. “Anything else?”

I gasped and my eyes darted up to meet hers. “I remember the doors bursting open. I turned around, and I saw...” I paused as I shakily recounted what happened. The images were incredibly fuzzy, but they were partially there. “I think I saw four men? Honestly, I can’t remember exactly how many. Definitely close to that. I’m sorry. I know that doesn’t help much.”

“No, no, no. That’s great,” she said with another reassuring smile. “Do you remember anything about their faces? Skin color? Hair color? Tattoos?”

I paused again, but I didn’t have to for long. “No. There was nothing. They were clothed from head to toe in black. Hoods and masks. Gloves. I only remember a glimpse of them, but I recall feeling afraid... And then everything goes black. Pastor Montgomery said there was an explosion, but I don’t remember any of that. I remember nothing else until I woke up on the floor—apparently with a chunk of a church pew stabbed into my side and some broken ribs.”

“Okay, okay,” she said as she wrote down some things. “What about voices? Anything stand out about them?”

I shook my head again. “When I first woke up, my ears were ringing. I could hear voices, but I couldn’t make anything out. Everything was a jumble in my brain.” After thinking for a moment, I remembered something odd. “One of them touched me.”

“One of them touched you?” Detective Hauer asked. “Touched you how?”

“When I was in the process of waking up, my brain came to before my body. I couldn’t move. It was like sleep paralysis. And as I laid there, I remember someone grabbing my face like this.” I lightly gripped my chin and turned my head from side to side. “And then they touched the side of my neck. Then they walked away, and the next thing I know, a deep voice yelled for everyone to move out.”

The detectives looked at one another. Detective Hauer’s eyes returned to me. “That sounds like they checked to see if you were alive. Touching the side of your neck... He was checking for a pulse. Clearly, you were alive and had a pulse, so why would they leave you alive when they’d killed everyone else?”

“Well, they didn’t kill Pastor Montgomery either. I don’t know if he was unconscious at the time, or if he just stayed quiet to keep them from noticing him, or if they just let him go. But he lived until we got here yesterday.”

I paused, trying to remember more. “I remember cries even after they left. I don’t know if that was my imagination or if it was Pastor Montgomery calling out for someone, but I remember hearing them. By the time I got to help him out from under the pew, they’d all stopped. I figured they’d died while I was wandering around, but I suppose it’s possible they were already dead. The screams and cries I heard might have been when I was under. I was so out of it. It’s hard for me to know anything definitively.” I shook my head, my eyes filling again. Clearing my throat, I said, “I’m sorry. I wish I could have saved them, but I couldn’t even process what was going on.”

Detective Abbott reached out with a sympathetic hand and placed it on my foot. “You were in shock. No one expected you to do anything. You’re not in any trouble here, and we don’t think you are responsible for those other people, so don’t worry about that, okay? We’re just here to figure out what happened.”

“Yeah, we caught video footage from a traffic cam. There were five men in an SUV heading away from the church. All of them wearing black with hoods and masks, just as you said. We just needed to know if they were the ones we should be looking at for this or not,” Detective Hauer said.

I sat up a little and immediately regretted it. I laid back again, clutching my side. “Does that mean you know who they are?”

They both sighed and shook their heads before Abbott answered. “Unfortunately, no. The vehicle was stolen. We found it down by the river—torched. Any evidence that was inside is gone, and any traffic footage we’ve managed to find has all of them suited up the whole time. They knew what they were doing.”

“Was it a robbery? Were they after someone? What happened in there?” I asked.

“Wallets, keys, phones, purses, and anything else valuable were missing from several people there. Mostly those closest to the aisles. The collection plate was missing as well. Seems they ran in and grabbed whatever they could and got out,” Detective Hauer said.

I shook my head in disgust. “That’s a lot of trouble and a lot of death for a few hundred dollars.”

“Well, some of the elderly women in the church had jewelry worth thousands all together. So, it seems there was a lot more to be had than just a few hundred.” Detective Abbott patted my foot again. “Look, don’t worry. We’ll get these guys. I promise.” She walked to the side of my bed and left a card on my table. “There’s my card. My cell phone is on there. Call me if you need anything. Okay?”

I nodded. I knew what that meant. “I’ll call if I remember anything. Thank you both. I hope I can be of more help. Maybe healing will bring back some memories.”

“Don’t stress yourself out,” she said. “It takes the time it takes. But definitely call if you do. My aunt and uncle were in that church. I promise, we want to catch these bastards. We really do.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said automatically.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

“And I’m sorry for yours. Get some rest. You’re going to need it. I think they’re coming in here to make you walk soon.” She scrunched her face for a moment and then gave a small smile before turning and walking out with her partner.

“Oh, one more thing,” Detective Hauer said at the door. I raised my brows in response, and he continued. “Pastor Montgomery. He mentioned something about you being in danger. The doc said he could have been hallucinating from blood loss. Maybe he thought you were still in the church, but I wanted to make sure. Do you know anyone who would have a personal reason to hurt you?”

I looked at him with all the shock and confusion I could manage. “Me? Definitely not. I’m no one. I don’t have enemies or friends in high places. I just...exist. I can’t think of a single person who would care enough about me to even play a prank on me, let alone murder a church full of people with guns and explosives just to get to me.”

He nodded. “Okay. I kinda figured that but... had to ask.”

“I understand,” I replied, even though I didn’t.

I didn’t understand at all.

Why would Pastor Montgomery say something like that?

Who the hell would I have to be in danger from? Hopefully the good doctor was right. Hopefully it was just the blood loss talking and nothing else.

CHAPTER FOUR

DAMIAN

Vacationing alone wasn't the worst, but after years of it, it got a little old. My friends, while loud and obnoxious, proved to be the cure for the monotony. They flew out to stay with me in my family's Hawaiian vacation home for the last couple of weeks. After spending the previous four weeks drinking and fucking my way through the locals, I got extremely bored, and I never fared well when bored.

Same thing day in and day out made Damian a very angry boy.

It was one of the reasons I hated summer. Dad and his wife were off doing whatever-the-fuck they do. My friends were off doing whatever-the-fuck they do with their own asshole parents, who were admittedly far less assholish than mine. Yeah, it was a real party.

Summer was almost half over, and it was time to head back. Every year we followed the same routine. First four weeks of summer was spent fucking off, last half working our asses off. Football season started at the beginning of the school year. First practice was even before the first day of classes, so we wanted to be ready.

Once we were boarded on the private jet, I sat in the back of the cabin, poured myself a glass of champagne, buckled in, and put my headphones on to drown out the walking bullhorns I called friends. And not a moment too soon, I realized, because all five of them piled onto the plane laughing and shoving each other.

The biggest of them, Everett, shoved my best friend Asher, which sent him stumbling into Trent. As expected, they all howled in laughter as they fell to the floor and predictably began beating the hell out of one another.

They managed to rock an entire fucking plane while acting like idiots, but I didn't care. I had Five Finger Death Punch and probably the most expensive bottle of champagne available on the plane—compliments of Daddy Dearest.

Laughing and breathless, the trio scrambled to their feet as everyone parted and found their seats.

Asher smiled ear to ear, his long dark hair a mess as he looked at me. He said something, but the volume was too high for me to make it out. I pulled one of the large earpieces back and looked at him expectantly.

“You good, man?” he asked. Judging from the mouth movements, I assumed that was what he'd asked before.

I nodded. “As good as I can be with you noisy asses around.”

He laughed and shook his head. “Relax man. You're the only asshole I know who needs a vacation from vacation.”

He wasn't wrong. I shrugged. “As long as I'm predictable, then you all should know how not to piss me off by now.”

I gave him a sarcastic smile and righted my noise-canceling headphones, signaling my departure from the conversation. His body shook a bit with a chuckle as he took his spot next to me across the aisle on the white leather sofa that spanned the length of the entire wall on the left side of the cabin. He'd only been seated for a second before he stood again and snatched my bottle of champagne.

Eying him with annoyance, I watched as he over-poured himself a glass before returning the bottle and reclaiming his seat. I grumbled under my breath and leaned my head back against the headrest, closing my eyes.

Asher was my best friend. We'd known one another since the fifth grade. We came from wildly different backgrounds, but that didn't bother me at all. Despite what people thought, I wasn't completely elitist. I was an asshole, but not that bad of an asshole.

He'd grown up poor, but that changed when his father got an inheritance. That was how he ended up in California and in the same school I went to.

His grandparents came over from South Korea and had started a restaurant which eventually became an incredibly successful chain. After twenty years, his grandfather, Jong-woo, had completed business degrees and began thinking of moving toward a much larger opportunity: the medical industry.

He sold everything in his forties and invested in medical technology. When that exploded and he made an obscene amount of money, he used that to build a business that manufactured bottles for pharmaceutical companies as well as medical equipment. That was how my father knew their family.

Sebastian Wolfe, my father, owned Wolfe Pharmaceutical, so he worked with Jong-woo for years.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

Asher's dad, Kwan, hadn't spoken to or even seen his father since before Asher was born. He didn't want any part of the business, and his father disowned him. To retaliate, Kwan took his wife's last name when they married—Jackson.

It was quite the shock to Kwan when Asher's grandfather died and left him everything—including the business. Asher's family went from being dirt poor and on the verge of losing their farm in Nebraska to being filthy rich in the blink of an eye.

Now his father and my father were as thick as thieves since their businesses fueled one another. Asher and I were pretty inseparable most of the time. We were the kings of Crestview, and we fed on that. Though, he'd softened a little since last year. He had good reason after everything that happened. He kept a good attitude, one that annoyed me endlessly, but also one that kept me grounded. Without him, I'd probably truly be a lost soul.

I sensed a presence, and I looked up to see him smiling down at me as he once again over-poured another glass of champagne. His waist-length, jet-black hair was now tied back.

When he sat the bottle back down, I punched him lightly in the gut. "Get your own bottle, dick."

He laughed. Judging by how his head fell back, it was probably loud, but my headphones were great, and the music was loud. He winked and took a sip as he headed back to his seat.

As I settled back in, I grimaced at the painting my dad had hung on the wall at the

front of the cabin. Asher's large body had hidden it from my view until he moved. It was an awful abstract painting of a nude woman. I hated it, and that was coming from someone who thought there was nothing more beautiful than the female form.

It probably disgusted me because I imagined that was how he really saw women. Something ugly and lesser, complicated and not worth the time to create smooth lines. It made me think of how he treated my mother and how he almost immediately replaced her after she died with a gold-digging whore half her age.

Piece of shit.

Closing my eyes, I turned my swiveling, reclining chair away from the monstrosity and tried to relax. Within a few deep breaths, everything was peaceful once I was lost in my own world. I liked having my friends around, but in such close quarters, it was too much sometimes. Some asshole therapist once said something about it being my way of shutting people out. That I wasn't used to having people around, so when I did, I tried to push them away.

Whatever the hell that meant.

We'd been in the air for about three hours when there was a gentle brush across my shoulder. My eyes opened to see the flight attendant standing there. Tall. Leggy. Blonde. She had brown eyes, so I assumed the blonde was purchased.

I pulled my headphones back, and she smiled. I couldn't help but notice the way she casually bit the corner of her bottom lip while waiting for me to acknowledge her.

"Yes?" I said, my voice harsh.

"Um... Sorry to bother you, sir. I just wanted to know if I could get you anything else?"

“Anythingelse?”

My brows knit together in confusion. I hadn’t even noticed she’d brought me anything. I turned my head and saw a small plate of food on the wooden bar that ran the length of the right wall of the cabin by my chair with a fresh bottle of champagne nestled in the large, temperature-controlled, built-in holder. I’d finished off the last one—with more help than I’d have liked from Asher.

I faced forward without meeting her gaze, placed my headphones back on, leaned back, and closed my eyes. “No.”

Another thirty minutes passed, and I once again reached for my glass. The top on the champagne had been opened for me before she brought it out, so I poured the first glass from it. When I did, something fell from the bottom of the bottle.

I picked it up and saw the perfectly loopy letters.

Special in-flight menu options are in the back.

- Tiffani

The right corner of my mouth tugged as I reread the note. Is that right, Tiffani with an ‘I’?

That poor girl had no idea what she was asking. I doubt she’d met a bastard quite like me. However, the flight had several hours left, and I needed to stretch my legs. I’d been sitting there for far too long. The guys were busy playing video games and

shouting at each other. I doubted they'd even notice I was gone.

I placed my headphones on the bar and downed my glass of champagne. I stood and made my way back through the cabin, past the bathroom, and past the kitchen area. Normally, that was where the attendant sat when not needed, but surprise, surprise—she wasn't there. That only left one last place.

The bedroom.

I'd been on enough private jets to know most didn't come with bedrooms stocked with a king-size bed, refrigerator, and other such things. Most were used for business purposes, or in some cases, family travel. Either way, there was no real need for bedrooms. This one, however, had one.

My family has two private jets. This one—which my stepmother, Jenni, knew nothing about—and the family jet, which we used for family vacations we never actually took together. That one was in use right now by my father and Jenni for their summer trip to Italy. That one had no bed.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I wasn't stupid enough to believe it was a coincidence that my mother knew nothing of this one when she was alive, Jenni knew nothing of it now, and that it had a bed in it. If she wasn't a bitch and just as bad as he was, I might've actually felt bad for her, but I didn't. Instead, I kept my mouth shut, and I got to use it whenever I wanted. Since I didn't give two fucks what either of them did with their free time, I took advantage where I could.

Which led me to Miss Tiffani. Sliding open the hideaway door, I found her sitting on the edge of the perfectly made king-size bed. The royal purple bedding fit well with her solid black uniform. Her long, blonde hair had been up before, styled to perfection, and now it hung loose and messy. I'd know that look anywhere. Finger teased over to the right and pulled over her shoulder to create a look that screamed, "Fuck me."

A loud cheer erupted from the cabin, and I fought a groan as I slid the door closed behind me. I leaned against it, crossing my arms over my chest as I examined the woman before me. She seemed uncomfortable with the silence. When I narrowed my eyes, she bit her lower lip again.

"Well, hello Tiffani with an I," I said.

She shifted in her seat when I spoke. Her black button-up shirt had the first several undone, showing off a hint of what I could safely assume was impressive cleavage.

"Hello, Mr. Wolfe," she said.

"Tell me, Tiffani with an I"—I stepped forward, my head tilting slightly—"exactly

whatison the in-flight, off-menu menu?”

She smiled and stood, sauntering toward me with a devious look in her eyes. It was cute she thought she had control of this situation, but I’d entertain it for a few moments out of mild curiosity. She reached out to place her hands on me.

The moment her fingertips brushed across my chest, I grabbed both her wrists. In an instant, I spun her around and slammed her against the wall. It happened so fast her eyes looked like they might pop out from shock. I cut off a sharp gasp as I pressed myself against her, my body towering over hers.

I had her wrists pinned to the wall on either side of her head. As I lowered my mouth to her ear, I felt a chill race through her. The slightest tremble. I wondered if it was fear, excitement, or both.

***“What are my choices?” I asked, brushing my lower lip against her earlobe.

She panted and shifted uncomfortably as she opened her mouth to speak.

“Uh... mmm.”

“Hmm?” I moaned in her ear. “What was that?”

“Wh-what would you like, sir?”

I smiled and pulled my face back to look into her wide eyes. Lifting her wrists higher, I put both in one hand while I placed the other lightly around her throat.

“What wouldIlike?” I clicked my tongue a few times as I shook my head in mock disappointment. “My, my... What happened to all that confidence from a moment ago? You weresocertain you knew what was on the menu. Have you forgotten since I

came in here?”

I was met with silence as she stared into my eyes, her lips slightly parted. Her racing pulse beat against my fingers, and it turned me on even more. I pressed my hardness against her soft belly, and she gasped.

“Mmm,” I moaned again. “No... That’s not it. You thought you had all the control but the second I grabbed you, your brain stopped working, and your instincts took over. That confidence fled as soon as your pussy began to think for you. You look terrified, but I bet if I were to reach between your legs right now, your little panties would be soaked.”

She swallowed hard against my hand. “I-I’m not wearing any,” she choked out.

My left brow raised as a smirk spread across my lips. “Is that so?” I roughly kicked her feet apart, and she cried out a little from surprise. I pulled my hand away from her throat and placed a single finger over my lips. “Shh. Don’t make a sound unless you’ve had enough.”

Tightening my grip on her wrists enough to hold her but not enough to cause pain, I reached down and lifted the front of the black uniform skirt. My middle finger brushed against her clit with the tiniest breath of pressure, and she jumped. A moan escaped her, and I pulled my hand away.

Her jaw dropped, and her eyes suddenly looked pained.

“So needy already?” I asked, shaking my head again. “You’re revealing your weakness, you know. Never reveal your weaknesses to a predator.” She shuddered at my words and nodded lightly. “Now... I believe I told you not to make a sound unless you’d had enough.” My free hand reached up to grab her chin and force her to look fully into my eyes. “You’re not done already, are you?”

She opened her mouth to speak but quickly closed it again, instead deciding to shake her head no.

I tilted her head to the side and inched my way closer to her. “You don’t want me to stop?” I asked quietly, my lips brushing her ear.

She shook her head no almost violently, and I smiled.

“Very good. Then I expect you to obey.” I pulled my free hand away again and once again placed it between her legs, careful not to touch her yet. “Now, where were we? Ah, yes... Shh... Not a sound. Can you do that?”

She nodded. I reached forward, the tip of my middle finger barely brushing against her clit. Her back arched against me, but this time, she obeyed. Her eyes closed as she bit her lower lip to control herself.

Rewarding her, I added more pressure, circling it slowly. Her eyes opened, but they rolled in the back of her head as she forced herself against my hand to create more pressure. Clearly, she liked it rough.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I pulled my finger away and watched as desperation filled her eyes. I shoved my hand further between her legs, my middle finger lightly grazing her folds.

“Just as I thought,” I said as I felt how slick she was. “You’re soaked.” She writhed against my hand, and I laughed. “So needy and demanding! What a little whore you must be.”

Shock rolled across her face like I’d just slapped her. I stilled, waiting to see how she would react. Would she fight me on it? Defend her honor?

No.

No, I didn’t think so.

Miss Tiffani, the needy girl that she was, inhaled deeply through her nose and swallowed whatever disgust she might have felt building for me. Her eyes bored into mine, begging me to continue. Her desire far outweighed her need to be respected.

Her mouth moved like she wanted to say something, but she remained silent. Instead, she lowered her body just enough to grind herself on my hand again. Another grin pulled at my lips.

“Good girl.”

Without warning, I thrust a finger deep inside her. She gasped, but quickly went to biting her lip again to keep from making noise. Curving my finger inside her caused her to arch her back into me. I took the opportunity to lean down and bite one of her

hardened nipples through the fabric of her uniform shirt.

She hissed in painful pleasure as she pressed herself against my mouth. I pulled away, releasing her wrists and taking two steps back. She panted as she continued to lean against the wall. I placed the finger that had been inside her in my mouth and sucked it clean. Her eyes widened, and she licked her lips, her hands immediately going to her breasts to squeeze them.

“Take off your clothes. Get on the bed,” I ordered.

She moved quickly to obey. I laughed as I watched her scurry to discard her clothing and jump on the bed. Well, well. Someone was an eager girl.

She sat in the middle, waiting for my next instructions. I said nothing as I prowled toward her, watching her every expression as I moved. Her eyes watched mine, never looking away. The expression on her face looked equal parts excitement and fear.

I grabbed hold of her ankles and roughly pulled her to the end of the bed. Once her ass was on the edge, I knelt, placing her legs over my shoulders. Her breaths quickened, her nostrils flaring as she watched me lower myself.

“You might think you’re in the control seat right now with me on my knees,” I said, my voice low and dangerous, “but I assure you, you aren’t. Don’t you dare make a sound, or I’ll stop. Understand?”

She nodded enthusiastically, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

“Good,” I said before locking my lips around her clit and sucking.

Her head fell back as she sucked in a sharp breath. As I sucked and circled my tongue around the sensitive little nub, she fisted the blanket to distract herself. Pulling away,

I wet two fingers before sliding them inside her.

I chuckled when both her hands shot over her mouth as her hips bucked against my hand. She was trying so hard to be good. I teased Miss Tiffani as I pumped my fingers inside her. I found a rhythm that both excited and frustrated the poor woman, thrusting several times before burying them deep and curling them against her sensitive g-spot. I repeated the process several times over several minutes, watching her reaction every time.

My mouth licked and kissed on her soft inner thighs. I trailed my tongue up to the apex where her leg met her pelvic bone. I continued along, teasing, making sure my tongue came painfully close to licking her clit—but never once making contact.

I wanted her to break. I wanted to watch her lose her fucking mind, and she was close. Every time my tongue got close, she panted faster, grinded on my hand harder. And every time I passed by it, her hands slammed down on the bed, fisting the blankets again.

Her legs trembled against me, and I could feel how tense she was. To be honest, I was a little impressed. She must have been terrified I'd stop because she should have screamed by now.

And just like the filthy girl I knew was hiding somewhere in that submissive little brain of hers, she broke. When my tongue licked up the side of her pussy again, carefully missing her clit, a loud, frustrated groan escaped her. She thrust both hands into my hair and gripped hard before putting my mouth on her clit.

I almost laughed as I wrapped my lips around her clit once again. Her head fell back on the bed as she held onto my hair for dear life. Thrusting my fingers as deep as they'd go, I massaged the sweet spot I'd found that she loved so much.

Another groan built in her throat as she struggled not to make a sound. She spasmed against my fingers, her climax drawing ever closer, she released my hair and grabbed a pillow before covering her face with it.

Flicking my tongue as I sucked proved to be too much for her, and her entire body shuddered, her hips bucking as she grinded her pussy on my mouth. I watched the muscles all over her body tensing and releasing as she clutched the pillow hard to her face, struggling to keep quiet.

After a few more seconds, her body relaxed, and her hands fell limply to the bed, the pillow still sitting on her face.

I removed my fingers as I reached up with my free hand and tossed the pillow off her face. “Did you die?” I couldn’t help the amusement in my voice.

Her chest quickly rose and fell with every breath as she panted, trying to calm herself. “Almost.”

“Hmm. Almost isn’t good enough,” I said as I ripped off my shirt and wiped my mouth on the inside of it.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

Her eyes went wide as she looked over my muscular chest and torso. She sat up, and one of her hands reached up to play with the light dusting of dark hair on my chest and stomach. She licked her lips as I undid my pants, pulling a condom from my pocket.

I handed her the foil packet, and she quickly opened it while I dropped my pants. Her hands stilled as her jaw fell slightly open as she stared at my cock. My eyes narrowed, and the corner of my mouth twitched. Seeing that reaction never got old.

“It feels a lot better than it looks, Tiffani with an I.”

She shook her head a little as my voice pulled her from her thoughts. She quickly went to work rolling the condom down my shaft. The moment it was in place, I grabbed her by the throat and forced her to look up at me. She stared into my eyes, hers wide and silently pleading.

“On your hands and knees,” I ordered.

She moved quickly to do what I asked. I kicked her knees further apart with my own, and roughly lifted her hips a little higher, earning a moan that was a mix of both pain and pleasure from my toy. I rubbed my cock on her slick entrance, teasing her. After only a few seconds, she was already trying to shove herself back on me, so I decided to give her what she wanted—all at once.

I thrust my cock deep inside her, burying it to the hilt. She screamed out, and I decided to let her have that one. I was sure it was quite the adjustment for her.

“Remember... you scream, and I stop. I like watching you squirm as you try to obey.”

She nodded enthusiastically, and I began to move inside her. Slow at first, giving her a moment to adjust. After all, I wasn't a total monster. Just...mostly.

Once I felt she was good to go, I moved harder and faster. Her right hand shot out and grabbed hold of the pillow, stuffing it under her face so she had something to bite down on. I buried myself deep once again and moved my hips back and forth, causing her to scream into the pillow.

I stopped. “Ah, ah, ah!”

She groaned and nodded, shifting her hips against me, urging me to continue. I could hear the guys messing around in the cabin, and I knew it wouldn't be long before they came looking for me. I released a groan of my own at the realization.

