



All My Broken Pieces

(FindingLight #2)

Author: *Kitty Rose*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Sinful desires.

The need to be the perfect child.

A war between what she knows in her soul and what years of conditioning have led her to believe.

Can Fallon break past the pressures to live what her family believes to be a “righteous path” so she can be with the woman she loves? Or will she succumb to the wants of others, and sacrifice her own happiness in the process?

All My Broken Pieces is a dark sapphic romance that follows the story of two unlikely companions trying to find their love amidst a world that views it as inherently sinful. This book contains dark romance themes, including violence and sexual content, as well as a look into religion and the pain of accepting yourself, even if that means losing everything.

This is book 2 in the standalone FindingLight series and can be read on its own, but it is recommended to read the books in order to avoid spoilers.

Please check the content warnings before proceeding. While the story does end in a HEA, it is a very hard road to get there.

Total Pages (Source): 54

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

Two years ago

I follow closely behind Killian, my mind wandering back to the boy we just murdered. I usually enjoy the thrill of the kill, something about the brutality of ending another person's life just gets me going, but this time was different. Instead of the usual high I got as his end approached, a heavy weight dragged me down.

I hate to admit it to myself, but I even sniffled a little as I watched Killian snap his neck. Not that I'd ever admit that to anyone else. I'd deny that shit and threaten anyone who dared to question me. But, in all honesty, there may have been a wayward tear or two I had to hastily wipe away.

Pushing aside the unwanted memory, I come to a stop behind Killian as he pushes the button for the elevator. After a few moments of stilted silence, the elevator doors slide open and we climb inside to begin the long journey up to his penthouse.

I had mentioned an interest in moving into the building a while ago and the ball's in motion. Just waiting on a few more final pieces to fall into place and then it'll be home sweet home for me and mine.

And by mine I mean my adorable little Sir Ichabod, my pride and joy.

Some people may think having a chinchilla is strange, but to those people I say, what crawled up your ass and died ?

I've been having to deal with such a judgmental person when it came to my application for my condo. Turns out fancy-schmansy places don't immediately love non-exotic exotic pets, even if they're totally legal to own in the great state of Washington. Not that I own my precious little Sir Ichabod, but that's all semantics.

The elevator dings and opens up to the vast condo. I follow Killian out and notice his spitfire woman bouncing on her feet holding hands with another girl. My breath hitches as my eyes take in the beautiful stranger before me.

She's dressed in an oversized sleep shirt, a simple geometric pattern along the front and back. The fabric falls just shy of her knees and my eyes zero in on the exposed flesh popping out with each leap.

Well I'll be damned.

A smile spreads across my face, a renewed excitement builds as I get lost in her beauty. My grin fades when Killian storms toward the two, all but shouting, "What the fuck?"

The girls stop their giddy celebration and turn toward the imposing man stomping his way over.

I can't help but roll my eyes.

The audacity of men. Always thinking they're the most important person in the room.

I tune out most of the conversation between Killian and his angry woman, my focus centered on the beauty trying to make herself as small as possible.

Fiddling with the hem of her shirt dress, her ashy blonde hair falls forward, draping across her face. She slumps her shoulders, hunching just slightly. A small burst of my

own anger flares that she feels the need to hide.

Funneling my rage into humor instead of a sharp stabby stab, I chuckle, “Oh, don’t mind him, he’s just grumpy because we got shot at.” I feel a wave of satisfaction as my simple statement only adds fuel to the flames of fury building between the two lovebirds.

Serves you right. Don’t you know it’s rude to fight in front of guests?

My eyes trail back to the beautiful nymph.

Especially visitors like her.

The “happy” couple continue their arguments, something about it not being a big deal blah blah blah . I tune them out until I hear a melodic sound that is going to take center stage in every dream and fantasy I have for the rest of time.

“Ava, I think I’m going to take off.” The otherworldly creature murmurs, keeping her gaze averted, even from her friend.

My eyes narrow as I watch the interaction.

Ava steps up and wraps her arms around the small woman, hugging her tightly and whispering something into her ear, earning a nod. They pull away and the beauty begins gathering her things. She turns toward the elevator, arm raised to slip on a jacket.

Her eyes meet mine and I forget how to breathe. My entire world becomes the two orbs holding me captive. An eternity nestled in the green spheres.

Ava steps between us, breaking the spell, and I have to fight against the urge to rip

her throat out for the intrusion. “Fallon. Babe.” My teeth clench at the endearment leaving her lips.