Knowing it was time to wrap things up, I grabbed my pet's hips and furiously fucked the hell out of her. Her entire body went limp as she gripped the pillow to her face. One of her hands flew back and grabbed one of my hands.

I shook her off and grabbed hold of her hair, pulling her up onto her hands. She panted with every rough thrust, and when I reached down with my free hand to rub her clit, she choked out a low groan.

Within seconds, her entire body tensed as her orgasm approached. Mine rapidly approached as well. I pulled out and roughly flipped her over onto her back. Before she could make a sound, I was on top of her. I put a hand over her mouth and slammed hard into her. She moaned against my hand as I fucked her harder.

Her breath caught in her throat, and her eyes rolled back just as my orgasm rocked

through me. It took everything I had not to yell, but I managed. I pumped into her a few more times, riding out both of our climaxes.

I exhaled sharply and removed my hand from her mouth. “You’re lucky we had a time limit. Otherwise, I would have punished your ass for disobeying me,” I said sharply before getting up.

I tied off the condom and discarded it before quickly dressing.

***Tiffani was slow to move, and I could see her legs trembling as she tried to pull herself to the edge of the bed.

“Hurry and clean yourself up,” I ordered before heading for the door.

“Did you at least enjoy your entertainment?” she asked.

I paused for a moment, debating on giving an answer. In the end, I just huffed and left the room.

CHAPTER FIVE

TEMPERANCE

A week after talking to the detectives, I woke up to white lilies next to my bed. They were beautiful, and their scent was enough to mask most of the hospital smell I had yet to get used to. A full-sized card peeked out of the vase, and I carefully reached for it.

The envelope was lavender, my favorite color. I opened it and inside was a Get Well Soon card with a cute cartoon St. Bernard puppy on the front with a little bandage on its nose and a cast on its leg. It was quite adorable. St. Bernards were among my top

five favorite dogs, so whoever sent the flowers got extra points for such a good guess.

When I opened the card, a smaller business card fell out. It was a simple white card with nothing printed on it. Instead, it was just a name—Angela—and her phone number, both handwritten. I smiled. Nurse Angela had sent the flowers. It made me feel warm. I hadn't seen her since that night, but I hoped I would again. I assumed she was on another unit. She'd mentioned that might happen.

I looked at the larger card, and it had the stereotypical "Get well soon" message inside, but she'd also written on both sides.

Temperance,

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I hope you're feeling better. I'm sorry I couldn't be there for the rest of your visit. I've been moved to another unit due to staffing issues, but I promise we'll see each other soon. Until then, my number is on that card. Use it if you ever need anything. Hold onto it even after you leave.

You're alone now, and you never know when you'll need help. I'll be there—day or night if you ever need me. Don't hesitate. I mean that. It's not an empty offer. I would be devastated if someone weren't there for my own daughter, so I won't allow you to be all alone out there either.

Also, there are a lot of reporters sniffing around wanting to talk to you. This story has gotten pretty big in the region. The hospital has kept them away but be careful. Don't let them put you on the news. Trust me, that kind of thing never goes away, and you get weirdos crawling from all corners of hell interested in you. People you want to stay far away.

I hope you like the flowers. They're my favorite. Get well soon. I'll check on you as soon as I can.

Angela.

I smiled and looked back at the beautiful flowers. They certainly were beautiful. I'd never been so grateful for a stranger before. The world felt dark and dangerous, but she was a reminder that not everything was bad.

Looking at the clock, I discovered I had about an hour before physical therapy came in here to torture me. They came in a few times a day to get me up and walk me through the halls. It was horrible. It was torturous. I hated it. However, I hated the thought of getting pneumonia or a blood clot from laying around in bed too much and being down even longer. So, as much as I despised Selena the PT, I would grit my teeth, grunt, and groan my way down the hallway and back a few times.

Until then, I decided to watch some TV. At least they had cable in here. My phone had been destroyed in the explosion. It had been in my pocket, so I'd landed on it and smashed the screen. My dad didn't have insurance on it, and even if he did, it wasn't like I could pay the deductible.

An estate lawyer had stopped by to talk to me a couple days before. They had life insurance, but it would take a little bit longer to process because of the investigation. In the meantime, I had to figure out what to do with their bodies, which was even more devastating. I had no way to pay for them to be buried, and I didn't want to do cremation—even if it was what they wanted—because that meant burning away any evidence.

I'd seen enough of those cold case shows where bodies were later exhumed, and more evidence was found. I didn't want to be the reason their murders didn't get solved. I hoped they'd forgive me. I think Dad would definitely understand, though I wasn't sure about Mom. One thing I knew for sure was there wouldn't be a proper funeral. Once the life insurance went through, they'd be buried even before I was released.

It was a terrible realization, one that broke my heart. How lonely.

I didn't feel much like thinking about any of that, so I resumed my previous train of thought—TV.

The remote was on a wire attached to the bed. It controlled the TV, the lights in the room, and had a call button. It was everything I needed. I flipped through channels, looking for cartoons—because I was an eighteen-year-old child—but I stopped short when I came across the news.

It was 9:00 AM, so the main story was always a big one. And the only big story right now was...mine.

I looked on in horror as they showed an arial shot of the church. It was taken when the firefighters were still battling the blaze. It was nearly out by the time this was shot, so no large flames were in view, but smoke still billowed through the now open roof.

The back had been burned all the way through. Some of the roof caved in as the water from their hoses continued to fall. I wondered if that was before or after the bodies had been removed. I grimaced when I realized the bodies were still probably in there right then. If the fire had gotten that bad, there was no way they would have been able to get more than a hundred people out of there.

The fire had probably burned their bodies. Rage seared through me as I thought of how much those people suffered only to continue suffering even after death. My eyes squeezed shut as I thought of my mom and dad in there...burning.

I reached for a Kleenex and blew my nose. I groaned loudly as the pain in my side reminded me that I was an idiot and not paying attention to what I was doing.

By the time the pain calmed back down, the news had shown shots of the inside. This was obviously taken later because there was no fire or smoke to be seen, and the bodies were gone. Still, all the evidence in the world was there.

The pews were destroyed toward the front of the church. From the outside, the front

wasn't terribly damaged by the fire, but inside was a different story. From the looks of it, the explosion had happened between the entrance and center of the building. It made sense. They probably opened the door, chucked whatever it was inside, and ran back out to take cover.

Once the explosion happened, they ran in and shot people before taking whatever they could.

I grabbed another Kleenex to wipe my tears as my free hand clenched tight around the remote. They spoke about what happened, but I couldn't even focus on that. All I could focus on was the shattered pews. The blood stains. The charred Bibles and Hymnals. I couldn't believe they would show that on the news. It was not only disrespectful, but it was also triggering to the survivors.

My chest fell. Survivor. Only one.

Me.

And just like clockwork, just as that horrible thought occurred to me, I saw exactly what Angela had warned me about.

"...sole survivor, Temperance Wilder, who is in stable but critical condition at County General Hospital in southern Indiana. She could not be reached for comment at this time."

My eyes were wide as I listened to them talk about me while showing a large photo of me from my junior year. They couldn't get in touch with me, so they snagged a yearbook and got a photo of me! I was eighteen now, as of June second, which was a few weeks ago, so it was completely legal.

Completely legal and completely shitty, and I was completely pissed off.

I was a competitor. Always had been. I competed in archery, wrestling, and even karate. I took second place in archery nationals the same week as my eighteenth birthday. It was televised, but my dad was paranoid about protecting me from weirdos.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

He was always worried about me, so if he knew something would be televised, he'd have me wear a hat and really cool half-skull mask so my face wouldn't be out there. With everything going on in the world in the last few years, the mask worked just fine and didn't even look weird.

Since I was in it for the competition and not the fame, I was totally okay with that. I never wanted my face out there. I enjoyed being a nobody while also enjoying being a competitor and having goals and working toward them.

My dad and I were a lot alike in that way. We enjoyed our privacy and believed home life should always be separate from work or competition life. That way, when you were home, you were safe. You were comfortable. You felt at peace. I always loved the way he looked at things, and so I had the same views.

And now... that was all shot to shit. My face was all over the news, and everyone knew exactly who I was. I hadn't even thought about going back to school in August, but now, it would be even worse. People who never noticed the goth girl because she wasn't important would now take notice. I'd be on everyone's radar.

"Thanks for the warning, Angela," I said under my breath. "Unfortunately, it's a little too late."

CHAPTER SIX

ASHER

After tying back my long, black hair again and straightening my Gi, I stepped back

out onto the mat and bowed to my newest student. I wasn't a professor in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, but I helped out at the gym sometimes. I'd been in classes since I was a kid, so when I was asked to help due to being short staffed, I said I would.

It was only one day a week, and it gave me the chance to refresh on the basics but help work one-on-one with some of the newer students who had trouble learning. Normally, my mind was in it, and I was excited to be there, but today was different.

Summer was half over. We just got back from Hawaii a week and a half ago, and I dreaded getting back into the regular routine. It wasn't that I didn't want to be on the football team anymore. It was just that...

Well, yeah. Actually, it was that I didn't want to be on the team anymore. I was sick of the games. It'd grown old and tired. Damian was my best friend, and I loved the guy to death, but to be honest, I was just over the bullshit.

We grew up together. My parents were normal people. We lived in Nebraska—on a farm. It was why I knew so much about fixing things. If you pointed me toward it, I could probably fix it. Plumbing, minor electrical issues, cars, tractors, and even some machinery. I learned a lot at my young age, and I never stopped taking things apart and putting them back together, even after moving to California.

When my paternal grandfather died, he left my dad everything. That came as a huge surprise since they hadn't spoken since my dad was eighteen. Dad thought Granddad hated him, but apparently, that wasn't the case.

One of the first meetings my father took was with Sebastian Wolfe, Damian's father. It was in that meeting that they became fast friends. Sebastian pushed my father to put me in the same school Damian went to because it was safe and secure. Less students and a better education. My father thought it was a great idea, but I hated it.

Damian was a little shit, but for some reason, he was my friend. We clicked. We've been inseparable ever since. I think that was the main reason why I stayed in football. We had each other's back, and honestly, I didn't trust some asshole on the team not to sabotage him in some way just to try to take the throne.

He'd created one hell of a name for himself. He was known as the Wolf of Crestview, and it hasn't escaped people that his first name is frequently used for demonic characters in movies. He played the part well.

The popularity and all the things that came with it were great at first, but now, it was just boring. Power was fun in the beginning, but if you didn't have the personality for it, it eventually got fucking lonely and annoying.

The girls were all the same. They all had the same damn hair stylist, and despite what they said, they all went to the same plastic surgeon. There was no other excuse for why most of the girls in the school looked like carbon copies of one another. It was disturbing.

Bleach blonde hair, but they paid \$600 for it, so that meant it looked good. Their lips were full, they all had blue or green eyes thanks to colored contacts. I mean, heaven fucking forbid one of them had natural brown eyes. That might prove they weren't naturally blonde!

I was all for a woman doing whatever she wants with her body. It was hers and it was none of my business. However, it sickened me when they did it to look like everyone else because they were terrified of being an individual. I spent the first part of my life on a farm; I enjoyed simplicity and individuality. I didn't see a purpose in all the competition. Especially when there was nothing to win from being popular.

Ninety-nine percent of the people at Crestview could stand to learn that.

On top of the physical fakeness, there was the endless shallowness. Those girls would sell their souls to be with one of the Crestview royals. There were six of us, and I had seen some of the craziest shit go down. Don't get me wrong, I'd taken advantage of my status plenty of times. I wasn't perfect.

I was kind of an asshole.

However, I did have a soul. And after a while, I just lost my taste for it. Maybe that was why Damian was how he was. Maybe that was why he liked to fuck with people so much. He couldn't stand it either, but he liked to push people. Toy with them. See just how far they were willing to go and just what they'd do to even be seen with him.

It was pretty disturbing. Both on his part and on theirs. Though, I had to say, if they didn't show up to play his games, he probably wouldn't have gotten so good at hosting.

Again, I loved the guy to death, but he was a little bit fucked in the head. I worried about him sometimes.

"Asher," David, the thirteen-year-old kid I was helping today said. "Can you show me the straight arm lock again?"

David seemed like a sweet kid, but he was brand new to anything physical. He was completely uncoordinated and more than a little afraid of using his own body. He was a little overweight, but he looked good. Solid. But that added to his fear. He was worried about hurting someone.

He'd only been here for two weeks—or two classes—but I'd seen him get picked on by the other kids. I told him that he was at that age right now where he'd start growing taller. I'd seen his dad. He was even taller than me and possibly Damian, and I was six-three and Damian was six-four. That kid was probably going to be tall as

hell.

I told him that if he kept coming to class, not only would he start growing taller, but he would lose weight, too. His body was about to change in crazy ways. That seemed to help him feel a little better. I assured him that if he could hold out a little longer, he'd be bigger, stronger, and look way better than any of those little douchebags.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

He'd laughed, which made me feel better for him. Since then, he decided to come in on off days for me to help him. If he kept coming to his regular class once a week, training with me once a week, and practicing in between, he was going to be awesome at this. He seemed dedicated and kind of stubborn—a perfect combination when it came to dealing with assholes like the Cassidy brothers.

I pointed to the floor. “Lay down,” I told him. “I’ll show you again, and then you can try on me, okay?”

David nodded and lowered himself to the floor. He laid flat on his back with his knees in the air and feet on the mat. I straddled his torso and placed his hands on my shoulders.

“Okay. So, if you have an opponent you take to the ground and you’re on top of them, the first thing they’re probably going to try to do is put their hands on your chest or shoulders to hold you up and away from them. This would make it difficult for you to punch them since their arms are blocking your swing.”

I did a slow swing to demonstrate. He nodded and adjusted his hands to a more comfortable spot on my shoulders right where they attach at my chest. I placed my right hand behind his arm on the center of his chest, while my left hand wrapped around the front of his arm and laid flat on top of my right. This made it so his arm was trapped between mine, giving me the ability to move around.

“You’re going to put your hands on their chest like this and lean forward.” I leaned forward just enough to get my point across, but not enough to compress his chest. “This is going to take your weight off your legs and allow you to swing them

around.”

Leaning forward, I swung around so my right leg was wrapped inward around his shoulder, while I knelt on my left knee.

“Now that I have you here, I’m going to lean forward again.” I leaned forward, once again pressing my hands into his chest for leverage. “And this leg I’m kneeling on, I’m going to swing it around, so it’s draped over your face. At that point, I’ll have your chest pinned with my right leg, your head pinned with my left leg, and I’ll have a hold on your right arm and pulling it back.”

I moved quickly, demonstrating everything I just told him. When I fell back onto the mat, I had him pinned as I’d stated and his arm between my legs and across my abdomen, his wrist in both of my hands. The bend of his elbow faced the ceiling, and I pulled down on his wrist, bending his elbow backwards.

He tapped my leg, signaling he’d reached his limit, so I let go. I scooted back off him, and we both sat.

“What do you think?” I asked. “Think you can do it?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I think so. I might need you to coach me through it as I do it, though.”

“Yep. No problem.”

I flattened myself out on the mat with my knees in the air and feet flat just as he had earlier. He straddled my stomach, and I placed my hands on his shoulders. I guided his hand placement on my chest. The placement seemed confusing to him at first, but I was seriously impressed. Once he got his placement right, he swiveled around perfectly and had my arm pinned and bent backwards almost immediately. It was so

smooth.

“Damn!” I said as I tapped his leg. “Nice job! See? I told you you’d get it!”

David was all smiles. “Thanks! I feel like once I get the first few basic moves down, I’ll feel more comfortable.”

I nodded. “Definitely. It just takes some time. I’ve been doing this shit since I was a kid. I’ve always been in sports and stuff, so this is natural to me. You’re just getting started. You just gotta give yourself some room to make mistakes and grow. You’ll get it. You did that one great.”

The rest of the class went smoothly. Around halfway through, David practiced with the other kids and seemed to be evenly matched with them. This group of kids was the group I liked best. They were slower learners, but they were good kids. The others were faster learners and acted just like the little shits I went to school with every day. Just their very presence pissed me off, honestly, but I dealt with it for Randy, the owner of the gym.

Once I’d finished up with the class, I walked through a door that led to an open gym full of weights, bars, benches, and pretty much any equipment you could dream of. Toward the back was a boxing ring and all the boxing training equipment. I dabbled in it, but I wasn’t good enough to get in the ring with anyone with any level of real talent in the sport.

I’d get my ass kicked.

I took off the jacket to my Gi and stuffed it in my bag, followed by the pants. I had on a tank top and ball shorts underneath, which I was perfectly comfortable working out in. I walked over to the mat and began stretching. I wasn’t much in the mood to work out, but I knew I needed to get my mind in it. In a few days, Damian would get

everyone together for group workouts, and they'd be brutal.

We had to get ready for football season, and I wasn't looking forward to it at all.

Once I finished stretching, I put in my ear buds and started my playlist. I jumped on the treadmill and hoped I could stand to make it through the five miles I needed to get through.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TEMPERANCE

Over the course of the next week, I had several calls to my room offering me everything from money to random gifts for exclusives. Late last week, one suspected reporter was good enough to get scrubs and pose as a nurse to get into my room. I'd been napping and woke up to the sound of someone digging through my trash.

She startled when I groaned as I tried to reposition a little. My IV had started beeping, so I asked her about pain meds and if she could stop the beeping. She looked at the IV pole like she was staring into the engine of a plane, and someone asked her to do maintenance on it.

It took no time at all to realize something wasn't right.

If there had been students on the floor, they would have told me. They only came in on Wednesdays, and it was Tuesday. So, I had a feeling she wasn't who she said she was.

"Can you stop that beeping? It's driving me crazy," I asked again, knowing she had no idea what she was doing.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

She'd hesitated and gave me a nervous smile before fidgeting with it for a second. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with this stupid thing. It's messed up. I'll see if Sharon can help me," she'd said.

I'd smiled and reached over—which I absolutely should not have done. Luckily, the IV pole was directly next to my bed, so I didn't have to reach far. Without hesitation, I pushed the same button I'd watched other nurses push a hundred times to stop the beeping. When she gave an uncomfortable chuckle, I hit my call button without breaking eye contact.

"Yes, Temperance?" Nurse Melanie said.

"Hi, sorry to bother you. My IV is beeping. I think it needs to be swapped out," I said.

"Okay! I'll be right there!" she responded quickly.

I smiled. "Thank you. Send security, too. There's someone in my room pretending to be a nurse."

The faux nurse had waved her hands and rapidly pleaded innocence. "No-no-no. I'm so sorry to bother you. I'm the aunt of one of the—"

Before she could get too far into what I assumed would have been an Emmy Award winning testimony, I put my hand up to stop her. "Nice try on the aunt thing. Might have been believable if I hadn't caught you going through my trash and shit. What grieving aunt poses as a nurse, pretends to know the staff, comes to a stranger's room

to check on them, and goes through their trash?”

Before she could give another panicked answer, my real nurses rushed into the room. As always, they were in there within seconds.

“Come with us, or we’ll drag you out. I’m not waiting for security. Don’t think for a second I’m playing with you. I’m small, but I’ll climb you like a damn tree.” Nurse Luisa was a tiny, sweet, and patient woman. She’d almost seemed mousy, but apparently, fucking with her patients was a no-go.

I couldn’t help the smartass that kept bubbling up. I was in pain, on pain killers, probably had PTSD, and I’d had enough of all the assholes trying to mess with me. “Also, you should probably learn the names of the people you’re fake-working with next time. I’ve been here long enough to know everyone here, and there’s not a single Sharon working on this floor.”

Security ran in and hauled her ass out while she blubbered something unintelligible about not meaning any harm. She’d had someone cause enough of a commotion in the lobby that she was able to slip by unnoticed in the same color scrubs assigned to nurses working in this unit.

Angela was right. My face and identity being out there would bring out the crazies! I just wish I’d even had the opportunity to take her advice. That chance had been robbed from me.

After that unfortunate event, security was tightened around my room, and I had an off-duty police officer posted at my door around the clock. Anyone coming in or out had to use a passcode that was changed every shift. It was ridiculous, and honestly, I didn’t understand how or why I was so important, but I knew it was necessary.

Someone charitable had taken it upon themselves to pay for my added security. They

didn't tell me who or why, but I was grateful for that, too. It was the first time I'd felt safe since everything had happened.

After all, it was obvious whoever attacked the church didn't want any survivors. How long before one of them showed up in here to finish the job? And while dear, sweet Nurse Melanie had done her best to dissuade me of that, she failed. I had a wild imagination, and after seeing that much death... it didn't exactly leave you thinking straight. Nightmares plagued me every time I closed my eyes, and I somehow felt safer in my paranoia.

A knock on my door distracted me from my worried thoughts. When I turned, Detective Abbott stood in the door frame with a folder in her hand. She had a genuine soft smile on her face. She was by herself, and I wondered if her brighter appearance had anything to do with losing Detective Downer for a while.

"Good morning, Temperance. May I come in?" she asked.

I nodded and carefully shifted higher in bed. "Of course. Good morning to you, too. Did you bring me some good news?"

Detective Abbott sucked in a breath and held on to it for a moment, her expression thoughtful as she pondered her next words. "Um... well...news, yes. However, I'm quite unsure how to classify it. I hate to say this, but I do have to warn you. This will be a difficult conversation."

My brows furrowed. I didn't like the way that sounded. "Okay... That doesn't sound great." I took a deep breath, preparing myself. "Okay. What is it?"

She motioned to the edge of my bed, and I nodded. After she took a seat next to me, her gaze turned to the door before turning back to me.

“I’m sure you’ve wondered why a generous benefactor would take it upon themselves to place round-the-clock armed, off-duty police security at your door as well as pay for all your medical bills, including a six-hour surgery.”

“What? I knew about the security, but I had no idea about the medical bills. I can’t even imag—” I exhaled sharply, cutting myself off as I shook my head in genuine disbelief. My eyes were wide. “My bills have to be nearing \$100,000. At least. Don’t get me wrong. I’m very grateful. With my parents gone, I don’t know what happens to my medical coverage. Grateful doesn’t begin to cover it. However, hell yes. I’m wondering why.”

A mix of some emotion I couldn’t identify crossed her face. Sympathy? Concern? All-out worry? I couldn’t tell.

“Some information has come up. I want you to know that I looked into it myself. Before I tell you what I’m about to tell you, I want you to know something. This could possibly be completely untrue. It’s simply wishful thinking on someone’s part. And while I would love for him to find his happy ending and reunite his family—truly, I truly do—I also don’t want you to have to suffer through anything else. You’ve been through enough shit in the last couple weeks to last a lifetime. So again... What I’m about to say may not even be true. Whether it is or isn’t, I will be with you every step of the way. Okay?”

I swallowed hard. I appreciated her honesty and fierceness. It was obvious that even though she didn’t know me much and hadn’t spoken to me more than a couple of times, that she cared. She hadn’t completely walled off her heart like Detective Dickhead.

“O-okay. What is it?” I stammered. My voice cracked when I spoke, which bothered me more than it should.

“As you know, this has been quite the headline. Something tragic like this happens in a small town, and it’s big news. One hundred and thirty-seven people died. It got a lot of attention.” She shifted in her seat uncomfortably. “When your picture went up—”

“Oh, hell. Here we go,” I mumbled. “Lemme guess. Some weirdo came out of nowhere claiming I’m someone special, and he needs to meet with me right away?”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

Her eyebrows rose, and her lips pursed together as she stared at me with that, “You’re not exactly wrong,” expression.

“Wait... seriously?” I laughed. “I’m no one. Whoever it is... Well, they’re a psycho. They probably want to collect me for their creepy dungeon. Tell Buffalo Bill I’m not interested.”

She snorted, her hand briefly covering her mouth as she tried not to outright laugh. After clearing her throat, she focused back on me, still wearing a ghost of a smile. “Very well. I’ll tell Senator Buffalo Bill you’re not interested then.”

Senator? Okay. That got my attention.

“Uh... Senator?”