I find my feet moving as I’m pulled by an invisible thread. Wanting her attention back on me, no needing her entire focus, I call out, “Hey there, I’m Arriana.” I offer her a blinding smile as I close the distance.

Her head ducks and she peers up at me through her lashes, making my heart stutter within my chest. “Fallon.” She whispers.

Fallon.

I heard Ava say it, but the name on the lips of this creature, in her melodic voice, captivates me. I’m spellbound as I take the last few steps to close the distance between us. “Fallon?” I repeat, loving the way the name feels in my mouth. She nods again, her blonde hair cascading down her shoulders swims around her with the movement. “Hmm, I like that. I like it a lot.” I murmur, brushing up against Ava as I come to a halt.

Running my gaze down her body again, I slowly rake my eyes back up before meeting hers. “Want me to walk you out? Not safe for a beauty such as yourself to travel alone at night.” I wink at her, the corner of my lips curving up into a smirk. Fallon’s face flames at the attention.

Darting her eyes to the other woman, who still hasn’t gotten the hint, she looks back at me and inclines her head. “Yes.” My breath catches at the word. Never before have three letters meant so much to me. “I’d like that very much, thank you.”

My smile is blinding as I gesture to the elevator. “After you.” I half bow, earning a soft giggle that I make my new life mission to hear as often as possible.

We climb into the elevator and I press the button to bring us down to the lobby. Fallon is back to fiddling with her clothes, trying to avoid any conversation. I allow her the silence as I take the opportunity to study her more.

Even under the baggy clothing, I can see her breasts pushing out against the fabric, her slim figure has small curves at her hips where the jacket falls. Her dainty feet are shoved into a pair of ballet flats and she has several rings on her fingers. Her pale skin shows the lack of exposure to the sun, a direct contrast to my own mocha complexion.

The doors ding open again, disrupting my inspection. I gesture for her to go first, following closely behind and enjoying the sway of her hips. My mouth waters as I imagine diving between her legs.

I bet she tastes just as sweet as she seems.

We make our way out to the parking lot and toward the bus stop. It would appear we are both city transportation bitches. As we climb onto the bus, I make a mental note to learn how to drive so I can treat this woman as the passenger princess she deserves to be.

The bus ride is full of awkward tension. I have to fight against the desire to claim her on the bus full of passengers, certain the fellow patrons wouldn't enjoy the show. Or they'd enjoy it too much.

When my stop approaches, I stand from the seat and lean over Fallon. Brushing my fingers down her face, I peer into her eyes, relishing in the pink blooms forming on her cheeks. "Till next time, mi vida ." She gasps at the endearment and I smirk. Pulling back, I walk down the narrow aisle and exit.

Turns out there's something else that can give me this feeling. A beautiful little

creature who has no idea what she just stumbled into.

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Fallon

Present day

Ohmygod she's gorgeous.

I can feel tears pricking behind my eyes as I watch my best friend walk down the aisle. The long fluffy dress accentuates her beautiful curves. Curves I would kill to have. The bodice of her dress dips low between her full breasts, forming a sweetheart neckline. Her long auburn, perfectly curled hair drapes over her bare shoulders.

I bite my lip as I study her.

The first time I laid my eyes on Ava, my heart stopped. She was equal parts beautiful and...awkward. Just like me.

My lips twitch at the memory of our first encounter and the ball of nerves I was. I almost didn't acknowledge her existence again after that, too embarrassed by my whole thing . But I'm so fucking glad I did it anyway.

My eyes drift over the crowd watching my best friend's descent down the aisle. I scan over the faces until I find the one I'm looking for. Until I find her .

Arriana is already watching me, her gaze running hungrily down my body. My eyes widen when they meet hers, bringing a smirk to her face as she slowly licks her lips.

Fuck me.

I fiddle with my glasses, needing something to distract me from the heat blooming low in my pelvis.

Even though it's been two years since we met, I still get butterflies every time she looks at me like that. Like she wants to eat me up. My very own big bad wolf.

A shy smile covers my face at the thought, straining as my cheeks bloom. A mental image of just how my wolf likes to eat flashes into my mind.

So not the time.

I mentally shake myself and return my attention to Ava. Before I can look away, I catch Arriana throw me a wink, as if she can read exactly where my mind is at. I shudder and quickly turn my head away.

This is going to be a long night.