She nodded. “Yup. Senator. Senator Rick Avery from California.”

My eyes widened. “What? Why the hell would a Senator from California want to meet me?”

All humor drained from her face as she placed a hand on my leg. “Here’s the hard part, kid. Remember what I said. I looked into it. There was enough reasonable evidence for me to bring this to you, but not enough that I can say it’s definitely true. We need you to complete the puzzle.”

“What is this? An episode of the Bachelor or something? Quit dragging it out. What is it already?”

She lightly chuckled and nodded. "Okay. Look, this man thinks you're his daughter that was kidnapped eighteen years ago."

My eyes widened, and my jaw went slack. I thought maybe it was a long-lost uncle or some shit. Maybe someone who lost touch with my family years ago after a huge fall out that completely severed the family. Someone my parents hated for personal reasons and never mentioned, but who was a good person I could rely on. Someone I could get to know. Maybe they had kids, and I had cousins out there I could get to know.

Maybe I wouldn't be alone...

But this? No.

Not only does this suggest that my parents weren't really my parents but that they'd kidnapped me. This was ridiculous. There was no way. My father raised me to be strong and independent. Why on earth would he have done that if I was his victim?

"That's impossible. I'm not adopted or some kidnap victim. My dad has dark hair and blue eyes. Just like me. I look like him. Everyone always said so. This isn't possible. I'm sorry for that man, but I'm not his daughter."

Detective Abbott took a deep breath and continued carefully. "His daughter's due date is right around the date you were born. May 31. Your birthday is June 2. He also has black hair and light blue eyes."

I held up my hands to stop her before she went any further. "I can appreciate the similarities, but you didn't come here to tell me all this because of something circumstantial at best." Her brows raised, and I shrugged. "I watch a lot of true crime. So, what was it? What actually convinced you to talk to me?"

She opened her folder and pulled out a piece of paper before handing it to me. She said nothing as I looked it over, my eyes not believing what they were seeing.

“How did you get this?” I asked, my wide eyes looking into hers.

“The back of the church where the office was had been destroyed by fire. The firefighters were going through once the fire was out, looking for evidence and checking structural integrity. They noticed something strange in the wall. Upon inspection, they realized it was a hidden room. They opened it up and found a few boxes of personal effects. Because of the investigation, my partner and I went through the boxes, and we found that document.”

“I—I don’t understand. Is it real?” I asked, now staring down at the adoption papers with my name and my parents’ names on it.

“Pastor Montgomery was a safe haven for unwanted babies. Over the years, he helped facilitate several adoptions. He kept extensive records on everything. For some reason, yours is a bit short. We only found a couple of things, but everything points to yes. However, there’s only one way to know for certain.”

“A DNA test,” I said. It was more of a statement than a question. That would clear everything up 100%.

“Yes,” she said. “While I have no idea if the senator is actually your father, I’m fairly certain the rest is true. According to what we found, you were dropped off at the church anonymously. You were placed with the Wilders soon after and adopted within a year.”

“Okay, so... my parents weren’t the ones who kidnapped me then? If the senator truly is my biological father.”

She shook her head. “No. We don’t believe so. Obviously, it’s possible, but the lengths they would have had to go through make that both highly unlikely and unbelievable since you were dropped off at the church days before you were placed with them.”

That certainly made me feel better. Thinking they could have kidnapped me ripped me apart even more than them being gone.

“What about my biological mom?” I asked.

She looked at me with regret. “She was killed when you were kidnapped. I’m sorry. I tried to find some information on her, but I couldn’t find anything.”

That broke my heart. I wanted to know how she died, but I figured that would be a question for another day. I’d already lost one mother. I didn’t need the details on how my other one was lost before I ever even had a chance to know her.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

“Do you have a cell phone on you?” I asked. “Can you show me a picture of the senator? I want to know if I look like him.”

She pulled out her phone and pulled up a random picture. “He’s the man on the left.”

It was a picture of him and a young blonde girl on his left. Standing next to him on the right was a tall man with dark brown hair and green eyes and a boy about my age. He had black hair and those same green eyes. I looked at the names.

Harper Avery, Senator Rick Avery, Sebastian Wolfe, Damian Wolfe.

According to the short description, Harper was the senator’s daughter. If his theory proved to be correct, she would be my sister. It was strange to think I might have a sibling out there, but I tried not to get my hopes up.

Looking at him, I didn’t see much of a resemblance, though there was a hint of one there. We had the same black hair, but his eyes were a much deeper blue than mine. I was darker complected like him, though.

However, she looked like me. Harper looked a lot more like me than I’d like to admit. She was blonde, petite, very slender. We didn’t have much in common there, since I was dark haired, tall, and thick. But her face—something about her face.

Her individual features looked nothing like mine, yet when I looked at the whole picture, somehow, she looked like me. It was strange.

My eyes wandered over to the two guys standing next to my potential father and

sister. It appeared Rick Avery and Sebastian Wolfe were good friends. They stood next to one another so casually, both with large, easy smiles on their faces. The boy next to them, however, seemed quite the opposite.

I assumed Damian was Sebastian's son. The resemblance was obvious. He stood with his hands in his pockets, putting most of his weight on one leg while the other was casually bent to the side. His posture was very nonchalant, like he didn't give a damn about much of anything. Even his nose was turned up.

His green eyes seemed to bore into the camera. There was a darkness in them that kind of creeped me out. He was certainly beautiful to look at, but it was like staring into the eyes of a tiger. It was a beautiful beast, but you know not to get too close, or it could kill you.

He looked like a rich prick if I'd ever seen one. Still, one could admire his beauty from afar.

I handed the phone back to Detective Abbott. "I can see why you came to me now," I said, my voice low as I fiddled with my hands nervously. "What do I need to do?"

She reached into her jacket pocket and removed a sterile swab kit. "The senator has already submitted his DNA. He did so the day he saw you on TV. He was that certain. If you want to pursue this, it's your decision. You're eighteen years old, which means you don't have to answer to any-damn-body." She shrugged her shoulders. "That being said, you just lost everyone and everything you've ever known. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to verify if you actually have family out there."

I nodded. "Can you ask Melanie to come in here? I'd feel more comfortable if she did this. I don't want any mistakes."

She nodded. "Absolutely. If that's what you want, that's what we'll do. You okay?"

“A church exploded with me inside it, then my life exploded. I learned my parents aren’t really my biological parents, and that I may have been kidnapped as a baby from California from powerful parents and dumped in Nowhereville, Indiana. I’m doing great.”

She smiled. “Oh, good. And here I thought you were going to say no.”

I chuckled lightly at her sarcasm, and she patted my leg, gave me a small wink, and left the room to get Melanie.

Time to figure out where I’d go from here and just how fucked up my life was about to get.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DAMIAN

This morning was the first for training. We had five weeks before school started, and four weeks before football practices started. The first day was always the hardest, but we all agreed morning was the best time to do it.

Do it.

Get it done.

Go on about our day.

It was no coincidence that the royals of the school were all on the football team. Sports were worshipped in schools, especially places like this. It went a long way to padding those bougie bullshit applications to ivy league schools. Not to mention, it got all our dads off our backs. Trent, Michael, Liam, and Everett were lucky enough

to have mediocre or even good parents.

Ash and me? Not so much.

He said his dad was cool before moving out here, but once my dad got a hold of him, he turned into a wicked piece of shit. When poor people went from rock bottom to rich, it went in one of two directions. They were either penny pinchers from hell and still lived like they were poor or close to it, or they were obsessed with status and money and wanted more of both.

Unfortunately for Asher, he was the modest type, and his father was the asshole. That being said, I thought that had a lot more to do with my dad than anything. He was great at getting his hooks into people and getting them to do anything he wanted. He was a manipulative douche, but I learned from the best, I guess, because I could get whatever I wanted, too.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I was in the middle of stretches when Trent and Michael stumbled up, half-asleep. Both looked like shit.

“Were you two fucks up all night drinking?” I asked.

Trent was five-eight, but he was built like a tank. He always liked to say he was small but mighty, but I bust his balls about being little anyway. He was clutching his stomach with one hand while the other held his bag of gear. He roughly tossed it on the ground.

Michael was just shy of six feet, and he had blonde hair and grey eyes. That alone got him a lot of ass around here—not that it was hard—but the fact that he was actually good looking didn’t hurt. He shook his head at Trent.

“Yes,” Michael said. “Vodka.”

The hand that had been clutching Trent’s stomach rose to cover his mouth as he made a gagging sound. “Oooh, fuck.Brruuugh,” he gagged again. “Don’t say vodka.”

Michael snorted. “Vodka, vodka, vodka. Oh, and that nasty, weird-colored brownish orange juice you douche canoes mixed with it.”

That was all it took.

Trent leaned over and puked repeatedly on the football field.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I said, climbing to my feet. “Are you serious right now?” I

walked over and knocked his dumb ass over with absolutely no effort at all. “Can you even stand?”

“Wow. He looks like total shit,” Asher said as he walked up, his bag slung over his shoulder as he tied his hair back.

“Yeah. He’s still wasted,” I said, fighting the urge to kick Trent in his ass. Michael, too, for that matter.

Asher made a disgusted face when he saw the puddle of puke and walked around. “Yikes.” He set his bag down and opened it, reaching inside for a bottle. He tossed it to Trent. “There.”

“What’s that?” Michael asked.

“I figured one of you assholes would show up wasted and piss the demon off, so I brought that. My famous hangover cure.”

That got Trent’s attention, but he said nothing as he opened it. It was well known to taste like shit, but it worked wonders. Electrolytes, vitamins, and whatever the hell else he shoved in there.

“Hey,” I said, “you need to puke a couple more times before you drink that. That shit actually needs to stay in your stomach for it to work.”

“I’ll take him,” Michael said, grabbing Trent’s arm and dragging him to his feet.

As they stumbled off, Liam and Everett walked up. “They shwasted?” Liam asked.

I rolled my eyes and walked away. I was already done with everyone’s bullshit. What a start to day one.

“Relax, man,” Asher said as he walked over.

He was careful to keep his distance. He knew when I got pissed that I was capable of blowing up. It was why he called me the demon. It was a play on my name, but he said it worked. I’d have to say that I agreed. Plus, it added to the fear.

“It’ll be fine. It’s just one day,” he said.

“Doesn’t change the fact that I want to beat their asses. We do the same thing every damn year. They have plenty of warning. They know what’s going on, and still, they show up trashed. It’s our senior year, and we’re the number one team. I’m not getting my ass knocked down because those morons can’t get their shit together.”

“Fuck them, okay?” Asher said. “Besides, Trent will be fine in like... thirty minutes. Tops. Besides, I’m ready to go, and I’m getting dragged down by all this drama. So, pull up your big girl panties, and warm up with me.”

I laughed, despite myself. He was the only person I allowed to talk to me like that. Then again, he was the only person who really knew me. We’d shared everything from toys as kids, to money, to girls when we were older. There have been more than a few devil’s threesomes and sex parties at my house. I mean, my dad and his gold-digging wife were never home, so what else was there to do besides have fun?

“Ladder sprints?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yep. Twenty seconds rest between. Go until the fifty-yard line.”

We lightly jogged our way down to the end of the field and touched the field goal post.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Of course. Go!”

We sprinted to the ten-yard line and back, waiting twenty seconds before then sprinting to the twenty-yard line and back. We repeated this process, taking twenty second breaks between sprints, until we made it to the fifty-yard line and back. By the time we finished, both of us were already breathing heavy and sweating bullets.

“Never fails,” he said, panting and wiping his face with his shirt before taking it off and throwing it to the ground. “Those four weeks of vacation always really screw us hard. We always say we’re going to dosomethingduring those weeks, but we never do.”

I laugh, but it’s nearly breathless. “Speak for yourself. I was working my ass off in Hawaii.”

“Oh, is that so? Like you worked the flight attendant’s ass off?” Asher smirked.

I shrugged. “There wasn’t much work involved there—unless you count trying to ignore all of you noisy asses.”

“Hey, I was trying to read.” He jabbed a thumb toward the bleachers where the other four were slacking off. “Those idiots were the loud ones.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever. Still distracting as hell. I was in the middle of torturing her, and I had to give up and finish because of them.”

He laughed. “Okay, yeah, that would have pissed me off, too. Though, I’m sure she

was grateful for the torture to be over. You can be pretty mean sometimes.”

“Eh. I feel like they know what they get with me. I’m an asshole. I don’t try to hide or sugarcoat it. They want me because they know it’ll be terrifying but still their choice. They like the torture. If not, they’d go after you.”

His eyes narrowed, and his brows furrowed as he studied me for a second. Even though he appeared taken by surprise at that comment, I could see amusement in the hint of a smile. “Did you just subtly call me a bitch?”

“I wasn’t being subtle. If the stiletto fits…”

“Dick,” he said with a smile.

He punched me hard in the arm, throwing me off balance a bit. I recovered quickly and slammed my fist into his gut. He groaned loudly as he doubled over.

“Oooh, not fair,” he choked out. “Dick move.”

“Come on, loser. Pull up your big girl panties, and let’s go,” I said with amusement as I casually threw his words back at him. “We’ve got work to do.”

When we got back to the group, Trent already had a little color back in his face. “I really hope you guys were over here stretching or something because I’m about to tear your asses up, and I’m not waiting all day.”

Liam stood, taking his shirt off and tossing it onto the bleachers. He ran his fingers back through his brown hair that was at an incredibly awkward length. He quickly tied it back in a stumpy little ponytail. He had an undercut, so it didn’t look quite so stupid as it did when he first started, but he was trying to grow it out like Asher’s. Apparently, he thought Asher’s long list of conquests were due to his long black hair.

I had news for him. It was because Asher was over six feet, built like a brick shit house, and was well known for possessing other impressive physical attributes, but I didn't want to crush him.

Okay, maybe that was a lie. I did like to torment him, but not about that for whatever reason. I guess even Lucifer was an angel once.

"I'm ready," Liam said.

Slowly, everyone else followed suit, and we made our way back out onto the field. I was warmed up and ready to go for more ladder sprints, but I knew Trent and Michael would hate me for it. They'd really hate me after the planks, pushups, box jumps, squat jumps, and everything else I had planned.

That was fine. I didn't give a shit. Maybe it would teach them a lesson:

Not to piss me off on day one.

CHAPTER NINE

TEMPERANCE

It had been forty-eight hours since Detective Abbott was here and twelve hours since I was handed the results of the DNA test. The DNA test which proved Rick Avery was my biological father. I still couldn't stop staring at it. I'd taken it out of the envelope a dozen times at least, and each time, I stared at it for ten or more minutes. I couldn't believe it.

My whole life had been a lie. I wasn't a Wilder. Not biologically, anyway, and it was so strange. When most people find out they're adopted, their adoptive parents were still around to ask questions to. I didn't have that luxury. They'd been brutally

murdered. Hell, I didn't even get to go to the burial I'd planned.

At least I'd have a place I could visit when I wanted to talk to them. Even though they were divorced, and my mom had done a number on my dad, I had them buried next to each other. The way they were positioned, it looked like he'd given his life to protect her, and Detective Abbott had said the same—at least from what she could tell. If Mom meant that much to him, I wanted them to be together.

I still couldn't believe they were gone. There was so much in my life that was unreal. It was like I was standing outside myself, watching all this happen. Like it wasn't actually happening to me.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

But it was.

There was a knock at my door, and I looked up. It was a man in a very expensive tailored suit. He was nothing shy of ridiculously hot, and probably in his early thirties.

“Miss Wilder?” he said with the tiniest hint of a Spanish accent. His voice wasn’t the deepest I’d ever heard, but it was definitely smooth.

“Yes?” I answered.

He stepped inside, and I noticed that he had a briefcase in hand. “Hello,” he said as he crossed the room and offered me a hand. The security outside my room didn’t budge, so I assumed they’d either passed him or knew him. Either way, I didn’t feel threatened, so I shook his hand. “I’m Javier Vasquez. I’m an attorney from California, and I work for your father.”

My eyes narrowed a bit. “Rick Avery,” I corrected.

He noticed and smiled faintly. “Uh, yes. Rick Avery.” He paused a moment before remembering he had a briefcase in hand. He laid it on the bed next to me and dug out some papers before handing them to me.”

“What’s this?” I asked.

“This is bank account information that’s been set up by Mr. Avery in your name, credit cards, and credit card account information. There is also information about

your parents—the Wilders,” he said, emphasizing the name and their title for my benefit. “Everything we could find on your adoption, the Wilder family home, vehicles, and anything else you might need while dealing with their estate. Mr. Avery thought this might be of assistance to you during this difficult time. On top there, you’ll also find all of his contact information as well as the address where you’ll be staying if you so choose.”

My head snapped up at that last part. “Do what now?”

“He would like it very much if you came to stay with him and his family—yourfamily—in California.”

I looked at him incredulously. “Not that I don’t appreciate the twenty-four-seven armed security, the paid medical bills, and you dropping by, but why would I do that? I have a life here. I have school and friends. Yeah, I’m a little short in the family department, but I still have a life. I have suffered through enough change in the last couple weeks to last a lifetime. I can’t make a decision that big right now.”

He nodded, looking at me with obvious sympathy. “I certainly understand that. He does, too. However, with everything that happened here—and the fact that those responsible have yet to be caught—he’s worried you may be in danger. The only lead we have so far is a woman who may be working with them.”

“A woman? Do you know who she is?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No, but we managed to get a photo of her. The van they were in was destroyed along with any evidence inside, but we found security footage that showed a woman removing a mask in the passenger side seat.”

“What? How? Detective Abbott said they had nothing. They found a few things on traffic cams, but they were smart and had their masks on the whole time. How did

you guys find something else?”

He looked at me with a quirked brow, and everything clicked.

“Ah, right. Daddy Warbucks is a state senator. Creepy government spy stuff. Got it.”

Javier laughed. “Something like that. Anyway, we wanted to show you that security photo. While we don’t believe you know her, it’s possible she may have come to the church beforehand, or maybe you’d conveniently bumped into her in other places. She may have even posed as that fake nurse who turned out to be a reporter you had issues with. We’d just like to know if you’ve seen her.”

I almost asked how he knew about that, but then I remembered that Rick Avery was the reason I had the security in place to begin with. He probably had connections in the local police department looking out for me and giving him updates. Wasn’t too farfetched to believe.

“Okay. Sure. I’ll look.”

I waited patiently as he reached into his briefcase and handed me a photo. I fully expected never to have seen the woman, but the moment my eyes landed on hers, my blood ran cold. I swallowed hard as chills ran down my body.

“Miss Wilder?” he asked.

I looked up at him, my eyes widened, and my lips slightly parted. I wanted to speak, but I couldn’t. I just looked over at the vase of lilies sitting on my bedside table.

“Temperance, did she send you those?” he asked, his normally kind voice turning cold. “Have you seen her?”

I looked back at him, and he suddenly looked fierce. Like he would go to war to protect me if he had to. Not something I would have expected from a lawyer.

I nodded. “Sh—she was my nurse,” I choked out. “Angela. She said her name was Angela.”

Recognition flashed across his face when he heard the name, but he continued. “What did she say to you?”

I stared at him, but I wasn’t looking at him. It was more that I was looking straight through him to the wall. My brain felt like it might melt. The same fear came over me that I felt in the church. Death. The feeling was death. I had been so close to it then, and when Angela was in my room, I’d apparently been closer at that moment than I knew.

“She was my nurse,” I repeated, finding my voice. “She was kind. I’m usually a pretty good judge of character. I noticed Faux Florence Nightingale the reporter right off. But this woman... I don’t know. She seemed—warm. She talked to me about her daughter.”

“Her daughter?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. She told me she had a daughter, and she would be mad if her daughter were in my position, and no one was around to help her. She stayed in my room for like two hours, holding me in my bed while I cried. I slept in her arms.” I said the last bit loudly as my fear and anger got the better of me.

Shock registered on his face. “Look, I don’t want to scare you,” he said. “I’m unsure how to proceed. What to say. I never actually expected you to have seen her. I just had to ask.”

I prepared myself for what I was certain would be a total mind-fuck. “Please, just be honest. That’s all I ask. Clearly, I’ve been lied to a time or two. I just need the truth.”

His lips pressed into a flat line. “Very well.” He straightened his suit jacket nervously. “That woman has no children. We’ve already looked into her. She’s a ghost. We know she’s dangerous and a weapons expert. We know she’s killed a lot of people. You were either left alive for a reason, or you were left alive as an accident—one she plans to rectify. I believe that visit was a warning. Maybe not to you, because you obviously had no clue who she was, but to anyone looking into her. Those lilies?” He pointed at the flowers, and my eyes instinctively followed before turning back to him. “That’s her signature. She leaves them at her kill sites. You asked for me to be honest. Here’s my honest opinion. I believe you’re in danger, and I think you need to get the hell out of Indiana. Fast.”

I swallowed hard, fear coursing through me. “She said those were her favorite flower,” I said. It was more to me than to him. It just kind of popped out.

“Seems like that was the only truthful thing she told you,” he said. There was a heavy sigh, and I looked up to meet his worried eyes. “You’re eighteen. Your father and I can’t tell you what to do. As a lawyer to the Avery family, which includes you, I can tell you that you’re free to do whatever you want and suffer no consequences from him. Your bills will still be paid, your family home will be kept out of foreclosure until you decide whether you want to keep or sell it, and the vehicles will be kept out of repo status until you decide to pay them off or sell them. You are free to do as you wish.”

I laughed, but it wasn’t because I found anything funny about the situation at all. “Doesn’t sound like I have much of a choice at all.”

He shook his head, his hand gently resting on mine. “I’m so sorry that I don’t have better news. Again, I didn’t come here anticipating this. I honestly thought I’d come here, give you the information you’d need to get everything squared away, show you that picture—the one you’d definitely deny recognizing at all—and then you’d make a decision all on your own without any pressure on whether or not you wanted to come live with your birth father. I know it isn’t much of a choice, but if you didn’t want it, I know Rick. He would find a way for you.”

I looked into his eyes, and I saw honesty there. “How so?”

He shrugged. “Honestly, he’d probably keep the armed guards by your side everywhere you went. It would be like miniature secret service.” He laughed a little, and it made me smile, though the darkness never stopped threatening to swallow me whole. “At least until you came to visit him a couple of times, got to know him, and hopefully came to a different conclusion. He wants to know you. You’re his oldest. His first child. You’re his baby girl, and he desperately wants to get to know you. That being said, he also wants you to want this. He won’t force it on you. The choice is yours, but I’d be lying if I said you had much of a choice. You’re right about that.”

I sighed heavily, my head falling back on my pillow. “Fuck.” The second I said it, I looked over at him with regret. “Sorry.”

He waved a hand. “Don’t worry about it. I cuss like a sailor. Well, that’s not entirely accurate. Army.”

Ah, that explained the seriousness earlier and why he looked like he’d go to war for me if he had to. With his age, I’d be surprised if he hadn’t been deployed at least once. He had veteran written all over his face, though the Armani tailored suit covered it up a little.

“I have stipulations,” I said. He nodded, and I continued. “First. I’ll go, but only if I can visit my parents’ graves. They didn’t even have a funeral. Now, because there’s some psycho bitch running around threatening me withflowers, I can’t even have a proper funeral for them. However, when all this calms down, Iwillbe returning to do just that.”

He nodded. “That can be arranged. What else?”

“My family home stays in my name, and I reserve the right to come back whenever I like after all this crap is over. Also, I’m not changing my last name. From what I was told, there’s a good chance my adoptive parents hadnothingto do with my kidnapping, so that means they were innocent. They willalwaysbe my parents, and I won’t dishonor them like that.”

He nodded again.

“Lastly, I’m a private person. I donotwant my face in the public eye. I don’t want to do any long-lost daughter routine for the press. I don’t want some sob story to be all over the news. And I’m not changing how I dress or who I am for anyone. I don’t care if my personality or clothing is harmful to his career. He either accepts me as I

am, or he doesn't. If he doesn't like my platform boots and black riveted pants and skirts, and my weird shirts, that's fine. I don't expect him to. But I do expect him to respect them."