I'm so beyond ecstatic for Ava and her man, but if I'm honest, all I want right now is to meet Arriana somewhere and beg her to tongue fuck me until I'm screaming.

Shifting my thighs against the growing pressure, I glance to my left. Killian stands next to the officiant, his eyes glistening with unshed tears and genuine adoration as he watches his bride. His fingers twitch like he's having to force himself to remain in place.

My smile widens at the sight. I'm so happy they have each other. Even though it took some shit to get here, the two are made for one another.

My eyes drift back to Arriana, the thought crossing my mind again. Like it does so often.

Are we meant for each other?

Before I can get too lost in the whirlwind of my anxiety, I return my focus to Ava and Killian as Ava comes to a stop before him.

“Hey, firecracker.” Killian murmurs, brushing his fingers down her cheek. He leans in to whisper something in her ear, making her shiver. Chuckling, he pulls back and holds out his elbow, escorting her to a stop before the officiant.

Clearing his throat, the man looks over the crowd. “Ladies and gentleman,” He starts, his voice booming in the large church. “Please take your seats.” As one, everyone sits down in the pews.

The officiant proceeds with the ceremony, but I don’t hear a word he says. My focus is on the way Ava and Killian are watching each other, the love shining in their glistening eyes. I gulp, trying to blink back my own tears.

I want that.

As the thought slips through, I find myself reminded of all the ones that have come up throughout the whole process leading up to the wedding. Thoughts that grow louder as the familiar church setting only serves to give them strength. Reminders that, while Ava and Killian can have this beautiful moment together, I can’t. Not really. Not in the way I would want.

“It’s just a phase.”

My mom’s words run through my mind.

“You’ll grow out of it. Settle down with a nice man.”

I bite my cheek, fighting back the emotions.

“Girls aren’t made to be with other girls. Man and woman. That’s what is right. Now get those thoughts out of your head.”

I can feel Arriana’s eyes on me, but I don’t look at her. I can’t look at her.

“You may kiss the bride.” The words float through my subconscious and I bring myself back to the present. My heart aches once again as I watch my best friend and her new husband lean into each other, my heart aches once again. I ignore it and clap wildly, letting the tears flow down my face.

People cry at weddings all the time.

Ava and Killian pull apart, panting for breath as they resist the urge to devour one another. A watery laugh bubbles from my chest, drawing their attention to me. Ava smiles, throwing me a wink.

Love you. I mouth at her. Her smile widens as she mouths the same back. Some of the heaviness on my chest lifts. This is her day, and I’m going to celebrate damnit.

“Hey, gorgeous.” Arms slip around my waist from behind. I lean back into Arriana’s embrace, releasing a sigh at her comforting touch. “Your poor friend.” She whispers, nuzzling my neck.

I dart my gaze around the room in search of Ava, Arriana’s cryptic words sending my thoughts into overdrive.

Does she know something? Did Killian do something stupid again?

My eyes narrow at said man, flashing back to the pain he had caused Ava. When she

finally broke down several months after it had happened and told me about his punishment , I wanted to rip his head clean off his shoulders. A pure hatred like I've never known filled me at her confession.

"It's okay, babe." Ava consoles me, like somehow I'm the one who needs it.

I shake my head, looking around for the asshole. "No. It's not."

"Fallon." She pleads, grabbing my hands. "He's more than made up for it, please trust me." I glare at our connection, trying to breathe past the rage. "I shouldn't have said anything." She mumbles, releasing my hands and tossing back the rest of her drink.

Slowly blowing out my breath, I grab her face between my hands. "Ava. You can tell me anything. " She blinks at me, her eyes filling with unshed tears. Smiling to try to alleviate some of her concern, I release her face and place my hands on my hips. "Doesn't mean I don't want to rip his balls off though."

She stares at me for several beats before bursting into laughter.

My mind returns to the present, watching the two with hawk eyes.

If he did something again, I will chop off his balls.

Chuckling at my furious state, Arriana runs her hands down my body. "I love when you get all protective." She murmurs, placing a kiss on my throat. "No need for the claws though, mi vida ."

I shiver at the term, still having just as strong of an effect on me now as the first time she used it.

"I simply meant that you are the most exquisite creature in this whole place." She

hums on a breath as she nuzzles my neck. Her hot breath against my skin has a shiver running down my spine.

I suck in a breath when she flicks out her tongue. The sensation of her subtly licking up my throat has me clutching the champagne flute in my hand.

“No offense to the lovebirds,” Arriana whispers, her lips brushing against my skin. “But you are the star tonight.”

I gasp as her fingers drift across my hip, brushing over the spot between my legs that is screaming for attention. “Ar-Arriana, we can’t.” My protest is barely a whisper, the need building inside so distracting I can hardly think of the words to stop her.

“Oh baby,” She chuckles, brushing my hair back and running her nose along my jaw. “We can and we will.”

Before I can protest again, she releases her hold on me, pulling an involuntary whimper from my throat at the sudden loss. Her husky laugh fills my ears, sending a thrill down my spine.

A smirk lifts her lips as she notices my shudder. The devilish look in her eyes has my stomach flipping and I try to subtly shift my legs to alleviate some of the growing pressure. “Here, let me help you.” Arriana slips her hand into mine, leading me through the throng of guests.

My heart beats erratically in my chest as we cross the room. I can imagine just what Arriana has in mind, and I want nothing more than to beg her to do just that. But as we pass by the officiant, who stayed long enough to snag some food, a familiar wave of guilt and shame wells up.

This is wrong.

Before I can get too lost in the thought, Arriana drags me into the bathroom. She flicks the lock shut behind her before turning toward me, her eyes on fire as she slowly walks us across the tiled room. My fluttering heart stops when my hips bump against the sink counter, the cool surface sending a thrill down my spine as the thin fabric of my dress does little to guard against the chill.

Arriana gently takes the glass still clutched in my hand, her fingers brushing against my skin. A jolt sparks at our connection, my oversensitized nerve endings lighting on fire at her gentle touch. Reaching behind me, she sets the champagne flute down.

I gulp as her chest brushes against mine with the movement, the sensation nearly too much. A persistent nagging tries to break past my overwhelming need, a reminder of where we are and what this moment promises to be.

My eyes dart toward the door, needing the confirmation that it's locked. The thrill of possibly being caught is at war with the shame I feel at my excitement.

We shouldn't.

Before I can voice my defeated thought out loud, I glance back at Arriana and find the words get caught in my throat.

Her heated gaze trails down my body, her bottom lip trapped between her teeth. “ Te necesito, mi vida. ” She murmurs, her voice almost pained.

I don't know Spanish, not really. But the way she says the words, I don't need to. Because I know. And something about the desperation in her tone has the guilt fading away.

“Please.” I beg, reaching for her as I give in to my own carnal desires.

In an instant she's on me, pushing my hips back against the counter, her mouth slamming against mine. We groan into each other, a desperate need funneling into the shared connection.

Arriana breaks the kiss, trailing her lips down my neck and chest. Hovering over my breast, she takes my pebbled nipple in her mouth, biting down hard over the fabric. I gasp, lifting my hips into her. "Please." I beg again, lost in the sensation of her hot breath and warm tongue gliding across my covered chest.

I bite back the disappointed noise as she sinks to her knees, the momentary loss of connection almost too much. My disappointment is quickly morphed into nervous anticipation as she grips the hem of my dress, slowly pushing the fabric up to my waist.

"Baby," She groans, her eyes hyper focused on the space between my thighs. "You're not wearing any underwear."

I can't stop the smirk that lifts my lips at her strangled words. Despite my earlier protests, I might have gone commando on purpose, hoping for a little fun later.

Glancing up at me, Arriana's eyes are on fire with the desire burning within her. "Fuck, you're going to be the death of me, mi vida. " On the last word, she leans forward and flicks her tongue on my clit.

I cry out, digging my fingers into her hair as she proceeds to devour my pussy.

This is what I needed.

My hips buck against her face, seeking more, seeking everything she'll give me. She chuckles against me, the vibrations sending a jolt to my core. "Don't worry, I've got you." She hums, shifting the dress to one hand. Sliding her free hand down, she

pushes a finger inside of my aching pussy.

I groan loudly as her finger slowly slides inside, the feeling both too much and not enough. “More.” I whimper, rotating my hips.

Fueled by my desperation, she adds another finger, curling the digits until she finds that spot . The one that has me seeing stars. I bite down on my lip, trying to stifle the cries of pleasure she is drawing out with each flick of her tongue and pump of her fingers.

She shifts her eyes up to mine and I get lost in the chestnut orbs staring at me with something I can’t accept. Something I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to accept.

Squeezing my eyes shut to push off the unwanted thoughts, I focus on the feeling of her worshiping my body. I clear my mind of every thought and allow the sensations to take over.