He smiled. "I think all that can be arranged."

I nodded. "Fine. Oh, I lied. One last thing. I grew up in Indiana. I'm not fake, and I don't like fake bullshit either. If I go there, and it doesn't work out, I don't want any hard feelings. I also don't want to be forced into a family I don't fit into if it comes down to that."

"I completely understand. I'd feel the exact same way."

I sighed. "Good. In that case, when do we leave?"

He grabbed the papers on the bed and placed them all in the briefcase. "Get dressed. We leave today."

My eyes widened. "Today?"

"Yep. We were ready for anything. We have a private jet with a full medical team on board, and all the medical supplies they could possibly need. You were only a couple of days away from release anyway, so you've been cleared for travel so long as you did so with precautions in place. You're mostly healed, so your doctor doesn't foresee a problem, but better safe than sorry is the motto from here on out. Once you get to California, you'll be on limited mobility for the next week, and then—provided there are no complications between now and then—you'll be free to move around as you please. No bending or lifting, no ladders, no exercising—light walking is okay—and no sex."

I laughed. "Well, I guess I'll have to cancel my weekly orgy. They'll be so

disappointed.”

He snorted. “I can already tell you and I will get along just fine. I think you will with Rick as well. He’s a funny guy.”

“I hope,” was all I could manage because I’d once again begun to freak out. Every time I started to get comfortable, something crazy like that happened to blow up my life.

I needed a vacation.

CHAPTER TEN

While living in Indiana with parents of modest means, I never had the opportunity to fly anywhere. Pair that with my mother's crippling anxiety, and you got a teenage girl who was terrified to get on a plane. And while the fact that it was a private jet made me feel more at ease, it was Dr. Asiimwe who really saved the day.

My IV was still in place from my lengthy stay in the hospital, though they'd had to start a new one a few times. When I boarded the plane, shaking like a leaf on a tree in late October, my beautiful dark-complected savior in a white lab coat seated me in a reclining, pillowy, white leather chair and gave me enough Ativan to calm my ass right down.

I learned a lot about her in the thirty minutes before we taxied down the runway since my anxiety had me rattling off rapid-fire questions. She had a beautiful accent paired with a soft voice, and when I asked where she was from, she told me the sweetest story.

"I'm from a small village in Africa," she'd said with a smile. Her skin was perfect, and she had sparkling, dark, almond-shaped eyes. Her hair was done in elegant cornrows that came down to meet in a singular braid down her back. "My husband was from another village in Africa, and we spoke two different languages. We met in college, and we could only communicate by speaking English."

The story itself was pretty normal to expect from two people from different areas, but it was the way she told it and the way she smiled when speaking of him that made my heart flutter. You could see just how much she loved him. "That's all we speak in our

home, but I'll tell you a secret." She laughed. "When we argue, he knows he's gone too far if I stop using English."

For some reason that struck me funny, that sweet, patient soul getting feisty enough to argue in her first language to make a point.

When we were about to take off, she'd told me that would be the worst. I could safely say that was accurate. It scared the hell out of me, but thanks to the meds, I was able to not freak completely out. Once we were in the air, my drowsy eyes stared out the window and watched the world below pass us by.

The good doctor had offered to knock me out all the way, but I decided against it. I wanted to sleep through the trip, but I knew if I did, I wouldn't see firsthand how non-threatening a flight could be.

In my mind, I thought if I watched it happen from start to finish, I'd know everything that came with it. I'd also experience the beauty from the window. Then, when it came time for me to fly back to Indiana later, I wouldn't be scared. More than that, I'd be able to fly alone and not ask Daddy Warbucks for another in-flight doctor to get me high as a kite before the flight.

So far, I'd say my plan had worked great.

Looking around the plane, I was almost disgusted at the extravagance. I didn't have an issue with rich people, but sometimes the excess annoyed me.

When I got on the plane, my anxious eyes took in everything there was to take in. From nose to tip, I saw the cockpit followed by a small hallway with a bathroom on one side and closet on the other. Then the exit. Then a doorway that opened into the cabin. On either side of the doorway was a wall. On one side, there was a large TV with gaming systems underneath, and on the other was a weird painting of an abstract

nude woman. It was rather hideous.

On the left side of the cabin was a long, white leather sofa with three small tables evenly spaced in front of it. It looked like the tables could collapse if needed, and the bottom part of the sofa was in sections. I wondered if they slid out like an ottoman, or maybe it was extra storage.

On the right side, where I was, were two luxurious, oversized, white leather chairs with armrests. Both reclined and swiveled, and next to those along the right wall was a one-foot-wide, light colored wooden bar that extended from one end of the cabin to the other. There were holes in the bar for glasses and larger ones for what I assumed was bottles—wine or champagne more than likely. There were controls where the cup holders could be chilled or heated.

It was insane.

Behind the cabin was another bathroom and a kitchenette area where the flight attendant sat when not needed. And behind that was a bedroom with a king size bed decorated in royal purple bedding.

I didn't even want to think about how much this thing cost.

"Do you need anything? How are you feeling?" a nurse asked as she came over to take my blood pressure.

"I'm doing okay," I responded. "Very relaxed."

She smiled. "I'm glad to hear it. On a scale of one to ten, what would you rate your pain right now?"

"Two if I'm not moving. Four if I do. Doesn't feel like I've just had surgery anymore

though. Mostly it just feels like I got kicked in the side. I think the worst is behind me for sure.”

“I’m very happy to hear that, too. I wanted to ask just in case. We want to make sure your pain doesn’t get worse in flight. That could be a sign of trouble if it does,” she said. I didn’t respond because she’d just released the air from the cuff, and I knew she’d need to hear it. When finished, she pulled her stethoscope off and hung it around her neck. “One-thirty-four over seventy-two. Perfect.”

I gave her a lazy, sleepy smile, and she patted my shoulder before walking back over to the couch.

After turning my head back toward the window, I zoned out. My brain wandered, and my eyes saw nothing. I wondered how long it would take for everything to become my new normal. I wondered if it would become my new normal. Part of me hoped it would, but the other part just thought I’d bide my time until the threat disappeared, and then I’d go back home. Back to my real home, and my real life.

The truth was, I had no clue what I was in for. All I knew was what I’d lost and thinking of that only made me think of my parents—my dad mostly.

They were good together when I was young. We went to church, and my mom was a homemaker. She was beautiful, my dad was handsome, and they made a beautiful couple. He worked at a golf course and supported them both until I came along, and then he got a job at a factory. He bought a new house and a new car, and he took care of us the best he could.

Mom was good up until I was about eight. Granted, I was a kid, so I only knew what I saw, and I doubted very seriously I saw even a fraction of it. She seemed depressed, Dad seemed angry, and I was just confused.

She left when I was nine, and I didn't see her for months. It stayed that way for years. She'd pop up, get into the swing of being a mom again. Dad would drop me off at her house at night before work, and then he'd pick me up in the mornings to take me to school. They worked together even though they weren't together anymore. From what I could tell, it worked well.

Until Mom started dating. Ugh, she could pick them.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I couldn't even remember how many times Dad had to come rescue me from some fucked up domestic disturbance. She was an alcoholic, and a mean one at that. When I was a kid, I obviously believed my mom was innocent and was the one on the receiving end, but it was my dad who slipped one night and told me the truth.

He'd told me about the times when she'd get drunk and hit him with things. He never hit her back, but he pinned her down on the floor one night until she tired herself out. She'd thrown one of the grates from a gas stove at his head, hit him in the face, and broke two of his molars out.

Dad didn't want to leave her, but he didn't want to hurt her either. He was easily three times her size, and if he'd fought back, it would have hurt her. So, he did what he thought was best. He thought it was the safest option for them both. It wasn't long after that when she left for good.

It was years later, and I was seventeen when he finally told me that. I realized why he never let her come back, even though he loved her as much as he did. I was always convinced he'd love her and want to rescue her until the day he died.

Silent tears spilled out onto my cheeks when I realized he'd done just that.

My mom was a complicated woman, and when she was my mom, she was the best. She didn't deserve to die. She needed help. She needed therapy to fix the years of bullshit she went through as a kid, and she needed AA and whatever else could help with the alcoholism. And my dad...

That man spent his whole adult life trying to support my mom and save her from

herself. He worked his ass off to raise me alone, and he did a wonderful job. He made me strong. Took me to all kinds of classes so I could learn how to fight and defend myself. He taught me how to use weapons. He taught me to be strong and independent.

For their lives—along with those of all the others lost that day—to be taken so violently, so abruptly... My blood boiled.

My hands clenched into fists on the armrests, and my jaw tightened. If I ever saw that woman again—Angela or whatever-the-fuck her name really was—I'd kill her myself. They didn't even get a proper funeral.

I was given five minutes. Five. I was surrounded by six men in suits as they took me to my parents' graves. When they saw the white lilies laying on each of their plots, they immediately tried to take me back to the car, but I demanded to stay.

I ran forward and grabbed those lilies from both graves and shredded them. Loud, angry screams tore from my throat as I stared down at the remains of those flowers scattered across the still settling earth containing my parents' corpses.

After carefully lowering myself to my knees, I'd placed one hand on each of their graves. "I love you," I'd said as I sobbed. My face was still contorted in anger, but I did my best to focus on them. "I know there were many things you didn't tell me. Why, I don't know, but I assume it must have been hard. You had your reasons, and as I learn more, I will try to keep an open mind."

I'd turned to my dad's grave then. "I know you did your best, Daddy. I know you raised me the best way you knew how. You were one of two boys with no sisters. It couldn't have been easy for you having a little girl, but you did it. You made me strong, and I will never forget that."

It hurt, but I'd leaned closer, as if I wanted to tell him a secret. Honestly, it was, because I didn't want any of the men surrounding me to hear what I had to say. "I don't know how, but I will find a way to find the people who did this. You have my word. They won't get away with this."

Groaning a little, I'd leaned back to my original position, placing one hand on each of their graves. "I love you both. When all this is over, I'll come back. We'll have a proper funeral. Actually, a party. I know you'd rather have a party in your honor than a depressing funeral."

I'd placed a kiss on each of my hands and placed my hands on the ground one final time. "Goodbye," I'd said before losing all resolve and crying.

After that, two of the men helped lift me to my feet, and they once again surrounded me as they walked me back to the large, black SUV and took me straight to the airport. It all happened so fast, and even staring out over the beautiful Midwest as it passed below us, rage burned in my blood.

I knew I'd find a way to make good on that promise, but for the time being, I needed to adjust. I needed to adapt. If I couldn't get through a single day without dwelling on everything, I'd never get my head back on straight.

At that moment, I decided I'd allow myself the rest of the flight to mourn. To be sad. The moment we land, I'd begin my new life—whatever that may mean.

But once all this was over, once those assholes were caught and either killed or in prison for life, then I'd mourn for real. I'd go home and have that party I promised them.

Until then, I was going to lay low, keep my nose out of trouble, do my best to stay under the radar, and not be noticed by anyone. If I managed that, I might be able to

avoid anyone finding out who my biological father was, which would keep me out of an even bigger spotlight. And as long as no one recognized my face from the news, I'd be good to go.

Hopefully...

Hopefully this wouldn't be so bad.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Ativan had worn off enough that my anxiety returned on the drive to the Avery home. After leaving the hospital earlier, I was taken to my house to pack. Again, I was given a time limit. Thirty minutes to pack—even with someone doing it for me while I gave instructions—and say goodbye to the only place I'd ever really lived was not enough.

The only thing that kept me on task was knowing that once the life insurance came in, I'd be able to pay it off, and Rick had agreed to keep it out of foreclosure until then. Apparently, the bank account and bank card in my name had more than enough money in there to do just that.

When the bougie limo slowed, my eyes widened, and my jaw fell slightly open as we pulled onto a long driveway with beautiful dogwoods lining both sides. With the center screen down, I could see ahead to a massive house. It had to be at least ten thousand square feet or more. Why on earth would anyone need a house that big? I didn't even know senators made that kind of money, but then again, I hated politics.

How convenient my birth father was a politician given that hatred.

The end of the drive was a hollowed-out circle with a large fountain in the middle. As the car rounded the fountain, it slowed to a stop just in front of the steps leading up to

the home. Several people waited there with smiles on their faces, though two faces didn't have them—Harper and a woman who I assumed was her mother. They looked too much alike to be anything else, and both had resting bitch face down to a T. The RBF was strong in that family. Neither looked happy to see the car.

Fan-fucking-tastic, I thought.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

Within moments, someone came around to open my door. I hadn't waited for that on purpose. I was just trying to get my wits about me, but I felt like an ass for not opening my own door.

"It's alright," Javier said from beside me. "They're excited to meet you."

I lowered my voice. "Yeah, I don't think my little sis is all too excited about it."

He smiled, and it made me feel more at ease. "Don't mind her. She's a bit rough around the edges, but I think the two of you will end up being friends. Just give them a chance, okay?"

I reluctantly nodded and steeled myself for what was to come. Carefully, I turned my whole body in my seat to avoid twisting at the waist. I'd worn a binder ever since the accident and it helped, but I still had to be careful. While I felt a million times better than I did almost three weeks before, I was still sore and more than a little paranoid of doing any kind of damage and making my recovery even longer. My visit to the cemetery earlier had been taxing enough.

The driver who opened my door gently grabbed my arm at the top and by my elbow and helped me stand. It was much sturdier than holding my hand, and I was able to stabilize my shaky knees. All the anxiety today hadn't been good for stability at all.

I forced a smile at the man I recognized from the picture on Detective Abbott's phone that day, and he flashed an even bigger one. It was bright and genuine. He seemed truly happy to see me. His eyes glistened in the early evening sun, and I wondered if he might cry.

Slowly, he stepped off the bottom steps and made his way toward me. The driver guided me forward and turned to close my door behind me as I closed the gap between Rick and me.

“Temperance,” he said, his voice full of wonder. He reached out with both hands as if he might cup my face, but he stopped, his hands lingering a couple inches away from each side of my head. “I can’t believe you’re here. You are even more beautiful than I imagined.”

A snort came from behind him, and I didn’t need a to be a rocket scientist to know where it came from. I didn’t even bother looking. Maybe the driver was right. It might start off rough, but it would be okay.

“Hi,” I said nervously. “Thank you for inviting me to stay with you. I’d planned to stay in Indiana, but after talking with Javier, I realized it wouldn’t be safe. I appreciate this a lot. I hope it’s not an imposition.”

He laughed and pulled his hands back. The sound was rich and wrapped around me. “An imposition? You’re my daughter! I never even got the opportunity to meet you. This is ablessing,” he said. “Having you here means more to me than you could possibly know. Come, you must be tired.”

Turning, he moved to stand at my side. He reached behind me like he might place his hand on the small of my back, but just as before, he didn’t actually touch me. Part of me found it odd, but another part of me was grateful. I could only imagine he was being considerate of everything I’d been through, and also the fact that I don’t know him at all. Touching me at all would feel forced and uncomfortable. I was just relieved he hadn’t tried to hug me.

I was grateful for the respect he showed me.

As we made our way up the steps, he stopped directly in front of Harper and placed his hand on the back of her head, pulling her closer so he could kiss her forehead. “We’ll do introductions inside,” he told her.

She sighed. It was faint, but I definitely heard it before she turned and walked toward the house, her mother following closely behind.

When we stepped inside, I couldn’t help the small gasp I made. The front foyer was massive. The floor was made of white marble tile, and there was a curved staircase going up the left side of the room and an identical staircase on the right side of the room leading up to a landing on the second floor framed in floor-to-ceiling arched windows.

Under the landing between the two staircases was a small sitting room. The windows were arched, but they were shorter on the bottom because there was a large built-in bench beneath. It looked like there were bookshelves on either side. It was a small—at least in reference to the size of the house—book nook. I loved it.

“Temperance,” Rick said, a smile in his voice as he pulled me from my shocked thoughts. “I’d like you to meet my wife and daughter.”

I turned and smiled at both. Surprisingly, I’d eased up enough that it was actually genuine. Theirs, however, was not. Harper and her mother both wore forced smiles as they stared me down.

“This is my wife, Angela,” he said, motioning to the woman standing next to Harper.

Chills went down my spine, and my throat felt tight. Angela was the name of the woman who posed as a nurse in my room. Who helped murder everyone in that church and nearly me.

That couldn't be a coincidence.

I looked over at Javier, and he must have seen the fear in my face because he placed a gentle hand on the small of my back and smiled gently. "I know," he whispered. "You see now why we wanted you here? We believe everything she did was for a reason. It was a message."

It was then that I remembered the flash of recognition earlier in the hospital when I'd told him the woman had introduced herself as Angela. I swallowed hard. More and more all the time, I realized just how lucky I was that Rick wanted to meet me and offered to allow me to stay here. I'd be safe here with what was the only family I had left and their security.

"Are you alright, Temperance?" Rick asked, pulling me from my jumbled thoughts.

I quickly looked back over. "I'm—I'm so sorry," I said directly to Angela. "I didn't mean to be rude. Your name... It startled me is all."

"My name?" she asked with obvious offense. Her eyes were narrowed at me, and I shrank a little under her harsh gaze.

Rick reached over and stroked her shoulder with the back of his hand. It was gentle and immediate. "Please, take no offense, my love. The woman who came to her hospital room and posed as a nurse said her name was Angela. We believe the name choice—along with the white lilies—were a message. She was involved with the attack. She must have known who Temperance was, that she was my daughter. It's possible they all did, which is why the attack happened in the first place."

Angela's demeanor almost immediately changed. "Forgive me," she said. "I can be a bit overprotective when it comes to my family."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I eased a little, but not by much. She was a hard nut to crack. I could tell by the random response that she was trying to cover for her rudeness. After all, her name had nothing to do with her family, but I wasn't about to say anything. I wasn't sure what part, if any, of this was an act. Though, I suppose after just meeting someone, it was hard to tell sometimes. Deciding it was safer to give her the benefit of the doubt, I smiled.

"I definitely understand. I'm sure me being here is complicated for you. It's a big change for all of us, but I want you to know how grateful I am that you opened your home to me. I understand being protective. You have a lot to protect."

Acknowledging what might be her worries and concerns seemed to go a long way. Her posture softened, and she gave a curt nod. "I appreciate you saying so. Hopefully all of this will pass soon, and things will return to as normal as possible."

My father seemed to be pleased with her statement, but I couldn't help but notice the double meaning. On the surface, one might think she meant we could all relax and actually live without fear. However, I couldn't shake the feeling she meant something else entirely.

That she hoped all this would be over soon so I could get my ass out of here, and she could go back to living as normal. As normal as possible while now knowing I exist and didn't die eighteen years ago.

I smiled and nodded, trying to remind myself I'd had a very emotional day, and it was entirely possible I was being judgmental.

“Yes, indeed,” Rick said before he gestured over to Harper. “And this beautiful young woman is your sister, Harper. The two of you will be seniors together at Crestview Academy.” His voice was so chipper when he said that, but my brain was too busy over-processing things.

“Seniors? She’s a senior, too?” I asked as I looked at her. “How are we both the same age?”

Harper’s eyes narrowed, and when she spoke, her voice was almost icy. “They started dating a year after I was born. He adopted me after they were married two years later.”

Rick smiled. “Yes. She’s a month younger than you. Her birthday was actually a week ago.”

“Oh,” I said. “I apologize.” I felt like I was being so rude, but it just shocked me is all.

When Detective Abbott showed me that photo in the hospital, I was able to identify who Harper was just by looking at her. I knew she was my sister because she looked like me. All her features were her own and nothing like mine, but somehow, when I looked at her entire face as a whole, she looked like me. It was strange. She looked like Rick, too. Turns out, she wasn’t biologically related to either of us.

Though, I suppose I’d heard a lot of stories where people resembled one another when they live together for long periods of time. Not to mention I was looking for a resemblance. Looked for it and found it. My mind was a mess.

Now was not the time to act like a suspicious bitch. They were out of their element, too. They had no idea I existed, even though I know Rick hoped I was still alive, and here we were meeting for the first time, and I was blowing it by being a rude ass.

“It’s really nice to meet you, Harper,” I said honestly. Blood or not, I had a sister, and I was excited to get to know her. “Truth be told, I always wanted a sister. I thought my parents couldn’t have any more kids after me and it bummed me out, but it turns out they couldn’t have kids at all. And... I have no idea why I just said that.”

My eyes widened a bit as embarrassment flashed through me, turning my cheeks red.

Rick laughed. “Honey, it’s been alongday for you. Very long. You’ve had a lot happen, and I’m surprised you’re still standing, let alone as polite and well put together as you are. Give yourself some grace. I know we do. Let’s get you settled, hmm?”

He smiled, and it was warm. When he walked over toward me, he once again placed his hand behind me as though he’d touch my back, but he kept an appropriate amount of distance.

We walked forward between the two staircases, and I realized there was a large archway under each one. “Off to the left is the kitchen, dining room, and a half bath. You’re more than welcome to anything in there.” He pointed to the right. “We’ll be heading in this direction. This is where your room will be. It’s temporary since the kitchen is down here. I wanted you to have full access to everything, but I didn’t want you going up and down the stairs yet.”

I was relieved he said that. I assumed all the bedrooms were upstairs, and I was not looking forward to going up and down those every day.

We walked through the right archway, and it opened into a large family room. There were several doors throughout, and I wondered what each one went to.

Seeming to read my mind, Rick spoke again. “This first door here is a walk-in closet. The second door here leads to what will be your room temporarily. It’s usually an

office, but I had it converted. There's a hospital bed in there—but don't worry. It's a nice one. You won't even notice. I tested it out myself to make sure it was comfortable." He smiled and winked. "There's all the medical equipment in there we could possibly need thanks to a friend of mine."

I wondered if that was Sebastian Wolfe that he was talking about. When I Googled him, I learned Sebastian owned a pharmaceutical company that also produced medical equipment as well. It wouldn't be hard for him to get a hold of whatever he needed, whether to buy or borrow it.

"According to your doctors, you have a week left of restriction. You're more than welcome to get up and travel to the kitchen for snacks. However, if you want food and not something quick, like a sandwich, please let someone know. I don't want you standing around long enough to cook anything. Okay? Let me know, and I'll make it."

That sounded oddly domestic. I assumed he'd have a chef make it or something.

"Won't you be busy?" I asked. "I'd imagine your line of work keeps you extremely busy."

He nodded. "It does, but I took some much-needed personal time. You are far more important. I want to make sure you're healthy."

Tears welled in my eyes, but they didn't spill.

"I'm a dad, and as such, my instincts are telling me to pull you close and hug you because you're about to cry. However, I'm trying to respect your space. I'm your biological dad, but I know you don't see me that way yet. I'm just a strange man you've never met. I hope that passes with time. This can be your home if you want it to be. And if not, when the danger passes, you're free to do as you wish. I just want

you to be comfortable. That being said, if you ever feel the urge, just know that your biological father is a hugger.”

I laughed, and when I did, my tears spilled. He wiped them away, and just like the touch to his wife’s shoulder, it was immediate and gentle. He was right, I didn’t know him. Not even a little. He could be a terrible man—a wolf in sheep’s clothing—or he could be everything he seemed to be. Truth was, I didn’t know, and I probably wouldn’t for a while.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

Still, looking up into his stone blue eyes, I found myself hoping this wasn't a dream. That he really was as wonderful as he seemed because God knew I needed something good in my life after all the hell I'd been through.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It had been a few days since I arrived, and everyone gave me my space. I stayed in my room for the most part but came out occasionally. Rick gave me a new phone when he found out mine was destroyed. I was super happy about that because I wasn't completely cut off from my old friends anymore.

I tried to keep tally on how much money I owed him. If I had it once the life insurance came in after paying everything off, I wanted to pay him back whatever I could. I felt terrible about him spending money on me.

After a few days spent relatively alone, I started to feel a bit better. I absolutely needed the adjustment period. I knew I wouldn't do well jumping right into family movie or game nights, big dinners, and whatever else real families did together. Whatever this family did together. The nightmares were worse, which made the awkwardness around them worse, but the anxiety medication I'd been prescribed helped in those moments when I woke up panicking.