“That’s it, baby.”

A moan slips through my lips at her praise. Her loving attention bringing me closer and closer to the release I so desperately crave.

“Come for me.”

My body tenses at her whispered command, only a few more strokes of her fingers needed before I cascade over the edge. I shudder through the orgasm, clinging to her as the sensations wrack my body. My heart aches as the last of the trembles stop, my mind replaying the look in her eyes as she stared up at me from her knees.

This isn’t fair to her.

I try to push aside the thought, not wanting to ruin this moment.

Movement pulls me from my thoughts and I blink my eyes open to see Arriana gently placing a soft kiss on my hip before pushing to her feet. She pulls her fingers from me in the same motion, and I find myself riveted by the sight of her slowly pushing the same fingers into her mouth. My eyes widen, another wave of desire welling up at the groan she releases at the flavor of me .

“Exquisite.” She hums, leaning forward to capture my lips with hers. “So fucking perfect.”

Arriana readjusts my dress, effectively hiding away what we had just done behind the lush fabric. After a quick inspection, she takes my hand in hers and turns to leave.

“Wait.” I call, planting my feet. “What about you?”

Arriana stops, turning back to me and brushing my hair back. “I’m fine, this was about you . ” Leaning close, she whispers in my ear, “I’ll get my fun tonight back at home.”

My thighs shift at the promise of just what kind of fun she has in mind. Swallowing down the excited anticipation, I bob my head and wordlessly follow her out.

Home.

The word repeats in my head the rest of the night, each time our eyes meet or she brushes her fingers over my body.

She feels like home.

I shake my head, wishing I could keep her, keep this little fairytale we have going.

“It’s just a phase.”

“It’s not real. You’ll find a decent man one day and settle down.”

Each whispered memory drags me down from the high of our shared moment. The cold splash of reality a painful reminder of who I am, who I’m destined to be.

It’s not real. It can’t be.

My eyes drift to Ava and Killian once more.

One day I’ll have to do that, have that.

Glancing at Arriana out of the corner of my eye, I chew on my bottom lip.

This isn’t real. I can’t be in love with her. It’s just lust.

With my heart breaking, I down glass after glass of bubbling alcohol, praying it will dampen the suffocating emotions.

“It’s just a phase.”

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Arriana

Three weeks later

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I grumble under my breath, staring at the phone in my hand.

Things have been...tense. I don't know what happened, but something happened at that wedding. Fallon has been more and more distant every day since and it's been driving me crazy. I know it's not technically their fault, but I can't help but blame Killian and his wife . Which has made work a little stressful.

Drewbie

New job - this one would probably be best if you both handle it

Grandpa

Ok

I sigh, running my hand down my face.

This is work. Separate your personal shit. Plus, there is the promise of some murder and that always helps.

I tuck my phone away, opting to reply later. Turning toward the hall, I make my way down to the extra bedroom, knowing I'll find her there. I come to a stop outside the

room, leaning against the doorframe and watching her.

Fallon is scrawled across the large cushioned chair she insisted on getting, claiming it was a reading necessity. Not that I minded, I would get her the moon if she asked. Her long blonde hair has been tied up into a messy bun, her thin frame covered in a pair of baggy sweats and an old ratty t-shirt.

She's never looked more beautiful.

She doesn't notice my presence as I study her, too lost in the story. Her lip is trapped between her teeth, eyes scanning the words. She pushes up her glasses as she flips the page, holding her hand to her chin and leaning closer to the book.

My mind drifts, desire pulsing through me as I imagine what she must be reading on those pages. Sure, I might not be entirely into all the shit she reads. Cocks never really having been my thing. But it gets her going, and for that I'm grateful my girl has a bit of a porn addiction. Word porn. But porn nonetheless.

Unable to keep my hands to myself any longer, I push off the frame and make my way inside.

Must be a good book.

The thought crosses my mind as I come to a stop beside her and she's still yet to acknowledge or even notice me. Reaching a hand out, I trail my fingers down her throat.

"Oh fuck!" She squeaks, nearly toppling out of her chair as she slams the book closed. Her cheeks bloom at being caught reading her naughty book.

I chuckle, bending to place a soft kiss on her cheek. "Hi, baby." Raising an eyebrow,

I nod at her book. “Enjoying your story?” A smirk crosses my face as hers reddens further.

Fidgeting, she sets the book down, avoiding my gaze. “Um, yeah. It’s good...” She still refuses to look at me and it doesn’t sit right.

Grasping her chin, I pull her face toward me, forcing her eyes on mine. “You know I don’t care what you read, right?” I ask, genuinely concerned by her reaction.

Chewing on her bottom lip, she nods and relaxes just the slightest bit. “Yeah. Sorry. Force of habit, I guess.” She mumbles.

I study her a moment longer before I’m satisfied that it’s the truth. “Okay, baby.” Closing the distance between us, I brush my lips against hers. “As long as you’re happy, I’m happy.”

A quiet snuffle reaches my ears and I pull back, cupping her face between my hands. Fallon averts her gaze again, her eyes darting to the side. The same concern I’ve felt in the weeks since the wedding returns at her avoidance.

Stroking my thumbs, I wait for her to voice what’s wrong. When she still doesn’t say anything, I release a small sigh, sinking to my knees in front of her. “What is it, mi vida ?”

Peering down at me, she snuffles again. “I just...I-” Before she can finish her sentence, the sound of my ringtone fills the room. Her lips snap shut, as if the sound broke whatever courage she had.

Grumbling to myself, I slip one hand into my pocket to pull out my phone, keeping the other on her face. Without taking my eyes off hers, I answer the phone. “What?” I snap into the line.

A chuckle sounds, both further irritating and relaxing me simultaneously. “Well, hello to you too, Ree.” Andrew laughs.

Stroking my thumb on Fallon’s cheek, I blow out a breath. “Hey, Drewbie. Now’s not really the best time.”

“Oooo are you with the missus?” He quips, making me smirk.

Fallon may not be my wife yet, but she will be one day. When she’s ready.

Keeping my eyes on hers, I answer, “Matter of fact, yes I am.”

He laughs again, one of those deep belly laughs that are impossible not to join in on. My lips twitch at the force it takes to hold my own back. Fallon cocks her head at me, curiosity filling her expression.

“Damn, maybe I should have FaceTimed you instead.” He teases.

Rolling my eyes, I push to my feet and place a soft kiss on Fallon’s forehead before turning to leave the room. “Yeah, you would, you pervert.” I quip back, walking down the hall. “What’s with the call?” I ask once I’m out of Fallon’s earshot.

I hate keeping secrets from her, but I can’t share this part of my life. Not after what she went through and how much it still affects her.

“Ar-Arriana.” Fallon sobs into the phone.

The sound breaks something inside of me. I’m no longer a human, the sound of her broken cries turns me into a cold-blooded machine with one directive.

Destroy whoever caused her tears.

“Ple-please help me.”

“ Mi vida , I’m coming for you. Do you hear me?” Before she can respond, the sound of a struggle filters through the line before Charles' voice sounds.

“Hello, Arriana.”

My fingers tighten on the phone. “Don’t you fucking touch her. If I find a single hair-”

“Save your threats. It’s not you or her I want.” He sighs, cutting off my very real threat.

It’s both a pity and probably for the best, because the ideas I have flowing through my mind at what I’m going to do to the man who dared to touch what was mine...Let’s just say he might do something drastic to get away, and I really can’t have that.

“Tell Killian that if he doesn’t want this girl’s blood on his hands he needs to come to me. His life for hers.”

My eyes dart between Killian and Ava. I can’t help but wonder briefly if he would be willing to offer himself up. But, as I watch their protective stances as the two cling to one another, I know it’s a pointless thought.

Returning my focus to the man who just moved his way to the top of my hit list, I can’t help but chuckle. “Oh, you are stupid.” A near hysterical rage bubbles within me. “You might have been able to handle one of us, but both of us?” My laughter dies off as I warn, “You’ve just signed your own death warrant. Touch her and I’ll show you what crazy really looks like.”

Taking a bottle of water out of the fridge, I chug it and try to remain focused on the present.

She's okay.

I remind myself, even as my stomach churns at the lie it is.

She may be physically okay, but she's not been the same since. Fallon still often wakes up choking in the middle of the night, gasping for air and looking around wildly with sightless eyes.

My fingers tighten on the bottle, splashing some of the water onto the floor.

If I could take away the memories, the nightmares, I would. But I can't. Instead, I can only try to protect her from further trauma.

Andrew says something but my mind hasn't quite returned. "One more time."

Sighing like I'm the biggest inconvenience in his life, Andrew repeats his question, "You down for the job? They need it done ASAP."