Truth was, I had no idea how any family dynamic worked. I never really had one. It was just dad and me, and we had movie nights whenever he wasn't working or whenever I didn't have some class or tournament going on. It wasn't very often. A couple times a month.

Past that, Dad would talk to me when he got home from work. Sometimes I'd have dinner ready for him when he got in, and sometimes I'd just grab a sandwich or something. I'd work a little on whatever project car he had going on, and he'd work on it when he had time, too. But as busy as we both were, he always gave me hugs before bed and told me he loved me more than anything.

He was a good man. A good dad. But that was the only experience I had with families.

This was all new, and I needed to get used to even being in this big ass house, let alone them and the weirdLeave it to Beaverthing they had going on.

Okay, maybe that was dramatic. It wasn'tthatweird. Just weird to me.

Last night, Rick came in to check on me and extend an invitation I'd been expecting but part dreading. "I was wondering if you'd want to go to lunch with me tomorrow," he'd said with a cautious, hopeful expression. "I know things are off to a bit of a patchy start with your sister, so this would just be us. You and me. I don't want to push you too far too fast, and I figured less people would be better. I think it would be a good way for us to get to know each other in a neutral setting."

I wasn't entirely sure what to say. I wanted to get to know him, but I was nervous. What if he wasn't who he seemed? What if I wasn't anything like he'd hoped? It was a lot of stress, and it made my anxiety spike just thinking about it.

"I feel like the house is making it more difficult for you," he'd said. "It's big and intimidating. It probably makes you feel like you need to be something that you don't."

He had a point. It really did do all of that. It was a very big, uncomfortable house to be in. It was beautiful to look at, but it just seemed like way too much. I wasn't used

to it, and it really did make me feel like I was scraped off the bottom of someone's shoe and dumped here.

Oddly enough, the opposite had been true. I'd been stolen from this life and dumped in the life I had. This was supposed to be my life. I was supposed to live like this.

Such a mind-blowing thought.

"What about the park?" he'd asked. "I'll dress normally. I'll wear a hat and glasses. Clark Kent myself. We'll wear masks, too. No one will have a clue who we are."

That sounded amazing. I loved that idea, so that was what we'd decided on.

I went through my clothes and looked for something comfortable to wear that wouldn't cut into my side too much. I had a wheelchair I rolled around the house in whenever I was tired or just felt weak, though that need became less and less all the time. Every day I felt a little stronger, but I still needed it from time to time. Especially if I overdid it and needed to take one of my pain meds. The good thing about this monster of a house was that it was easy to get around in a wheelchair. That was a plus.

To say that I was a little nervous about today was an understatement. It would be the first time in a long time I'd be able to go out and about without worrying about IVs, medications, and wheelchairs—though Rick said we'd still take it just in case. I was glad for that. It made my anxiety calm down a little since I was so worried about getting overly tired and ruining the day.

I found myself wanting him to like me just as much as I wanted to like him. Part of me felt as though it was a betrayal to my adoptive parents, but I had to remind myself Rick was an innocent man. A father whose daughter was ripped away from him. From what Javier had told me on the way to California, my mother was kidnapped

and murdered—possibly to get to me.

Rick had lost so much. I had, too. If nothing else, I guess we had that to bond over—as grim as that was.

After what felt like forever, I settled on something to wear. A black, ankle-length midi-skirt made of a super soft stretchy material, and a white wrap-around blouse. It was made out of gauzy material but was lined with a satiny fabric, so it wasn't see-through. There was a tie on the inside—kind of like a bathrobe—to hold the inside secure, and the outside wrapped around and tied behind the back.

The skirt was perfect for not putting pressure on my side, but I moved around as much as I could to test out the shirt. With the binder in place, I barely felt anything at all. It was just stretchy enough it didn't put any pressure on any sore spots, so I felt confident I'd chosen something both comfortable and appropriate. I slipped on some cute black sandals and headed out.

“Hey!” Rick said when I walked into the foyer. “You look very nice. Is that comfortable enough for you?”

I nodded. “It's super stretchy, so it feels good. No worries.”

He smiled. “Good! You ready to go?”

“Yes. I'm starving,” I said just as my belly growled.

He laughed and turned toward the door. I followed him out to a silver Escalade. The wheelchair was already in the back. He opened the car door for me, and I carefully climbed inside.

After closing my door, he walked around the front of the vehicle to the driver's side

to get in. I buckled up and thought about his attire. He hadn't been joking. He really did Clark Kent himself.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

He wore light, loose-fitting bootcut jeans and Nikes. The pants were frayed a little at the bottom and looked like something a high school or college guy would wear. He wore a plain white V-neck shirt with it. To top it off, he had on a baseball cap and eyeglasses. I wasn't sure if the glasses were prescription or just for show, but he really didn't look like himself at all. It was like he was a totally different person.

“Do you have any idea where you'd like to eat?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Somewhere cheap is fine. I'm really not picky at all.”

He paused for a moment, looking at me intently before he turned to face me more in his seat.

“I want to say something, and when I do, I want you to know it's not meant to be rude or offensive in any way, okay?” I nodded and he continued. “You grew up in a small town in Indiana. Your parents did the best they could with what they had, and I will forever be grateful to them for raising you the way they did. It's obvious they did a wonderful job.”

Well, he was half right. It was mostly Dad, though I guess I could give a lot of credit to Mom for teaching me all the ways I didn't want to be. So, looking at it like that, I guess both of them were responsible for me turning out halfway decent.

“I know they're gone, and I know it's hard for you right now, but I also want you to know this is home, too. Think of it like a divorced couple.”

I looked at him with confusion, and he laughed and waved both hands in the air, keys

still in hand.

“Hold on, hold on. Gimme a chance here,” he said, still chuckling. “Your parents were separated, right?” I nodded. “Okay. So, when you went to your dad’s, you probably had one way of living, and when you went to your mom’s, you probably lived a different way, right?”

I thought about it for a moment. “Actually, yeah. I mean, that’s an understatement, but still very accurate. Night and day, really.”

He gave an exaggerated nod. “Right. So, this is kind of the same even though it’s different. You grew up with your parents and had one life, but when you’re here, you’ll live a different way. Does that make sense?”

“Is this your long-winded way of telling me I could pick a bougie restaurant, and you wouldn’t think twice about it?”

He laughed. “I mean, I wouldn’t word it likethat... More like, when you’re here you don’t have to worry about money and offending me if you want something that costs a little extra... but yes. If you want to eat at a bougie ass restaurant, let’s go. I want to give you experiences you haven’t had yet.”

I smiled. “Point taken. It’s going to take some time for me to get used to that. Still, I’m not picky. Except one thing. I don’t like Mexican food.” His eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. I laughed. I was used to that reaction. “I know! I get that same lookeverytime I say it! I love pretty much anything else. Well... anything you’d find in Dukes of Hazard, USA. Obviously, I haven’t had the opportunity to try much else.”

Another laugh took him, and he shook his head. Turning, he put the key in the ignition and started it up.

“I can honestly say I love your spirit and your sense of humor. I can’t wait to get to know you better.” He put it in drive and carefully accelerated. “How about we just drive around town and see what we find?”

“That sounds good to me.”

It took about twenty minutes to get to town, and we drove around until we found a pulled pork place that looked good. He said he hadn’t been there in years, so he was happy to go. Apparently, Angela and Harper were both vegans, so he didn’t get to eat meat often. I told him he didn’t have to worry about that with me. That just meant more bacon for us.

During the entire drive there, while waiting for our food to get brought out to us, and then all the way to the park we talked about everything and nothing. He asked me about school, what living in Indiana was like, what my parents were like, about my friends. I asked him what being a politician was like, and I was surprised when he acted like he didn’t like it much. He said it was a bunch of pleasing people you’d rather punch. And sometimes, the good you sign up to do couldn’t get done because of other people standing in your way.

It sounded miserable.

I asked about his life, what he wanted to be when he was a kid, and if he planned to stay in politics his whole life. We chose safe topics and avoided anything heavy. It was nice. He seemed pretty easy going, and I loved that he was sarcastic like me. My dad was a good guy, but sarcasm wasn’t his strong suit. Every time I’d say something smart-assed, he’d take me seriously. Rick wasn’t like that. He laughed every time.

It was nice.

I hated that I couldn’t stop worrying. I just wanted to enjoy the day because, to be

honest, it was the best one I'd had in a while.

As promised, we'd worn masks the moment we got into town. We looked and felt stupid since we were in the car, but we didn't care. We knew why we wore them. He got me a solid black fitted one that wrapped around my ears and curved under my cheekbone before coming back up over my nose. It was super comfortable. His was blue.

When we got to the park, he made sure to pick an isolated area that had a lot of trees and where people didn't really go. There was a people trail—what I quickly learned was just called a 'trail' outside of Columbus, Indiana—that wrapped around the area, but no one would really notice us that far out.

I grabbed the bag of food, and he grabbed a picnic basket I hadn't noticed out of the very back of the Escalade. When we reached a spot we felt was good enough where we could safely remove our masks without being noticed, he opened the basket and pulled out a blanket before spreading it out. He helped me sit, and I pulled our food from the bag while he grabbed each of us a water bottle.

"This place is beautiful," I said.

"It's a really large park. There's a nice lake over that way," he said, pointing off behind him.

"Speaking of water, how far from the ocean are we? I've never seen the ocean before." For the second time that day, his eyes widened, and for the second time that day, I said, "I know! I get the same look every time I say that, too!"

He laughed. "Okay, that needs to change. I'd take you today but walking through the sand would wear you out pretty quickly, and the wheelchair won't work well. At least, I assume so. It's not like I have a lot of experience pushing one at all let alone

through sand. Besides, I want to take you when you can really experience it. Take off your shoes and walk through the water. A drive by would be a waste. If you're still healing as quickly as you have been, we could go next week if you want. It's only thirty minutes away."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I smiled. “That would mean the world to me. I’ve always wanted to see it.”

We talked casually for a few minutes as we ate, but things had begun to weigh on me. I had so many questions, and I got the feeling he did, too. This was nice, but I wanted to know more.

“Can I ask you a question? It’s a little heavy,” I said.

He’d just finished his food and took a drink from his water bottle. After nodding, he said, “Of course. I’m sure you have lots. I do, too, but I wasn’t sure if now was the time.”

I paused and played with the hem of my skirt. “What was my biological mother like?”

“Hmm.” He thought for a moment, staring at a large puffy cloud as it passed by overhead. “She was smart. Beautiful. You looksomuch like her. You have her eyes actually. Her name was Anna. I fell in love with her the moment I met her in college. She had long, jet-black hair, tan skin, and she was strong. Anna had a personality that could build you up or tear you to pieces. She was fierce.”

He didn’t look at me once while talking about her. It was like he was off in his own world. It seemed like he missed her. “You must have loved her very much,” I said.

His eyes finally met mine, and they almost looked shiny. “I did. I do. I always will.”

“What happened to her? Is that inappropriate to ask?”

He huffed lightly and shook his head. “That’s your biological mother. It’s as much your history as it is mine.”

Every time he mentioned my adoptive parents, he almost always called them my “parents,” and when he spoke of himself or my birth mother, he almost always said “biological.” It was probably just a little thing to him, and maybe even one that hurt him to differentiate between, but it meant something to me. It showed how much he tried to respect the bond I had with them. He hadn’t tried to undermine it or belittle it.

With a sad sigh, he continued. “We went out to a dinner one night. It was some charity event; one I wish we’d never stepped foot in. It was dull until some psycho snuck in. We thought he was there to voice some grievances at first. No better place than an event full of politicians, right? But it became very clear he wasn’t there for peace. Your mother stood up to him and told him to leave. She told him he’d regret it if he tried to hurt anyone there. He said something to the effect of, ‘I’ll be back for you later.’ He had no weapons, so he couldn’t be arrested. Not really.”

“Seriously?” I said. “He threatened you guys. I don’t know what your title was back then, but that seems illegal enough.”

He shrugged. “He would have been held overnight, but a lawyer would have had him out first thing in the morning. Without any evidence that there was a greater threat, there wasn’t much that could be done. So, I called in more security for the event and for our address, and we went home. We had security outside our house and a security system, so we felt safe nothing would happen. I went to take a shower, and your mother went down to the kitchen to make herself something to eat. She hated eating at those events. She said the food tasted like ass.”

A smile spread across his face at the memory, but I had a feeling that things were about to get darker.

Inhaling deep, he said, "After my shower, I went downstairs to find her, but she wasn't there. All I found was a blood-soaked knife and smears of blood all the way to the back door. To be honest, we have no idea what happened after that. All we know is that we found a burnt van with your mother's body inside," he paused, swallowing hard. "She'd been burned so badly she couldn't be identified. However, the coroner said there were deep grooves on the hip bones. Someone had made cuts there, and it was obvious the woman had been pregnant because of the pelvic bones. However, no evidence of fetal bones were present, meaning the baby didn't die with her. She would have been close to full term, same as your mother. He managed to get a couple bone samples that weren't too destroyed and identified her through DNA. He said in his expert opinion, he believed you'd been cut out of her."

What a horrible way to die. What a horrible way to lose someone. "Was... Was she alive when they cut me out of her?"

His mouth opened and then closed for a moment before responding. "Alive." I couldn't help my sharp intake of breath. "He... he thought she was still alive. If they'd killed her first, they would have risked depriving you of oxygen, and it was obvious they wanted you alive. So... cutting you out first made a lot more sense."

"I'm so sorry," I said, reaching over to squeeze his hand.

When he looked into my eyes, tears glittered in his. A sad smile crossed his lips as he squeezed my hand back. "You might not remember it, but you lost her, too. I'm sorry for you, too. Your whole life changed that day."

I nodded. Several quiet moments passed as we both sat, thinking about what he'd said. Finally, I shook off the sadness and forced a smile at him. "I think that's enough for today. We'll have lots of time to talk about the past. Let's talk about something lighter."

“I’d like that,” he said.

We discussed some of our favorite hobbies, movies, music, and more. We didn’t have a lot in common, but we both liked comedy movies, which was awesome. He really liked superhero movies, too, so we thought it would be fun to have a Marvel marathon or something. That seemed to perk him up.

We talked about my parents more, and I told him my dad taught me how to work on old cars. Rick seemed pretty impressed. He didn’t see that one coming. Of course, most people don’t from an eighteen-year-old girl.

“You rebuilt a 1970 Chevelle?” he asked, his brows furrowed as a large smile grew.

“Oh, yeah. We redid a ’64 Ford Fairlane, too. It was cherry red. Beautiful. I loved that car, but that Chevelle was my favorite. He promised that car to me when I turned twenty-one, but he ended up falling on hard times and had to sell it.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” he said. “Tell me all about it. What color was it?”

“It was black with white racing stripes. Looking at me, you’d probably think that would be what I’d want, but I was secretly planning to paint it charcoal grey with black racing stripes. It wasso loud!We had a detached garage, and every time he’d start it and rev the engine, the house windows would rattle. It was awesome.”

We talked for about twenty more minutes before cleaning up, putting our masks back on, and heading back to the house. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had such a peaceful day. It was the first time in a long time I had hope everything would turn out okay.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

After spending the day at the park with Rick, I felt a lot better. Arriving back at the house felt different. It felt homier. It wasn't quite so big and cold after making a friend inside. While Rick wanted to eventually be seen as my father, or at the very least, a father figure to me, it was still way too soon for that. I was grateful he was satisfied to build a friendship with me.

That being said, spending the day with him really helped go a long way to bridging that gap.

Over the course of the next week, we stayed up late a few times bingeing superhero movies, he showed me around the property, and he taught me how to cook his mother's famous authentic Italian lasagna for dinner. I had no idea I was Italian, but that explained the olive complexion.

That night, I'd had my first real dinner with the family. It felt awkward since I hadn't spent much time with anyone else. Actually, I hadn't spent any time with anyone else. Angela avoided me like the plague, or at least it seemed that way. Though, she was always very polite when we ran into one another. Part of me wondered if it was just my paranoia and trust issues making me see things that weren't really there.

Harper, however, was a totally different story. I couldn't even count how many times I'd seen her roll her eyes in my direction. At our first real family dinner, Rick was once again talking to me about cars. He'd asked what other cars I'd done work on or would like to work on. He said he could probably find an old beater for me to fix up if I wanted, which really made me feel good. He was taking interest in my interests, and I appreciated it.

When I'd talked about the old Caprice we'd worked on, Harper groaned. She'd said, "I don't know why you're asking her about her felon parents." She'd looked at me then. "Those hillbilly losers were probably the ones who killed your mom and cut you out of her. You should be glad they're dead."

Even her mother seemed shocked at her outburst. Angela had looked at me, her lips parting briefly like she would say something, but then her lips flattened into a thin line as she looked down at her food and picked at it.

Rick, however, had no issues saying something. "Harper, I understand this is a big adjustment for you. It is for all of us. I can promise that each and every one of us are going through something here. All events in life have consequences. Even if the event is a good one, such as this, it requires adjustment. But that is no excuse for rudeness and callousness. Imagine losing your mother and me, everything you've ever known, having to change schools and move across the country, all while finding out your entire life is a lie. Have some sympathy."

After his rant, which, I thought was both well-spoken and rather calm, he took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders, and exhaled. "Besides... as I told you before she arrived, we don't believe her parents had anything to do with her kidnapping."

I'd kept my eyes down and tried to avoid eye contact with anyone while pushing some baby spinach leaves around on my plate. Why I'd had the idea to add to the awkwardness, I had no idea, but I did.

"If you know who didn't have anything to do with it, does that mean you have some idea of whodid?" I'd asked.

There was a brief pause as his eyes met mine, his jaw pausing mid-chew. There was a flash of something there, but he quickly recovered. His expression turned regretful. He swallowed and took a drink before shaking his head.

“We had some ideas years ago, but the trail went cold. We have nothing new, but we’re still looking.”

I couldn’t explain it, but a weird feeling settled in my gut. It was the first time I’d gotten the inkling he was lying to me. He had no reason to, and I had no idea why he would. The truth was, I was still getting to know him. What happened to my birth mother, Anna, was brutal. I couldn’t imagine that was something someone just got over, even after moving on and starting a new family.

Part of me wondered if I should talk to a therapist, and for the several days after that dinner, I put a lot of thought into it. Before the attack, I was confident, had no real issues with anxiety, and honestly didn’t have a lot of trust issues that weren’t related to my mom. I didn’t trust her as far as I could throw her, but that didn’t transfer to others.

Now...

I didn’t trust anyone.

On top of that, I was anxious all the time, I’d noticed I was withdrawing, and I just didn’t feel like myself. Granted, everything in the world had changed for me, so I tried to give myself some wiggle room, but I wanted to make sure those issues didn’t stick around.

A knock at my door pulled me from my thoughts. “You ready to go?” Rick asked with a smile.

I nodded. “Yep. Be right there.”

“You’re going to do great. I’m having Javier go with you. You seem comfortable with him. I’d take you myself, and I want you to know that I would. It’s important to

me that you know I would, but...”

I held up a hand. “No, no. This was a decision we made together. You don’t want anyone to see me with you because people will ask questions, media will get involved and possibly uncover the story of the long-lost daughter returned, the story would get even bigger, and then people we don’t want to know where I am will definitely know where I am.

“I don’t want to be seen with you for the same reasons but also because I’m about to start at a new school, and I want to remain as anonymous as possible. I know Harper doesn’t want any association with me, so this will be cake for her, and I don’t want to make her life or mine harder by people finding out. This whole situation is new and stressful as is. I don’t know you well, but I feel like I’ve gotten to know you well enough by now to know you’d be there for me if you could. We made that decision. It’s what’s best and safest.”

A large smile split his face. “You really are an incredible young woman, you know that? I wish I could take some of the credit, but your parents did a beautiful job with you. Smart and beautiful, though”—He stood a little taller and made a playful conceited expression while putting his nose in the air—“that last part, I take full credit for.”

I laughed and threw a throw pillow at him. “Dear lord. Go away. I’ll be out in a minute.”

He laughed, too and closed the door. “You’re gonna do great!” he shouted from the other side as he walked away.

Rick really seemed to be a great dad to Harper, and it was obvious he was trying to be the same for me. I was confident it would just take some time, though. I liked him more and more every day—despite my weird trust issues.

The nightmares were still in full force, and I knew that kept me on edge a lot. Every time I fell asleep, I saw my parents' faces staring up at me with cold, dead eyes. I could smell the fire and even feel the pain in my side as if it were brand new. I did my best to hide it during the day, and meditating in the morning helped some, but it was hard.

The anxiety still snuck through sometimes.

But as always, I relied on my sense of humor to carry me through when I felt uncomfortable.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I stood and walked to my closet to get a pair of black and neon pink Nike Air shoes. Black was my favorite, but mostly because of how well all other colors, especially bright ones, paired with it. I was a goth kid at heart, but I liked color, too.

After putting on my shoes, I went to my private bathroom, and checked myself in the mirror. I looked good. My hair was down and straightened. My makeup was well blended, and while I liked the smoky look, I used browns and tans instead of something darker. I usually did if I was wearing darker colors. I tried to balance it out. There definitely could be too much of a good thing.

I applied the same rules to picking out dresses. I always picked to show either cleavage or legs but never both.

Restrictions were lifted a couple days after spending the day with Rick. A checkup revealed I was healing better than average, and my pain was almost gone. There was still tenderness when they pressed on the area, but they said that would probably be there for another couple of weeks. Some people just had pain linger a little longer than others, and that was no ordinary injury and surgery either.

When the doctor had given Rick the okay, he'd talked to me about getting my driver's license transferred over. Since I'd be living there for the foreseeable future and attending school, that meant I was a resident. Normally, a resident would have ten days to transfer over their license, but I had extenuating circumstances that required me to wait a little longer.

Until today, in fact. It was Wednesday and almost time for my appointment to take my test.

I'd filled out all the online stuff and completed all the requirements except taking the written exam. Today was the day. Javier would take me to the DMV, and as long as I passed—which I didn't doubt for a second—I'd be licensed to drive in California. According to the doctors, as long as I could stomp my feet without pain, I could drive without restrictions, so I'd be free to explore.

Which I was very much looking forward to.

When I walked outside, Javier stood next to a black Audi. Of course, he'd drive an Audi. "Nice car," I said.

He shrugged. "Hey, if you pass today, I thought you'd like to drive back in style."

My eyes widened. "Wait... What? Are you serious?"

He looked at me incredulously. "Duh. What the hell kind of celebration is it after you get your license to get chauffeured back home? Besides, restrictions are up, you've been cleared to drive, and you deserve some fun."

I wasn't proud of the squeal that came out of me, but I closed the distance between Javier and me and hugged him tight. He laughed as he hugged me back.

"Well, damn. I didn't know it would make you this happy."

I pulled back, though our arms still held one another as I looked into his dark eyes. Looking at him this close, I was startled by just how attractive he was. Attempting to hide what I was sure were reddening cheeks, I released him and stepped back.

"I've never even sat in a car that nice. Getting to drive it would be so fucking awesome!"

He laughed again, and I enjoyed the sound. “Glad to hear it. Now get in before your father thinks I’m out here trying to move in on his daughter.”

I snorted. Javier spent a lot of time at the house, so I’d gotten to know him relatively well since arriving. He’d seemed pretty nice when I met him in the hospital, but he was even funnier the longer I was around him. He was definitely the uptight kind of person until he knew someone enough to let go.

Rick and Javier told horrible jokes and basically scream laughed at each other when there were visitors. Rick had asked if I would be comfortable with his friends coming over for a weekly poker night. He’d said it was my choice since I was still adjusting, but I didn’t want to interrupt his life more than I already had. I was more than okay with it.

Besides, I was still on bedrest at the time, and I didn’t plan to do much outside of watch TV and nap, so it worked great. What I hadn’t anticipated was hearing them all laughing and carrying on all night. It made me laugh. The office where they’d set up my temporary room was pretty poorly insulated, so I’d heard a lot of their ridiculous conversations, trips down memory lane, and terrible dad jokes. Being a lover of dad jokes myself, though, I totally understood.

Javier had more than the average person, and I attributed that to his time in the military. My dad used to tell me some of the terrible jokes Pastor Montgomery told him from his time in the army, too. They were my favorite.

“So, you think you’ll pass?” Javier asked.

I nodded. “Definitely. I studied a lot just to make sure. I didn’t want to take any chances. It’s not like it’s a lot different, but I still didn’t want to have to retake it like I did when I got my license in Indiana. That would suck. I wanna go to the beach.”

“Oooh, it’s so nice. You’ll love it.”

We spent the rest of the trip talking about the beach, and he described all the best places to go and all the places I should visit while I was here. He told me that I should do as much as possible as soon as possible—just in case things didn’t work out, and I ended up going back to Indiana for good. I appreciated that he still took that into account. Even though things were going relatively well so far, I hadn’t yet made up my mind if I planned to stay after everything calmed down.

I wasn’t sure if I’d ever know until that time came.

When I got to the DMV, there was a long line. However, thanks to preregistering, I was able to get in without waiting terribly long. It took about forty minutes to get seated with a test, and I was given the rules, time limit, and instructions on what to do after it was completed.

“Thank you,” I told the older woman who helped me.

She barely huffed as she nodded and walked away. My, she was pleasant, I thought.

I took my time and read everything carefully before answering. I didn’t want to take the chance of misreading something and screwing it up. There was no way Javier was driving back today. The clock on the wall seemed to move incredibly fast while the test moved slower than hell. Of course, that was probably my fault since I at least skimmed everything a second time.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

Once I was finished, I waved to the woman who had helped me earlier, and she told me to go have a seat. Javier was quiet, and I was fine with that. Honestly, I was too anxious to want to fake a conversation right then.

The entire process took about two hours, but it was done and over, and I didn't have to worry about it again because I'd passed!

"Congratulations!" Javier said when I walked over with all smiles and holding my temporary license. He hugged me again, and I gladly took it. I wasn't about to turn away hugs from a hot guy who smelled delicious—even if he was thirty-three.

"Thank you!" I nearly squealed. "I'm so excited! It feels good to have a win."

"I bet it does."

The second we were outside, I turned around and held my hand out as I gave him a large cheesy grin.

He laughed and pulled the keys from his pocket before dangling them over his head. "This what you're after?"

I nodded. "Yup. You promised."

His lips flattened into a thin line. "Hmm... Do you have proof that I said that? This sounds like hearsay. Would never hold up in court."

I stared at him incredulously. "You ever had your soldier ass kicked by an eighteen-

year-old girl?" I asked.

"Actually, yes I have," he said with a laugh. "I trained with women."

"Okay, well, do you want to have your ass kicked by an eighteen-year-old girl again?"

"Okay, now you're asking the right questions. And no. No, I do not." He smiled and tossed the keys to me.

"Yay!" I said, turning and practically skipping to the car. "By the way, I don't know who told you otherwise, but lawyer jokes aren't funny except to other lawyers."

He laughed but didn't respond. I didn't care. I couldn't believe how good I felt. I'd been in such pain for so long, both mental and physical, and today was the first day I'd moved around freely. I wasn't completely pain-free, but I felt great.

We got in the car, and Javier immediately started to lecture me, making me roll my eyes.

"What? Don't roll your eyes at me. This is important. I need to teach you how to drive this. I don't want my clutch burnt out."

I rolled my eyes again. "Please. Stop clutching your pearls there, Grandma. I know what I'm doing."

I put the key in the ignition, shoved in the clutch and brake, and turned it over. It came alive, and I felt more powerful than I ever had behind the wheel of a car that wasn't an old muscle car.

"Wait, you know how to drive stick?" he asked.

I sighed. “For a lawyer, you’re pretty dumb.”

“A lawyer? I thought I was a helpless little abuela,” he said with a sarcastic smile.

“Well, Abuela, please think back to everything you know about me and what I used to do with my dad as a hobby.”

His eyes narrowed. “Ah, yes. Old cars. Manual transmissions.” He nodded, repositioning himself in the passenger seat so he was more comfortable. “I’m an idiot.”

I laughed and put the car in first gear. I took it easy in the parking lot, wanting to get a feel for how it handled and how sensitive the brakes were before I got it out on the road.

“Watch out for cops,” I told Javier.

A smile spread across his lips. “Don’t worry about that. The cops around here know my car. Besides, if we get pulled over, and they see me? You won’t have to worry about anything.”

I looked at him pointedly. “You do know how that makes you sound, yes?”

He shrugged. “I can’t help that I work for a senator, and others act accordingly.”

“No, but you can help it that you take advantage of it,” I replied.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

“I’d just like to point out that you’re about to break several traffic laws and asked me to watch out for the cops. Pot meet kettle.”

My jaw dropped. “Ugh!Not the same! I’m talking aboutnotgetting caught. You’re talking about manipulating the systemwhenwe get caught.”

“I suppose you have a point. Have I mentioned I don’t like losing arguments?”

An exaggerated shocked expression replaced the last one of irritation as my right hand went to cover my mouth. “What? A lawyer who doesn’t like to lose arguments to someone without a law degree?”

He laughed loudly, his head falling back. “Man,you’re a real asshole, you know that?”

“I do, actually. Now, shut up and watch for cops.”

That car was magic. I got it up to one hundred before I chickened out and slowed back down. Javier honestly looked like he might shit his pants a couple of times, but he said it wasn’t because of my driving. He said it was because he had control issues, and if he wasn’t driving, it freaked him out. It made the fact that he’d let me drive it and allowed me to speed in it even more special.

“Stop as soon as you pull into the driveway,” he said. “I need to switch you spots.”

“Afraid you’re gonna get in trouble for contributing to my delinquency?” I asked.

Another chuckle escaped him. He and Rick really did have a great sense of humor, and I enjoyed it. It helped me feel more comfortable since I was the type of person to joke when feeling awkward or out of place—and I had felt alotof that since I'd arrived in California.

“No. Just switch me spots. You'll see.”

I parked the car at the end of the drive and got out to switch him places. As I got to the passenger side door, he pulled a piece of cloth from his jacket pocket.

“Don't freak out,” he said as he walked behind me.

“Okay, nothing good has ever started with that phrase. Don't freak out about what?”

The moment I finished that sentence, he covered my eyes with a blindfold. I reached up to pull it off, but he smacked my hands away.

“Just trust me. This is special.”

I sighed. There was something in his voice that was soothing, but that didn't stop my anxiety from kicking up while wondering what it could be for.

He helped me back into the car and shut my door. I heard the other car door shut, and the car started back up and crawled forward. While I knew it didn't take much time, the driveway still seemed ten times as long as usual. It parked soon, and I heard his door open about the same time mine did.

“Welcome back,” I heard Rick's voice say.

“Hi! What is this?” I asked, desperately wanting to reach up and rip off the blindfold.

He said nothing as he helped me out of the car and guided me away. Rick's hands appeared on my shoulders as he stood behind me, gently pushing me along for several steps before stopping.

"I know everything has been hard. Impossibly hard, actually. You've been through so much, and I want you to know how proud I am of you. Since you've been here, you've done physical therapy, displayed an impressive need for independence, and showed me you're capable of things I didn't know a woman your age could be. You've impressed me, and I'm proud to be anyone in your life that you need me to be. Even if it's just a family friend." He paused.

I thought I heard a tiny crack in his voice, but without seeing him, I couldn't be sure.

"And in this family, we celebrate accomplishments. Big dinners. Maybe trips. We do something. However, I don't know if you know this, but we might have missed one or two of your big moments and maybe a couple birthdays and Christmases." He chuckled, and so did I. The anticipation was killing me! "Because of that, I wanted to do something really special for you."

He pulled off the blindfold, and the moment he did, he said, "Happy eighteen past birthdays and Christmases, and congratulations on passing your driving test!"

My jaw dropped, and my eyes nearly fell from their sockets after widening so much. My hands immediately went to cover my open mouth as tears filled my eyes. I looked from the charcoal grey 1970 Chevelle SS with black racing stripes to Rick and back again.

"Oh, my God," I managed to choke out as the tears spilled onto my cheeks. "It's beautiful!" I looked over at him. "Is this mine, or is it just to drive? Because ask Javi back there. I'm good with either."

I looked back in time to see him roll his eyes and shake his head before he crossed his chest and kissed his thumb as he looked to the sky. “I’m so glad we made it back alive.”

I laughed at his exaggeration and turned back to Rick.

His hand extended, and a set of keys dangled between his thumb and forefinger. “It’s all yours. I thought about getting you one to fix up, but then I thought, no. She needs something to drive, and she needs something that makes her feel like herself. Especially with you staying on campus this year. We’ll look into getting you a project car for Christmas. Something you can work on while you’re home on weekends and breaks.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

Before I even knew what was happening, I rushed forward and hugged him. “Thank you. Everything is so complicated in my head right now, and I don’t know what to think. But I want you to know that I hear every time you call my adoptive parents my parents and every time you refer to yourself and Anna as my biological parents. I notice how you try to keep a respectful distance, and I notice how you try to keep my parents alive by talking to me about them even though I know it must kill you to hear all the things you missed out on.”

I pulled away and looked into his stone blue eyes. They were slightly red, and I saw wetness forming along the water line.

“This means the world to me. So much more than you know. Thank you for respecting who I am and where I came from.”

He wiped my tears and held my face. “Is it okay if I kiss your face?”

At that moment, I was so wrapped up, I didn’t care. It was the first time I’d felt like I had a dad since mine died—not that I could ever replace him. However, if he knew my biological father was taking such good care of me, I think he’d want me to treat him like family. That was the kind of guy my dad was.

I nodded, and Rick kissed my forehead.

“I believe that’s probably the best thank you I’ve ever received.” He stepped back to give me space and wiped his own eyes. “Thank you for that.” He pointed to the car. “That was well earned. You’re so much more than I ever hoped, and I’d always wanted the best for you.”

He cleared his throat, and I turned to look at the car. He stepped up next to me and nudged me a little. “It’s not a show piece, and you don’t have to stand around here thinking you owe me something. Go! Have fun!”

I looked back at him with excitement and ran toward the car. There was a little dull pain, but I didn’t care. As I moved to pull the door open, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. I looked toward the front of the house and saw Harper standing there, leaning against one of the columns. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and her eyes were narrowed.

If looks could kill, I would have had my heart ripped out and torn to shreds. I swallowed. Something about her worried me, and I didn’t like it. Not a lot scared me, but I had no idea what she was capable of. That worried me.

Just before I turned away from her, she lifted her thumb to her throat and “sliced” it across. She mouthed the words, “Watch your back, bitch,” and I decided not to give her what she wanted. I wouldn’t show her how much she worried me.

Instead, I waved. “Hi, Harper! Wanna go for a ride?”

Her eyes widened, clearly shocked I would ask such a thing after she’d just threatened me.

“Honey, I think that’s a great idea,” Rick said to Harper. “It’ll give you two a chance to bond.”

Harper snorted and turned to walk toward the house. “I’d rather die in a fiery explosion.”

Okay, that hit a nerve. Bitch.

Rick started to go after her, and I put my hand out. “Don’t.” He looked at me with confusion. The door slammed, signaling Harper was inside. “She hates me. If you keep fighting my battles for me, she’ll never learn to respect me, but she will come to hate you.”

His brows furrowed as he thought over my words. “You’re not wrong,” he said.

I nodded. “If you keep standing up for me, she’s going to think you favor me over her. Either because I’m your biological daughter and she’s not, or because I’m shiny and new, and she’s feeling like the princess who’s been locked away in the tower. I’ve never had to deal with siblings, but I have plenty of friends who had to deal with stepsiblings, and some of them had to go to therapy because things got so tense. Trust me, this is normal.”

Relief visibly washed over him, and his shoulders relaxed. “See? Capable of things I had no idea a young woman your age was capable of.”

He smiled again and turned toward the house, and I turned toward the gorgeous car. “Hey, Javi,” I said.

“Uh oh,” he replied.

“You wanna go for a ride?”

“Keep her out of trouble,” Rick said as he entered the house.

Javier sighed. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

Yeah... me neither.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ASHER

After spending all day after morning training under a '70 Dodge Charger R/T switching out the brakes and lines, I decided to take a break and head into town. It was almost three in the afternoon and Friday, so it would probably be busy as hell. However, my gut had been screaming at me for food since about eleven, so I didn't really care. Tacos sounded amazing, but once I got into town, Chinese sounded even better. One last day of eating like shit wouldn't kill me.

In fact, it might just make me tolerate all Damian's bullshit a little better if I had something to look forward to.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I pulled onto W 22ndSt and drove for about a quarter mile before I saw a strip mall. It wasn't anything fancy like the ones you'd find in LA, but it served its purpose, and it was way easier to get to. It had some shoe stores, a sporting goods store, a pizza place, bookstore, and a Chinese restaurant as well. There were a few more random stores in there, but I never really looked around much. I didn't like to shop.

The lot was packed, and I had a hard time finding a spot. I located one toward the middle and put it in park. The second I opened my door, I heard the thunderous rumble of an old muscle car. It had to have been late '60s to early 70's, but I couldn't see it. I sighed. Nothing got my heart pounding quite like driving fast in an old powerful car.

I wanted to hunt it down, but I figured one of two things would happen. Either they were on their way out, and I'd find it while they were pulling out and miss getting a good look at it, or they may have just arrived which would give me the opportunity to check it out when I came out.

Taking my chances, I headed into the Chinese restaurant. Lucky me—they were packed. There was no seating available, and several people were waiting by the door in stand-by seating. I groaned to myself.

“Are you guys waiting to be seated or to order takeout?” I asked.

A few people held up a small black disk that served as a pager that would vibrate and the lights would go off when a table opened for them. A few others verbally replied, “Waiting for seating,” simultaneously.

“Thanks,” I said before heading inside.

Fuck it. I’d just order out, I guess. Normally, I’d just go somewhere else, but I had my heart set on Chinese, and I didn’t want to spend twenty minutes trying to figure out where I wanted to go and another twenty to get there, plus whatever wait they had. I’d rather just wait here.

There was a line at the counter, and a few people had wallets out. I figured most were there to pay, but I assumed a few others were there to order something. As I navigated through the crowd, I found the end of the line and stood there. It wasn’t terrible, so I hoped I wouldn’t regret it.

I hadn’t been standing long when someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around to see Britney Langston standing behind me. She had a beaming smile and sparkling green eyes.

“I thought that was you!” she said with excitement.

I smiled back, though I didn’t really feel like chatting. My gut was threatening to eat itself. I could actually hear it growling over the din of the restaurant, which I found pretty impressive. That wasn’t her fault, though, so I tried to be nice.

“Hey, Brit. How are you? You here to eat or for takeout?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes and made a disgusted face. “Ugh. Today is my stepmom’s bitch of a daughter’s birthday. She wanted to come here, of all places.”

My smile faded, and I had to force another as I nodded. “Yeah, that sucks,” I said, though I didn’t mean it.

“Right? We could have gone to Angotti’s, for fuck’s sake.” She rolled her eyes again.

“She has no taste at all—literally or figuratively.”

Britney hadn't always been insufferable and conceited. I met her in middle school. She had brown hair then and was super nice. She hung out with anyone who was nice to her. Then she got involved with Harper fucking Avery. Harper was a bitch and a half, and that was being nice. If Damian was the king of Crestview, she was the queen. Even though they'd never dated.

She'd always wanted a piece of him, but he wouldn't get near her. He wanted her, too, but he liked fucking with her more than the idea of actually fucking her.

Damian was complicated.

But so was Harper.

And once she got her claws into Britney, it was all over. Britney had bleached her hair since the eighth grade. It was naturally super curly, and she had it relaxed. It destroyed her hair for a while, but now it looks good. She also wore the most expensive clothing she could find, has had her nose done to match Harper's, and wore contacts that were the same color as Harper's eyes.

It was fucking disturbing.

“I wonder if my parents would notice if I got out of here,” she said with a playful smile, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Clueless me, I looked around. “In this mess? I doubt they'd notice much of anything. There are plenty stores around here for you to go to.”

She laid a hand on my chest as she stepped in closer. Oh, no.

“Is that an offer to take me shopping?” she asks, one of her eyebrows lifting.

I swallowed hard, trying to figure out how to get the hell out of this. I’d liked her once as a friend, but I couldn’t handle her mean girl bullshit attitude. I definitely didn’t want anything to do with her romantically or sexually.

“No, actually, I’m just here picking up some food and then heading back home,” I said. I looked around and moved up in line when I saw there was a gap.

She moved closer. Fuck me. I managed to keep my groan to myself. I was trying to be nice, but she never took no for an answer.

Her playful smile grew. “Oooh,” she moaned out, giggling as she dragged her index finger down the center of my chest. “Does that mean you want to take me home with you instead?”

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I almost rolled my eyes. “I trained this morning. I’ve been under a car all day. I’m sweaty, smelly, and gross. Trust me, you wouldn’t want that.”

“That’s why God created showers, silly,” she said. “I could wash you clean... Then make you dirty all over again.”

I saw the eyes of the woman standing behind Britney widen as she shook her head in disgust, and my face turned red. Not only would she not take a hint, but she was extremely fucking loud and rude. My irritation had grown out of control. Between being hangry, the crowd of people, and her being clueless as hell, I was about to lose my patience.

I calmly placed my hands on her arms. Touching her made her expression turn triumphant as she looked up at me with obvious desire in her eyes.

“Britney,” I said.

“Mmm?” she moaned out.

“We are in the middle of a restaurant. There are people all over. People that can hear the desperation dripping from your voice with every wasted word. I have told you before, and I will tell you again.” I leaned down close enough our noses almost touched. “It’s never going to happen. Throw yourself at someone who has the patience to deal with your shallow, conceited, Harper Avery cloned ass.”

I let go of her arms and stood tall, taking in the utter shock on her face that quickly turned to rage. She moved quickly to smack me, but I’ve trained my whole life. I

grabbed her wrist before she even had a chance to make it halfway, which only made her face scrunch up with even more anger.

“Ugh!” she huffed out before yanking her arm free and stomping away back toward her family.

I shook my head, inhaled deeply, and sighed. I looked at the woman who had been behind her as she moved up.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

She snorted. “Don’t be. That was the highlight of my day. She sounded like a real bitch.”

Despite my mood, a laugh escaped me. “And you are an excellent judge of character.”

It didn’t take long to get through the rest of the line. When I got to the cashier, I decided to forego ordering and just pay for the buffet to go. I didn’t want to wait around any longer than I needed to. The last thing I wanted was to run into Britney again.

I heaped the box as full as I could and grabbed a bag, some chopsticks, and a fortune cookie before heading back out. The second I was out in the fresh air I remembered the car I’d heard earlier.

The parking lot had cleared a little, but not nearly enough that searching for a car would be easy. It came from the west side, so I made my way down that direction. I walked about five rows, looking down the center of each one where the front ends would be together instead of the aisle. It would be easier to see the hood than the tail end since it would probably be blocked by longer vehicles.

Finally, I came across a beautiful square charcoal hood with black racing stripes about halfway down. Yes! I thought. That must be it.

I made my way down the aisle and saw more than I expected. Standing next to a gorgeous 1970 Chevelle SS was a girl. She had her back to me, studying the car. I could see her reflection in the window, and she was smiling as she stared at it.

She had long black hair that was tied up in a ponytail. In the reflection, I could see she had bangs. They were cut just at her eyebrows and came down to frame her face on the sides.

She had on black bondage pants that hugged every curve of her thick thighs and the most perfectly rounded ass I'd ever seen. There were zippered pockets and rivets all over the tight pants that led down to knee-high, black, three-inch platform combat boots. Her shirt was the same color as the car. It was a jersey style shirt with "01" on the back with "Skellington" written right above it. In the reflection, I could see a small white skull on the left breast and knew it was a Nightmare Before Christmas shirt.

I almost laughed. It was cute. Certainly, different than anything I was used to seeing girls around here wear. It was kind of refreshing actually. She stood with her shoulders back. Even without seeing her face, I could tell she radiated confidence. I couldn't even get a good look at her, and I found her sexy as hell. Of course, her having a body that looked like a lot of professional dancers I'd seen—thick and powerful—certainly helped the appeal.

"Hey," I said, walking closer.

She jumped a little and turned around. The moment her icy blue eyes met mine, I stopped. Her face was even more beautiful than her body, and honestly, I forgot about the car for a moment. As pathetic as it sounds, that was impressive.

“You like old cars?” I ask, pointing to the Chevelle. “You looked super happy staring at it.”

She nodded as she clutched a small stack of books in her arms closer to her chest. She must have just come from the bookstore.

“Yeah. This is my favorite car.” Her voice sounded a little nervous, but she still seemed more confident than a lot of girls I talked to.

“What’s your name?” I asked. “I’m Asher Jackson.”

She laughed, and one of her eyebrows lifted. “Well, Asher Jackson... Are you always so forward with random girls you meet in parking lots, or am I just special?”

I absentmindedly licked my lips as I looked around before looking back at her eyes. They practically glowed in the afternoon sunlight.

“I suppose you’re special. I’m not used to seeing girls like you around here,” I said.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

She nodded, eyeing me suspiciously for a moment. A small smile spread across her beautiful lips. “Yeah? What kind of girl am I?”

Well, that was one hell of a loaded question. I figured being completely honest and telling her she was the hottest and most interesting girl I’d seen in a damn long time would be a bad idea, so I settled on something a little nicer.

“Most of the girls around here are more concerned with clothing labels and hair stylists than being themselves.” I motioned toward her. “You’re yourself. Your face looks like it’s momma-made and not store bought, your hair isn’t bleached to the point it’s about to fall out, and you have books in your hand, so you obviously read. I would assume that means you have a brain. You’re... normal. I’m not used to that around here.”

She stared at me, thinking, then finally she said, “While I’m not entirely sure you’re hitting on me, I get the feeling you are. Which, I’ll be honest, is a little odd given you look like the typical jock type, and I’m a goth girl from hillbilly Indiana. That being said, trying to hit on a girl while telling her just how average she is might not exactly be the best course of action.”

My eyes widened as I thought back over my words. Shit... That was exactly what I’d done. Outlined all the reasons why she was average.

“No, no, no,” I said, my free hand waving in front of my chest defensively. “That’s not what I mean. I’m so sorry.”

Her serious face evaporated as a laugh took her. Her head fell back as she clutched

her books. When she looked back at me, she shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’m just messing with you.” She laughed again, and it was a beautiful sound.

I physically relaxed, sighing in relief as I did. Okay... She has a sense of humor.

“I couldn’t help it,” she said. “You made yourself such an easy target.” She shrugged. “I’m more of a ‘big picture’ kind of girl. I look for the deeper message in what someone says. I do that because sometimes, people aren’t very good with words, and they shouldn’t be hated for that. Plus, in my defense, boys—especially of the jock variety—are even worse.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her joke, even though it was obviously at my expense.

Pointing to her stack of books, I said, “Well, reading stacks of books like that at a time, I’d imagine your vocabulary is superior to most. I can see why you’d look for deeper meaning in people’s words. I’m grateful.”

“Oh, yes. These books are full of rich, colorful scenery, romance, and characters. They also have lots of words that have been expertly strung together in complex sentences. Maybe you should pick one up sometime. It might help you flirt a little better.”

My brows rose as a smile spread across my lips. I watched as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Normally, that was a sign of nervousness, but her chin was held high. She was enjoying this, giving me a hard time.

That girl had no idea who I was. No clue I was one of the royals at Crestview. That my presence made people uncomfortable or even afraid. That people would do anything and everything I told them just because of who I was and who I hung around with, not that I would do that.

She didn't know, and she didn't care. She was flirting—just as Britney had earlier, though far better—but it was because she wanted to. Not because she thought it would gain her any kind of clout or status.

Fuck, I liked this more than I could ever imagine.

“Maybe you should let me borrow one of those,” I said, stepping closer.

Her brows narrow. “Yeah? Why would I do that?”

I took another step closer, now standing only a couple of feet away. “Because... I could read it and then have the perfect excuse to see you again when I come to return it.”

She looked impressed as she looked at me with a beautiful smile. “Now, see? That was smooth.” Standing straighter, she says, “Fine. I'll make you a deal.” She lifts the stack of books a little higher, showing their spines. “If you can tell me anything about any of these authors or their books—whether it's knowing other titles by them or you know what any of these books are about—or you can tell me anything about that car, I'll give you my name and number. I'm sure those two things sound wildly unrelated, but I assure you, it'll tell me everything I need to know about you.”

“Is that so?” I said.

“Yes, because right now, I need more. Judging from your body, you're a jock. Your clothes tell me you're rich. And you're pretty, so you're probably a dick but very good at hiding it. You stumbled over your words when we first started talking, so you're either nervous—which I highly doubt would ever happen to you with a girl like me—or you don't have a lot of brains and rely on your wallet and face to get you through life. So, to put it bluntly, I want to know if you're worth talking to. You can either be book smart or mechanically smart. I'm not picky. One's good with their

brains, and the other is good with their hands. Both can be beneficial.”

I stared at her dumbfounded. Wow. No, definitely, absolutely, positively nothing like any of the girls at Crestview. Where the hell did this girl come from?

Oh, yeah... Indiana.

Looking down at the books, I didn't recognize any of the names. I stuck to horror mostly. Military fiction and crime, too, though I ventured out some. I saw Colleen Hoover, Ember Michaels, Amanda R. Browning, May Sage, and Jennifer L. Armentrout. Romance, dark romance, and fantasy. That was about the extent of my knowledge of these books, and that was all based on their covers. I knew that wouldn't fly with her.

Instead of playing her little game, I decided to turn it around on her. She wanted to quiz me, but I wanted to know if she knew anything about the car. My bet was no. I'd never met anyone around here outside of a shop or a parts store that knew anything at all about cars. Liking them and thinking they were pretty was one thing but knowing anything about them was something completely different.

Hell, even Britney loved my '69 Mustang before I sold it.

“Well, I can safely say I don't know anything about the books or the authors outside of being able to identify their genres by cover only.” I pointed to the car. “But cars? That car specifically?” I smiled. “I guarantee I know more about that car than you do. That's a dream car right there.”

She shook her head, but there was a small smile playing on her lips. “I'm sorry, Mr. Jackson, but that was the wrong answer. You were supposed to prove to me you were more than a pretty face and a bank account.”

As she turned to walk away, I quickly moved around her. It had been a long time since I'd chased a girl. "Is that so? You know what I think?" She eyed me curiously, and I continued. "I think you just want to have all the power here." I smiled. "To be honest, I doubt you know anything about this car. I bet I could tell you anything I wanted, and as long as it sounded technical enough, you'd believe it."

“That’s quite the theory.”

I shrugged. “I’m not entirely above begging, and if you knew me, you’d know that’s saying something. I’m nothing like you think.”

“Hmm, well, I suppose I’ll just have to take your word for it.” She leaned in a bit. “I’ll let you in on a little secret,” she whispered before standing upright again. I saw the quickest pained grimace as she clenched her right side as she righted herself, but she recovered quickly. “I rebuilt one of these from the rusted-out floor pans, to the rebuilt Muncie M21 transmission, to replacing the small block we bought it with to a 454 big block engine back in Indiana. This is a 1970 Chevelle SS, and like myself, it deserves kindness, respect, and the intelligence to handle it properly. Unfortunately, it looks like I’ll have to keep handling it myself.”

She winked and smiled at me and placed her hand on my chest, walking my stunned ass back a few feet toward the front end of the Chevelle. I said nothing as I watched her turn and remove a set of keys from her pocket before putting it in the door and unlocking it.

My eyes widened even more as I realized she was the one who owned the car. A large smile spread across my face as I watch her get in and put her books in the passenger side before shutting the door. I walked to the driver’s side window and gently knocked. She clutched her right side for a moment as she shifted in the seat and put on the seatbelt. She’d been in pain a moment ago, and I wondered what had happened.

She ignored me before putting the manual stick shift in neutral, shoving the clutch in,

and starting the car. Part of me was immediately obsessed that she knew how to drive stick while the other part of me exploded with excitement when I heard the loud growl of the engine explode to life.

Fuck, this is the hottest thing I've ever seen, I thought.

She rolled down the window and looked up at me, smiling as she revved the engine.

"Is it too early to tell you I think I love you? Or should I wait for our first date?" I asked. She laughed loudly, and it sent chills through me. She was perfect. "Now I really think I need your name and number."

"Have you graduated high school yet?" she asked. I shook my head, and she shrugged. "Me neither. I guess you'll just have to hope we go to the same school." She reached over to the passenger side seat and grabbed one of the books and handed it to me. A Colleen Hoover novel called, *Reminders of Him*. "That way you can return that to me and get a second shot at a first impression. Let's hope it's better next time. That should teach you how to flirt a little better."

She rolled up the window and put the car in reverse. Once she had it lined up straight, she hit the gas and sped out of the parking lot—but hopefully not out of my life. A girl like that didn't come around very often, and I really didn't want to miss out on an opportunity like that.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TEMPERANCE

The whole week after Rick gave me the car, things with Harper were tense. That girl hated me. I tried to be mature about it—trying to remember she'd been a spoiled, rich, only child her entire life, and now she had me coming in and competing for

Daddy's love.

Even if there wasn't a competition.

I didn't want a father-daughter relationship with Rick, at least not yet anyway. She was jealous of something she'd built up in her head. Which, my rational brain told me I also understood since I'd had flashes of distrust about Angela and Rick while the only person who had actually been rude to me was Harper—someone I had repeatedly justified and shown patience for in my head.

I clearly needed help.

Even though I understood why she acted how she did, it didn't mean I liked it or planned to allow it to continue. What I'd told Rick was true. I needed to fight my own battles, and I needed her to understand I wasn't her enemy. I didn't plan to take anything from her.

That was why after I finished moving things to my new permanent—until I decided if I wanted to leave or not—room in the Avery home, I planned to ask her to come along with me to Crestview to sign up for classes.

While it wasn't a good idea for us to be seen together, it also wouldn't necessarily raise any bigger red flags like it would if I were seen with Rick outside social ones, of course. Such as why someone like Harper Avery was hanging out with a “weirdo” like me. And that could be explained away by the excuse I came up with for her when she inevitably tried to say something shitty about not wanting to be seen with me. An excuse I thought she'd rather enjoy.

I just moved in down the street, and Rick took pity on me and made Harper show me around and take me to the school so I could sign up for classes. I was her charity case.

Rick had sent for my things back in Indiana and had them delivered here a few days ago. Everything in my room was moved here and was packed away nice and neat in boxes. I still couldn't do any heavy lifting, so I couldn't move anything myself, but he asked Javier to help. Something I couldn't say I was entirely broken hearted about.

I looked in one of the boxes on my bed and saw it was full of books. I really needed to get some bookshelves. I had alotof books. Though, I had one less than I actually owned thanks to Asher Jackson.

Thinking about him made my heart flutter a bit. He was hotter than any of the guys I'd met back in Indiana by a long shot. It was still hard to believe he'd been flirting with me, but I loved it.

I'd kicked myself every day since then for not giving him my name and number, but after I looked his name up on Facebook and saw he went to Crestview, that crisis was averted. I knew I'd see him again.

It had been several days since then, and I still had no idea why I'd flirted like I did but didn't give him any information about myself. It was like I was caught up in the moment. To be honest, it was a little fun playing hard to get, even with a guy who I never would have dreamed of getting in the first place.

I was just glad he wouldn't be the only one getting a do-over. And maybe I'd actually get my book back. I'd heard really good things about it, and that was the one I was most excited about.

Which made the whole interaction even weirder and stupider.

Javier walked back into my room and broke my concentration. He set a bag of clothes on my bed before turning to the row of boxes stacked along the wall.

He wore a plain black V-neck t-shirt and very fitting light colored bootcut jeans with a pair of black combat boots. I may be a lot younger than him and would never date him, but that didn't mean I couldn't look and appreciate the way the jeans hugged his impressive ass. It was normally hidden in the dress slacks he usually wore, as well as his thick thighs. Javier had a lot to show off, front and back apparently.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

“Hey, my eyes are up here,” he said with amusement as he carried a box from the pile against the wall to the six-foot event table he brought up. He thought having the boxes on a table and off the floor would make it so I didn’t have to lift or bend while I was unpacking. It was quite thoughtful. “See something you like? Do I have to worry about getting jumped in here? I have a very loud, lady-like scream, and I’m not afraid to use it.”

I laughed, even though it was incredibly embarrassing he’d caught me checking out the front of his jeans—which appeared to be quite bulgy.

“Well, that’s not embarrassing at all,” I said. “Thanks for calling attention to it instead of just letting me satisfy my curiosity and move on with my day.”

His laugh filled the room. “I don’t have much of a filter, and I enjoy making people feel uncomfortable. I don’t know why, but it just amuses me. You left yourself wide open for that one. Besides, I made a joke after calling attention to your shame. I was nice about it.”

He emphasized the word shame, and I shook my head. “Don’t let it go to your head. It’s big enough already.”

Javier gasped as he turned around and grabbed at the sides of his head. “What? Mi madre said it was perfectly proportioned!”

“Are you sure you’re thirty-three?” I asked, looking at him with feigned doubt.

“Why? Wanna ask me out?” he said playfully before picking up a box.

I rolled my eyes and turned around to hide my smile. That man was something else.
“Not hardly, old man.”

“Liar. I just caught you checking out what I’m packing, and it wasn’t the box in my hands. Plus, judging by the raised eyebrow, the flared nostrils, and the way you were biting your lip, I’d say you were pleased.”

I turned around and threw a flipflop at him, hitting him in the back as he set the next box on the table. “I wasn’t biting my lip. You are a professional liar, and I don’t believe you for a second.”

He shrugged, leaning back against the table and crossing his large, well-toned arms across his chest as he crossed his legs at the ankles. My eyes involuntarily wandered again, noticing every curve of his body, and again, the front of his jeans.

And like clockwork, I bit my lip.

“See! See! You just did it again!”

“Damn it!” I shouted. “Shut up. Just shut...up.”

He placed a hand on his chest. “Meshut up? You’re somean, and you’re the one who won’t stop stripping me with your eyes!”

“This is so embarrassing. Go away.”

He laughed. “You know I’m just giving you a hard time, right?”

“You don’t say!” I said, throwing another flipflop at him.

He caught that one mid-flight. “Hey, I’m a master of catching flipflops. I’ve been

chased around by way too many not to be. My sister was feisty.” He stood and walked over to stand in front of me. “Look, I’m not offended. I’m flattered. I’m a natural flirt, and I don’t mean anything by it. You’re a lot of fun to hang around, you’re hilarious, and sarcastic. So, you make it fun and easy to flirt with you, especially because you flirt back. However, today is the only time I’ve ever caught you really looking, so I feel I have to say this. I also have limits. I don’t date anyone younger than twenty-five.”

“Well, that’s great because I wouldn’t date your ancient ass anyway.” I smiled to let him know that I was being playful. “I’m kidding about the ancient thing. More like pre-historic.”

He reached out and gave my shoulder a light shove. “My goodness you’re mean when you get turned down!”

“Hey! I never asked you out or told you I wanted to. You and that big head of yours assumed that. Besides, I have limits, too. I wouldn’t date anyone older than twenty-five. Doesn’t mean I don’t look, though. I’m usually a little less obvious about it, so... sorry about that.” I laughed. My face was sore. I could feel it. Normally I’d have a meltdown in a conversation like this, but Javier was easy to talk to and be around. “You’re pretty great, and you make it easy to flirt with you, too. Which is why I do it. That and you started it. However, I hold a very strict look but don’t touch policy.”

“I can definitely agree to that. Sorry to bring down the mood and have a serious conversation with you. I just didn’t want to give you any wrong signals. I’m just flirty, and I like giving you a hard time. You can see now why I can’t keep a girlfriend.”

I shrugged. “Yes, I’m super shocked by that fact. And as long as you understand that you never had a chance anyway, and that I’m probably still going to give you a hard

time, we're good."

He smiled. "Deal." He started to turn away but then turned back and stepped a little closer before whispering. "Besides, I don't want to end up in a shallow grave somewhere, if ya know what I mean." He looked at me seriously for a second then busted out in laughter with me following close behind.

We finished up and headed downstairs. Instead of feeling embarrassed about my conversation with Javier, I somehow felt relieved. He really was a good friend. He seemed like a great guy, and while it was mortifying to have that conversation, it was also great that we laid out the rules of our friendship so neither of us crossed them.

Harper just happened to be headed for the kitchen when I reached the base of the stairs, and I rushed to catch up to her.

"Hey, Harper," I said as I caught up to her.

She groaned. "What do you want?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I didn't think she'd be too surprised to have me try to get her attention. Every time I ran into her over the last week, I tried to say at least something. I respected her space while she was pissed, but I also needed her to see I wasn't a threat. Since I was about to invite her along with me, I hoped I'd made at least a little headway with it.

"I wanted to see if you'd be interested in going with me to Crestview to sign up for classes. Look, I know we've gotten off on the wrong foot, and I really, truly want to change that. I never in a million years would have expected that car, and I don't want you to think I'm here to take anything from you—certainly not your dad. Rick understands that I may never be ready for a father-daughter relationship. We may always just be family friends. But you? You're my sister. That's something I've never had but have always wanted. I have a feeling we'd like each other if we got to know each other. What do you say?"

Something crossed her face. It was only a flash. Curiosity? Longing? Could it be that she wanted a sister, too? I didn't have much time to figure it out because she rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"I'd rather shave my head with a rusty knife."

"Wow. That was super descriptive," I said. "Okay. Well, what else were you going to do? Just hang around here? Come on. It's just a few hours. If you hate it, I'll never ask you to spend time with me again."

Another low groan escaped her. "You're just going to keep asking, aren't you?" I nodded. "Whatever. Fine. But we can't be seen together," she said.

“Actually, I came up with a good, self-deprecating excuse for that,” I said with a smile. “I came prepared if you’re interested.”

Her arms crossed over her chest. “Go on. I’m listening.”

“If anyone asks why you’re with the goth weirdo, just tell them I moved in next door, and my parents came to meet yours. Your dad felt sorry for me and forced you to go with me to sign up for classes because my parents are basically lost around here. I’m your charity case.”

Oh, my goodness. A smile. It was only the faintest hint of one, but it was there before she took control of her face muscles to put back on the trusty RBF.

“I think I can work with that,” she said, her nose turned slightly in the air.

I smiled. The lengths I was willing to go to get that girl to like me was disturbing. Truthfully, she scared the shit out of me because I had no idea what she was capable of. Was she a sociopath? Was she the backstabby, Mean Girls kind? Was she just a lonely girl with some issues who honestly just wanted someone in her life who she could count on? A sister maybe?

I had no idea, and it was absolutely maddening.

But until I figured it out, I wanted to try my best to get on her good side. I figured one of two things would happen. We’d either end up tolerating each other and staying out of the other’s way, or we could even be sisters. Family.

Please don’t be a psycho.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“How in the hell is this loud bastard relaxing to you?” Harper asked over the loud growl of the engine.

“Are you kidding? That’s what makes this thing great! It sounds like a beast. That’s what was so awesome about muscle cars. They had a lot of power.”

She shook her head. “You’re so weird.” A few moments of silence passed before she surprised me. “Are you scared about going to a new school?”

I tried to keep the surprised look off my face. She’d asked a completely normal question, and her tone wasn’t even condescending.

“A little, yeah. The people who attacked the church still haven’t been found, so it’s still on my mind.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “Crestview is one of the most heavily guarded private academies in California. All the politicians’ kids go there, and so do kids of celebrities, and some of the kids of the other wealthiest people on the west coast. This school has alotriding on security. Trust me. You’ll be safe there. That’s why my dad—” she paused. “Dadwanted you to go there.”

I swallowed. She’d corrected herself... She’d corrected herself while trying to reassure me. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think she was actually trying here.

“That makes me feel a lot better,” I said. “I didn’t realize it was that secure. Maybe living there on campus won’t be so bad after all. Thank you.”

She shrugged and looked out the window. “Yeah, whatever.”

We were silent for most of the hour-long ride there. It was kind of awkward since neither of us knew what to say to the other, but we both started a few short

conversations. I learned that, even though she hates superhero movies and most of the other genres of movies I like, she likes to read. She likes a couple of the genres I like, and we both agreed Colleen Hoover was pretty great.

It wasn't much, but it was a start.

When we were about two miles from the school, Harper turned to me. "I think we need to set some rules right now before we're on school property."

While her wording was rather blunt, her tone was still relatively friendly. I mean, it was icy, but for her it was friendly.

"Okay. Sure. Whatever makes you feel comfortable. I'm good with that."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I saw her eyes roll out of my peripheral. “Relax, Mother Teresa. You’re not doing many favors here. I’m trying to do you one.”

Well, that was shocking.

“I might not like you, but you ending up dead is a bit drastic. Plus, it would devastate Dad. So, the rules are that neither of us tells anyone we’re sisters. This would quite literally never happen, but even if somehow the heavens opened, and God touched us both and magically made us besties... We’re still not sisters at Crestview. If anyone finds out, someone could come after you. And while, to be honest, I don’t think I’d give two shits, Dad would, and that would break my heart.”

Outside of the disturbing callousness to my possible death and dismemberment, this chat sounded similar to one I’d had with Rick. I wondered if he’d talked to her.

“Deal. This was actually one of my concerns, too,” I said. “And despite what you might think, I also don’t want to make your life more difficult there. I know I’m not exactly the norm around here, especially in a place like Crestview. If anyone knew I was your sister, it might blow back on you, and I don’t want that. You have no worries from me.”

Her brows knit together as she stared at me. “Thanks, I think.”

I nodded. “Family is important.” I made brief eye contact before turning back to the road. “I’d never willingly hurt you or take anything from you. I want you to know that.”

“Yeah, you said that earlier, but thanks.” She jumped. “Oh! That reminds me. Again, while I highly—and I do mean hiiiiighly—doubt this would ever become an issue, I still want to add one more rule. And I also reserve the right to add more as I see fit.”

Man, she really nailed the part of little sister. She may not want it, but she was great at it.

“Shoot.”

“Damian Wolfe. Stay away from him. Trust me, he’s a dick anyway, and you wouldn’t want him. However, he’s mine. He and I have been playing an annoying game for years, but he’s mine. Got it?”

I looked at her strangely for a moment as we pulled into the parking lot. “If he’s a dick, why do you want him?”

She shrugged. “He’s smoking hot for one. Rich as hell. Powerful. And if rumors are right, is well endowed and great in bed.”

I parked toward the back of the lot where it would be harder for anyone to notice us together. I looked at her more closely. “I didn’t hear a single thing in there about him at least being nice to you or making you feel good about yourself.”

“Excuse me?” she said.

I couldn’t tell if she was confused or upset, but I didn’t care. My dad taught me to have standards, and I’d hoped Rick had taught her that, too. However, sometimes environment plays a much bigger role in a kid’s life than the parents.

“You’re beautiful—like shockingly beautiful. Rick talks about you non-stop when we hang out, so I also know you’re extremely intelligent and can basically get in any

college you want. You're motivated and have actual goals in your life. You're talented in many different ways as well. He told me you sing and dance, and you're pretty good at both."

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Why are you saying that?"

"Because any douche bag who doesn't treat you with the respect you deserve isn't worth your time. If he can't make you laugh, make you feel like the most beautiful creature to ever walk the planet, and turn you on with something else besides his body... Then that particular male specimen is useless. Trust me. You're better than him by a longshot. Whatever game you're playing with him? Have fun with it, but don't let him get the better of you. I can already tell you that he doesn't deserve you."

I pulled the keys out of the ignition and got out of the car, leaving a stunned Harper behind. When I was about halfway to the building, I heard the heavy sound of the Chevelle door shutting. Looking back over my shoulder, I could see Harper walking quickly. Since it looked as though she wanted to catch up, I slowed down.

I'd assumed she wouldn't want to be seen with me, so I figured a head start would be better. Maybe I'd been wrong.

She cleared her throat when she neared me. "I don't know what that was back there, but it changes nothing."

I gave a single shake of my head, hiding my amusement. "Nope. Changes nothing."

"The rules still stand."

I gave a single nod. "Understood."

She seemed flustered, so despite the words coming from her mouth, I felt like maybe

I'd gotten to her.

"The card the lawyer gave you at the hospital is an unlimited card. You need to sign up for classes using your parents' information, but I'd think you should avoid putting anything down like that at all if you can. You're eighteen anyway, so it's not like you need parental information—at least I wouldn't think. Especially since you're going to pay the tuition in full."

"I'm paying the tuition in full?" I asked. My shock overruled my desire to call her out over calling Javier "the lawyer." Like she couldn't even be bothered to use his name.

She looked at me incredulously. "Duh? You're not in poor man's land anymore. Welcome to the new world. Everyone here has all their teeth, and they pay things in full. Dad gave you that card for a reason." She rolled her eyes and sighed. "I still think it's dumb, but whatever. Just pay off tuition and get your uniforms with it. Dad will pay it off later."

"O-okay," I stammered, my mind reeling. Javier told me how much tuition here was, and it was staggering. I couldn't imagine just casually throwing around that kind of money.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

But like Harper said...Welcome to the new world.I assumed I would get accustomed to it whether or not I wanted to.

When we got inside, Harper pointed me in the direction of the main office. "I'll wait by the doors. I don't want to be seen with you."

Shocker,I thought, but I left it alone and made my way to the office.

Rick had thought of everything. And like Harper said, since I was eighteen, I didn't need an adult to sign me up. Still, I felt rather sick. I barely knew the man, and he'd spent money hand over fist on me between hospital bills, security, acar, and now tuition. How did kids like Harper live like this and never think twice about it?

It took about an hour to fill out all the forms, pay tuition, get my ID and uniforms, and receive a schedule. It was a little quicker than I thought, but not by much. Everyone in the office seemed nice enough, though they certainly seemed to not like my clothing.

Oh well. I didn't care.

As I was rounding out of the office, I ran directly into a wall.

No... Not a wall.

Asher Jackson.

"Well, well, well. I guess I got lucky after all. Wedogo to the same school," he said

with a large smile.

Yes... Yes, we do.

“I guess so,” I said, returning his smile. I did my best to act casual. Since I knew we went to the same school, and I wouldn’t miss out on seeing him again, there wasn’t any point in giving up the fun I was having. “Have you made use of that book?”

“I have,” he said. “Between training, working on my car, and now football practice, I’ve been reading.”

While I assumed he was lying, I nodded anyway. I’d wait until he brought the book back to see if he was telling the truth or not.

“Are you going to tell me your name now? I mean, we’re practically best friends now.”

“Is that so?” I asked with obvious amusement. “Well, we are classmates now, so I suppose you’ll figure it out before my little challenge is up anyway. I’m Temperance.”

“Wow. That’s one hell of a name,” he said.

I shrugged. “It’s definitely a mouthful. My friends call me Tempe, though. So, if you don’t like Temperance, you can call me that.”

“Oh, I didn’t say I didn’t like it.”

There was something in the way his eyes narrowed when he said that last sentence that made my heart race.

My eyes wandered over toward Harper, and I quickly noticed she was staring me down. She looked positively icy. I cleared my throat and turned back to Asher.

“It was nice seeing you again, but I need to get out of here. I still have a lot at home to do. A lot of unpacking.”

“Are you going to be staying here on campus?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. I’m just settling in here. Once I get unpacked, I have to then re-pack everything I plan to bring here. It should be a good time. Hopefully, you could hear the sarcasm dripping from that.” He smiled again, and I felt lighter. My God, he was beautiful. “Anyway, that’s what I get for not being able to pack my own boxes before moving here. Everything’s all mixed up. Requires twice as much work.”

“I see. Well, it was nice to see you again. Can I have your number this time? Classmates, remember?”

I laughed again. “Oh, no, no, no. That doesn’t work for the number. I never give my number out. However, I made a deal with you. You return that book to me, read, and I’ll give it to you.”

“You have a deal, Temperance.” Without warning, the back of his hand came up to stroke my cheek. It was incredibly gentle, but every place his hand touch felt like it was scorching. Chills raced down my body. “See you soon.”

“Uh huh,” I said before shaking my head. “Yep. See you soon.”

I smiled nervously and walked away as quickly as possible. I couldn’t believe that just happened. I felt so confident up until that moment. The second he touched me, my brain ceased to work.

“Keep walking. We’ll talk in the car,” Harper said while staring down at her phone.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

I headed straight out of the building, to the back of the parking lot, and got in the car. My hands were shaking.

“What in the hell is wrong with me?” I asked myself quietly. “He’s just a guy. Relax, you fucking weirdo.”

By the time Harper came out, I was much calmer. I had never been so happy about anything because the last thing I needed was for her to see me freaking out over him.

“What the hell was that?” Harper asked as she slammed the door shut. She stared at me accusingly before gesturing toward the school. “AsherfuckingJackson? Seriously?”

My brain stopped working for a second time. I had no idea why she was so upset. It wasn’t Damian, so why the hell did she care?

“I’m... I’m sorry. I don’t know why you’re upset. He’s not Damian. In fact, he’s actually pretty nice. I met him last week when I went to the bookstore. He was looking at my car.”

She laughed, but it was obvious she didn’t think anything was funny. “That is Asher Jackson.” Yes... We’ve established this. “He is one of the kings of the school. Trust me when I say, he’s way out of your league.”

My eyes widened. “Wow. Thanks for the confidence there, Sis.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. She must have super strong eye muscles as often as

she does it. “No, you idiot. What did I tell you about Damian? That’s he’s a dick, right?” I nodded. “Okay, well if he’s the king of the school, and Asher is another, that probably means they’re best friends, right?”

“Probably but not necessarily.”

“Well, they are. And if Damian is a dick, and Asher’s best friends with him...” She trailed off, flattening her hands in front of herself and alternating lifting them as if she were weighing something in each.

I sighed, finally getting it. “Then he’s probably a dick, too.”

“Bingo!” she said. “I’ve watched them ruin lives. Asher isn’t as bad as Damian, and honestly, he seems to have changed a lot in the last year after some shit went down, but he’s still Asher. Not to mention the fact that if you get involved with him, and I’m involved with Damian, how long do you think it’ll take them to figure out who you are? Who we are to each other?”

I nodded. “I see. Fair point. Damn.”

She sat back in her seat, clearly satisfied with herself. “Do what you want, but you gave me some friendly advice, and now I’m giving you some. Stay away from Asher Jackson. I’ve never once seen him date someone like you, no offense. I say that because if he targeted you, it probably means something devious. He’s either planning to play you like a fiddle and ruin your life, or worse, it’ll fuck up my chances with Damian, and then you’ll be breaking rule two.”

“Duly noted,” I said before starting the engine. I ignored the fact that she thought her chances with Damian getting ruined was worse than someone mind-fucking me and ruining my life.

She was quite the gem.

We were completely quiet all the way home outside of stopping for gas and snacks. It was an awkward ride, but despite that, I felt like some progress was made.

When we arrived back to the house, there was a red Porsche 911 in the drive. I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to seeing all the extravagant cars.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Harper asked as she stared out the window.

"Who is it?"

"That's my dad's estate lawyer."

Ah, we were back to my dad again. Looked like the honeymoon was over.

Before I could even get the car parked, she was already unbuckled and reaching for the handle. I'd just stopped when she flung open the heavy door and jumped out, slamming it behind her. I killed the engine and quickly followed, concerned. If she was that worried, I wondered if I should be, too.

"What is he doing here?" I heard her ask Rick the second she got to the steps. He'd walked outside with a man who appeared to be in his early fifties or late forties. "Tell me it's not what I think."

Rick smiled and waved to the lawyer, but his face turned more serious as he looked at Harper, his hands coming to rest on her upper arms.

"Harper, everything is fine. There's no need to worry."

"The hell there isn't!" she said with rage. "Did you put her in your will? What did

you give her? Dad, you don't even know her!"

My eyes widened. Uh... what?

"She's your sister, Harper. My daughter. Of course, I put her in the will. You're being unreasonable."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

She looked back at me and laughed, but it was angry, not amused. “Not here to take anything from him, huh? Not here to take anything from me, huh? Is that what today was? You knew about this and wanted to distract me while MY father gave you everything? You said all that nice shit in the car about me deserving better to win me over so I wouldn’t get pissed about you manipulating your way into my father’s will and stealing everything out from underneath him, didn’t you?” She screamed that last part, and I jumped a little.

My eyes widened even more. “Harper, I had no idea. I meant every word I said! I had no clue his estate lawyer was coming today.”

“The fuck you didn’t!”

“Hey!” Rick yelled, grabbing her shoulders and spinning her around. “That’s enough! Temperance is a part of this family. Had she not been taken, she always would have been part of the will. She isn’t some secret baby with some random woman I didn’t know about. I knew about her, and I lost her. I love you both equally. You are my baby, and she is my first born. She has just as much right to an inheritance as you do. She isn’t stealing anything, and you need to apologize.”

“Fuck her,” she said coldly.

“Harper Marie Avery!” he yelled. “I’m done. The only issues in this house are the ones you’re causing.”

I hissed at that. That was too far. Even if she was being a royal bitch, he shouldn’t have said that. He’s playing right into her insecurities and validating them.

“Rick,” I started.

“No,” he snapped. His voice and the look on his face left no room for discussion. “This ends here.” He turned back to Harper. “You need to let this anger and resentment go and get with the program, or there will be consequences. I’ve had enough.”

Not only did every ounce of progress I’d made with her today just get gas poured on it and torched, but I had a feeling that things would only get worse from there. Way worse.

And when Harper turned to look at me, eyes red, and shooting icy daggers into me, I knew I was right.

“Like I said before.” Her voice was low and dangerous. “Watch your back.”

“Get your ass inside,” Rick said, grabbing her by the arm and practically dragging her inside.

“Welp, that’s probably not a good sign,” Javier said as he walked down the steps. He came to stand by me, leaning against the passenger side of my car.

“No... Uh, I’m pretty sure Rick just inadvertently signed my death warrant.”

“I’d like to say I disagree, but that girl’s diabolical. You need to heed her warning and watch your back. Understand?” I nodded, but didn’t verbally respond, so he continued. “Her mother has done a number on her. She’s extremely insecure, and her father just basically broke every rule in the book. She’s going to blame you for this, and if he doesn’t stop trying to fight your battles, that’s only going to get worse.”

“Yeah,” I said, my voice barely a whisper. “I warned him of that already.”

Javier huffed. “Well, I don’t think he got the message. Want me to talk to him?”

Part of me thought it was a good idea, but I shook my head. “No. This is family drama, and I have to figure out how to be part of the family—even if it’s just as a friend. I need to figure out how to navigate talking to these people. It’s on me to fix it.”

“Uh-uh. No, no. Don’t do that to yourself. It’s on them, too. Remember that.” He placed his arm around my shoulders and lightly squeezed, pressing the side of his head against mine. It wasn’t much, but it was comfort. I’d take it.

“Yeah, I’ll try to remember that while I’m looking over my shoulder and sleeping with one eye open.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DAMIAN

It was the last Saturday night before school started, and that meant it was time for the end of summer costume party at my house. This year’s theme was simple: pajama party. My friends thought it sounded dumb as hell until I explained every chick that came would probably be in panties and a long t-shirt, lingerie, or any other beautiful half-naked combination. Then they lightened up and told me what a great idea it was.

My parents wouldn’t be back from Italy for another month, so I was still able to live my life freely. I had two guys posted at each exit carding people. Anyone under eighteen got a huge red stamp on their hand, and anyone eighteen and over got a green stamp. No freshmen or sophomores under sixteen allowed.

I didn’t care the permitted age—they could drink and wear whatever the hell they wanted. But when it came to sex, the rules were clear. No meant no. Red meant stop.

Green meant go. Eighteen-year-olds didn't touch anyone under eighteen. I might've played recklessly with a lot of things, but that was something I took seriously.

Parties were supposed to be fun—not life altering.

I didn't really give two shits if two reds hook up, but reds and greens didn't mix. It protected all parties involved and kept my ass out of trouble as the host. Everyone knew not to break the rules at my parties, or they'd have me to deal with. I caught a graduated nineteen-year-old in one of the upstairs rooms with a fifteen-year-old sophomore last year, and I ended up breaking his nose and two ribs. I would have done a lot more had Asher not pulled me off him. And that was when I banned anyone under sixteen.

That creep learned real fucking quick never to step foot at one of my parties again.

Asher and the guys came over earlier and helped me set up. A catering service came in and set up tables with food, snacks, and desserts, and there were two stocked bars ready to go. Given my dad's best friend was a state senator, we didn't really worry much about the cops showing up. As long as I didn't piss off his little fucking princess, and no one drove, he stayed out of my way.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

Though, I would say it was more of a convenience to that I didn't fuck with her. I really didn't give a damn what her dumbass father thought—I was just too lazy to deal with his alpha male “I'm a senator, blah blah” bullshit.

Harper Avery had it coming. She'd wanted me for years, but she knew she wasn't woman enough to handle me. I wouldn't be a whipped dog like the rest of the assholes she had sucking her ass on a daily basis.

I told her last year she was free to make the choice, but I'd break her just like everyone else.

The doorbell rang, and I motioned to the DJ to get the music started. It was just after 9:00 PM, and people piled through the door in their pajamas. It wasn't unusual for about two hundred people to show up, and about half that showed up right at the start while the rest trickled in. It was always a good time.

I greeted a few people I cared to speak to and ignored anyone else who tried to speak to me. Asher always made fun of me because he couldn't understand why I threw parties when I hated people so much. Honestly, I just liked to people watch. These dumb assholes didn't know half the stupid crap they did when they were drunk.

But I did.

If I could get it on camera, that was even better.

I wasn't above using it for leverage when needed. Most of the time it was a cheating boyfriend or girlfriend. Sometimes it was someone who pissed me off. Sometimes it

was as simple as I didn't have the time for some dumb assignment, and I needed a paper written. These people were my pawns, and they knew that when they showed. It was kind of like the silent deal they made when they walked through the door.

They accepted the invite to one of Damian Wolfe's parties, and they accepted any of the consequences that came with it.

I made my way over to the bar and grabbed a cup before helping myself to one of the chilled kegs. Asher and Trent walked over, and I set two more cups on the bar.

"Looks like a good turnout," Trent said as he reached for the cup. He poured himself a beer and took a big drink.

"Try to hold your liquor this time, lightweight," I said before taking a drink.

"Oh, shut up," Trent said. "It's a fucking party dude. Speaking of which, the pajama party theme was a great idea. Look how many half-naked girls are running around here," he said.

I looked around, appreciating exactly that. There were some wearing lacy nighties, some wearing a football jersey shirt with boy short panties, some with a men's long-sleeve white button-up shirt and panties, and even a few in short-shorts and a tank top or sports bra.

It was beautiful.

"Just wait until they get a few drinks in and decide to hit the pool," I said.

There was an infinity pool out back that spanned from one end of the house to the other. The sides were clear, and when you were in the basement, you could see people swimming. It was amazing. Definitely a lot of fun. For my birthday this year, I

hired some girls to swim while we threw a party downstairs. With the pool lit up, it was sexy.

“Anyone wanna take bets on who the first fight will be?” Michael said as he walked up.

Asher laughed. “Probably one of you idiots. Usually is.”

“Hey! I’m on my best behavior tonight. I’m on the lookout for a lackey this year. I had to retire the one I had last year,” Michael said, looking around. “The end of summer party is always prime real estate. Everyone gets twice as shitfaced, and they mess up twice as bad. Plus, timing’s great. You get them the whole year.”

“Looking for someone to blackmail, eh?” I said, taking another drink.

He nodded. “Yeah. I gotta find just the right kid, though. You get one that’s too scared, they eventually crack under the pressure and rat you out. Usually to a friend who’s not a chickenshit who will tell someone important.”

“Eh, same thing if you get one too strong-willed,” Trent said. “I made that mistake last year. Damn near got suspended.”

I shook my head. “Amateurs.” I looked around for the perfect target. It didn’t take long. “There.” I pointed over by the snack table to a guy from the golf team. His father was some rich dick banker. Fucked over a lot of people for his fortune. “Chad.” I always said his name with a snotty asshole accent, the same one I imagined his father speaking with. Just like I imagined him with khaki shorts, a white polo, and a dusty pink cardigan tied around his shoulders.

It amused me.

Especially since Chad wasn't very far from that very description, so I assumed he picked it up from Daddy.

"Why him?" Michael asked.

I sighed and put my arm around his shoulder. "You see, I know personally just how good of a bitch he can be. Last year, his billion-dollar trust fund baby girlfriend thought he cheated on her at one of my parties. She's a goodie two shoes who would never be allowed to step foot in my parties. Oh, no-no-no. Daddy would never allow it."

Asher stepped forward; his arms crossed over his chest. "Yeah, so Chad declares open season at every one of them like a fucking moron. Last year at the Halloween party, that jackass hooks up with a sophomore. Some new girl from New York. Damian got it all on video."

"Mmmhmm." I smiled triumphantly. "Kelly came to me and asked me about it, knowing I would jump at the chance to destroy dear old Chad, but I covered for him, and she believed it. He asked me why, and I showed him the video. He was my bitch for the entire rest of the year. Trust me... he's your guy."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:24 am

Michael's eyes lit up. "Fantastic."

He looked like he was about to say something else, but he was quieted when Chad cocked his head to the side to check out the ass of Natalie Brewer as she walked by. His expression changed, and I could tell the hunt was on. Looking around, Chad made sure no one was watching him before heading off in Natalie's direction.

"Uh oh," I said. "You better run, Michael. He already caught the scent of his next prey. Though, I don't think Nat will buy it. She has higher standards than fucking Chad."

Asher shrugged. "Even if he strikes out, you could still catch him hitting on her and trying to hook up with her."

Michael quickly refilled his cup before giving a half-assed two-finger salute and walking away. "See you ass hats later," he called back over his shoulder.

I laughed. "Oh, man. I hope he nails him again. I'd laugh my ass off. I hate that bastard."

"Why Damian," Trent said. "It's so kind of you to look after dearest Kelly."

I snorted. "I'm not looking out for shit. Kelly knows I hate him. When she came to me and asked about it, she told me if he'd done it, she wanted to sleep with me to get him back."

Asher's brows rose. "And you still told her he didn't? I have to say, I'm impressed."

I shrugged. “You know me. Always looking out for the best solution. I’d have Kelly for one night if I ratted him out. Instead, I covered for him and made him my little bitch for an entire school year. Trust me, I didn’t lose anything.”

“Well, I’m sure all of this is fascinating, but Damian, can I talk to you for a sec?”

I groaned and closed my eyes the second I heard her voice. I figured she’d show. After all, I invited her. She was always invited. But that didn’t mean I wanted her anywhere near me.

“Harper, can’t you see I’m busy? I’m trying to figure out which girl I’m going to break in tonight instead of you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Ha-ha-ha. You’re brilliant and oh-so offensive. Truly. I’m offended. Now, will you please come with me? I need to talk to you.”

Annoying or not, she looked cute. She had her hair pulled up in a ponytail that I knew took entirely too long for her to fix, and she had the no-makeup-makeup look going on. It suited her. She wore a loose fitting, white, cropped t-shirt and white boy short underwear. Looking down, I could see the outline of her pussy.

I sighed heavily as I looked over at Asher and then over to Trent. They both gave Harper sarcastic smiles and walked away. I wasn’t about to do anything she asked me to do. I’d do it my way.

“What?” I asked when the guys walked over to the dessert table. I immediately saw Asher freak out over the lemon bars.

“I need a favor,” she said flatly.

My eyes widened, and my brows lifted as a devious smile crept across my lips.

“A favor you say.”

She rolled her eyes again. I was pretty sure they were on a timer. “Yes. A favor. And before you say anything, I think you should know this one won’t even put you out. It’s right up your alley. In fact, if I hadn’t come to you with it, I think you’d have jumped at the opportunity for yourself.”

My eyes narrowed as I leaned back on the bar. “You have my attention.” I turned and poured myself a shot of tequila. I decided to pour her one, too.

She took the shot and downed it faster than I imagined. Whatever the favor was, it was obvious she was nervous about it.

“Well, this certainly is interesting,” I said. “You seem rather nervous, despite this favor being right up my alley.”

“Trust me, I’m not nervous about the favor. I’m nervous about something else.” She took a deep breath and took a step closer. “There’s this girl starting at Crestview this year. Her name is Temperance Wilder. I need you to get rid of her.”

I looked at her with confusion. “Get rid of her? Like...how? Because I’m fresh out of hit contracts.”

She groaned, her eyes closing as she rubbed the bridge of her nose. She stalked toward the bar and grabbed the bottle and poured another shot before downing it as fast as the first.

“No, you absolute donkey. I need you to do what you do best. Get under her skin. Destroy her life. Rip it apart. Make her wish she never stepped her trailer trash ass onto school property or into California. Get. Rid. Of. Her. Make her leave.”

What an odd request. Don't get me wrong, she'd had a couple of enemies in the past she pointed in my direction so she could watch me have my fun, but she'd never asked me to go straight diabolical on someone.

"Who is this girl? Why do you care so much?" I asked.

She gave a light huff of laughter, but it was obvious she found nothing funny. "Don't worry about that. Just know that she fucked with the wrong one, and she has this coming. I want her gone. She needs to go back where the fuck she came from."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:25 am

I downed the last of my beer and sat my cup on the bar before turning back to her. I leaned against it and crossed my arms over my chest. “And exactly why would I do this for you? Don’t get me wrong, I’ve enjoyed our little games in the past. They were fun. But this? This sounds like it’s going to require sometime. Someeffort. Getting under someone’s skin is easy, but going catastrophic? That requires a lot of planning. I have a lot of shit to focus on this year. So, tell me... What’s in it for me? And it better be good, or I’m not biting. I’ve got better shit to do with my time.”

She inhaled deeply and blew it out hard. For several moments, she stared at the ceiling while making a rather annoyed expression. “This.This is what I was nervous about.”

I smiled. “Oooh! I see! So, you already anticipated this, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Then that means you came prepared.” I stood up straight and clapped my hands together. “Alright. Let’s have it. What was the grand prize you came up with that you thought was good enough to win me over?”

She looked at me, one of her eyebrows raised. “Me.”

Shock rolled across my face again, my brows raising. “I’m sorry, what? You? You how? I’m going to need you to explain. In graphic detail, if you don’t mind.”

“Uuugh, God!” she groaned out. “I do. I do mind.”

She paused before taking a step closer. She put both of her hands on my chest and looked into my eyes. Her expression was sarcastic and annoyed, but it also revealed something I'd waited a long time to see.

Defeat.

"If you do this for me," she started, leaning in so her tits pressed against my chest. "I'll submit. I'll play your little game. I'll be your little toy."

"For how long?" I asked. "Because a single night won't do. This job could take days, weeks, or even months. I don't know a fucking thing about this girl, but if you haven't been able to get rid of her?" I laughed. "Yeah. I'd have to guess she's pretty fucking stubborn."

She rolled her eyes again. I was impressed it had taken this long. "She is. I fucking hate her. Look, you tell me what you want."

I thought for a moment, and I could feel her radiating with irritation. "Three months. I want you collared. Daily."

Her eyes widened. "What? No. No way! I was thinking a couple of weeks. Three fucking months? Are you kidding me? And collared? I'm not a fucking dog, Damian."

I shrugged, lifting my palms up as I did. "See, I would beg to differ. You're here begging like one. You offered to submit like one. I'd say that makes you my pet. Three months. Take it or leave it. That's the cost."

Her nostrils flared. "Fine. Deal."

I smiled. "Pleasure doing business with you. Now, if you would be so kind, please send me a photo and any information you have."

She pulled her phone from her bra and unlocked it. Within seconds, my phone vibrated in my pocket.

“There’s her picture. I’ll write up what I know and email it to you.” She started to turn, but turned back. “You’re a real dick, you know that?”

I gave her a wide, sarcastic smile. “Yeah, and you’re about to get very acquainted with that dick. I’m going to enjoy breaking you down. I need to think of a sexy dog name for you. Cujo? Cerberus? Hmm. I’ll have to get back to you on that.”

She grunted in anger and turned to stomp away. I laughed loudly and motioned for the guys to come back.

“That certainly looked interesting,” Asher said.

“Oh, yes. Yes, it was.” I pulled out my phone and opened her text message. “Wow,” I said as I looked over the photo. For a goth chick, that Temperance girl was smoking. I already couldn’t wait to meet her.

“What’s up?” Trent asked.

“Ah, yes. Well, Miss Harper has struck a deal. I need to absolutely obliterate someone for her, and she will be my broken little bitch for three months. She even agreed to be collared. She’s going to be really pissed when I get her one with an actual chain ring on it and put one of those little bone-shaped nametags on it with the pet name I give her.”

“Who’s the target?” Asher asks.

“Some new girl.” I turned the phone around. “Her name is Temperance Wilder. The deal was for me to get under her skin, destroy her life, and make her hate it here so

badly she leaves. Now that I've seen her, I think I might take some other liberties to breaking her along the way. She looks like she'd be lots of fun."

Trent looked half drunk, with his glassy eyes, slouched and overly relaxed posture, and mild stumbling, but he also looked excited. He always found my extracurriculars amusing. Asher, on the other hand, looked mortified.

"What?" I asked. "You look like I killed your cat."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:25 am

He shook his head as he stared at the phone. “No.”

“No what?” I asked, confusion on my face.

“No to her. You can’t fuck with her.”

His voice sounded firm. Final. Like there was to be no further discussion.

“Excuse the fuck out of me?” I said, locking my phone and putting it back in my pocket. “And why the hell not?”

His eyes locked on mine, and I could see the seriousness in them. “Not...her.”

My eyes narrowed for a moment. “Wait... Do you know this girl?”

“Yes. I met her a couple weeks ago, and I saw her again while she was registering at school. I saw Harper waiting on her, and I should have known the fucking second you said Harper wanted someone destroyed it would be her. Why the fuck else would Harper be hanging around someone like her? She’s nothing like Harper.”

“You seem pretty set on this,” I said.

He nodded. “I am. I’m serious, man. Leave her be. Please, not this one. I don’t ask you for shit, but I’m asking now.”

I shrugged. “Look, I’m sorry. I can’t back out of a deal. You know how it is.” He opened his mouth to protest, but I held up a hand to stop him. “Wait, wait, wait. How

do you feel about a wager?"

Anger etched across his face. "What?"

"A wager," I repeated. "Look, you want her, and so do I. We've shared our toys in the past, but it seems like you're a little upset about this particular one. So, here's the deal. Let's see which one of us she chooses, shall we?"

"She's not a dog to be called by both of us to see who she runs to," Asher said with disgust.

I shrugged. "You know, that's thesecondtime I've heard something to that effect tonight, and I'll tell you the same thing I told her.I beg to differ. That's the deal. You either play along with the bet, or I just dive right in on day one, break her, and you'll be forgotten all about. We both know I'm more than capable.."

"Why the fuck wouldn't I just warn her?" he asked.

"Come on, now," I said. "You wouldn'treallychoose a girl you don't know over your best friend, would you? Besides... If you ruin the game, you ruin my prize. Ruining my prize means me needing a new target. Trust me when I say, you don't want me to choose a new target."

My voice had an edge to it, one he both heard and understood. He knewexactlywho I was talking about, and it stopped him.

"Fine," he ground out. "You win. Just so you know, I'm not happy about this."

I smiled. "You may not be, but I sure as fuck am. Let the games begin!"

I clapped him on the shoulder and headed off toward the pool. It looked like it was livening up back there, and I couldn't wait to take a victory lap with my consolation

prize of the evening.

Temperance Wilder, welcome to Crestview.

Your life is about to be a living hell.

And you are about to be mine.