My eyes dart toward the hall, an uneasiness settling in my chest. Pushing it aside, I grunt, "Yeah, count me in."

I can practically hear Andrew's grin in his voice as he exclaims, "Great! You're the best, Ree!" Rolling my eyes, I disconnect the call.

I swear there's no way he's in his thirties. The man acts like he's nineteen half the time, and the other half? Well, let's just say Killian isn't the only one who can get a tad grumpy.

Rubbing my eyes, I chug the rest of the water and head into our bedroom to quickly change.

My mind keeps wandering back to Fallon's face as she was finally about to share what has been eating her up.

I should go back, should go see what she wanted to say.

But I can't.

A part of me knows I don't want to know.

Hopefully by the time I'm back, whatever it was won't be bothering her anymore.

I know it's a pointless hope, but I can't help but cling to it anyway. I've never been great at delving into the deep stuff, and I'm terrified that I won't have the right words to work through whatever this is.

So, instead, I close the door behind me and pretend everything is okay.

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Fallon

I hear the door shut, signaling Arriana's exit. My chest tightens at the fact she left without saying goodbye. It's not like her and I know I'm the reason for the sudden change.

Staring blankly down at the page, I try to get myself to focus.

he thrusts his cock in deeper, the movements pushing me further up the bed. "Oh god." I groan, clawing at the blanket.

"There is no god here." He growls, slapping my ass and making me yelp. My cock bounces against my abdomen with each thrust of his hips. Reaching around my body, he takes my shaft in his hand, stroking in time with his thrusts. "That's it, baby boy. Cry out for me."

My body responds to his praise, my balls tightening up at my impending release. "Oh fuck." I gasp as

I rub my eyes, trying to focus on the story. I fucking love these two. Their relationship has been one of pain and love that sucked me in from the get go, but I can't keep my mind on the hot as fuck sex right now.

It might seem a little strange that I would enjoy reading male/male romance, but my taste in romance doesn't discriminate by pairings.

Love is love after all.

My heart aches at the thought, a part of me wondering why I can so easily accept that in my stories but not in my own life.

It's not the same.

Chewing on my bottom lip, I close the book and set it aside, not wanting to ruin my enjoyment of the story by my sour mood. I push to my feet and slip on a pair of worn slippers before heading toward the door. Making sure to grab my keys, I lock the door and head toward the elevator.

My foot taps while I wait impatiently for it, a relieved breath escaping my lips when the doors finally ding open. I slip inside, pushing the button for the top floor and wait. Again.

Once it gets to the floor, I pound on the elevator doors, seriously regretting not grabbing my phone.

God, I'm so stupid sometimes.

The doors slide open to reveal a very confused Ava. Her expression changes from cautious to ecstatic when her gaze lands on my disheveled appearance. "Fallon!" She squeals, pulling me into her arms.

"What's going on?" Killian's voice echoes from down the hall.

Ava looks at me, sucking her lower lip between her teeth. "Give me one sec." She whispers before darting down the hall.

I can hear their muffled voices but can't make out what is said until Killian bellows, "You did what?!" Quickly followed by Ava shushing him.

My eyes narrow, a flash of his last overreaction going through my mind. In the spirit of concern for my friend, I slip down the hall so I can hear them.

“It was just Fallon.” Ava soothes.

Killian sighs heavily. “I know, baby girl. But you’ve got to be careful.”

Silence fills the hall before the distinct sound of lips on lips reaches me. Taking that as my cue, I sneak back out to the living area to wait.

The positive of living in the same building as my best friend? Her literally always being an elevator ride away. The negative? I keep getting her in trouble with my forgetful ass.

This isn’t the first time I’ve forgotten to call ahead, and, if I’m honest, probably won’t be the last. To be fair, it’s not entirely my fault. Who designs a private elevator to allow you to travel to their home without a key lock required before even reaching the floor?

Seems like poor planning to me.

A few minutes later, Ava comes back into the room, her cheeks flushed. I quirk an eyebrow at her and she simply chuckles in response, smoothing down her rumpled clothing. “I’ll tell you later.” She whispers, shooting a knowing look in Killian’s direction.

Nodding my head, I fidget with my sweatpants’ drawstring, avoiding her gaze.

Maybe this was a mistake.

I find myself regretting coming because now I’m going to have to talk about it. But I

need so desperately to get all of this out of my head.

Glancing up at her, I find Ava watching me, a crease in her forehead from her slight frown. “What’s wrong, babe?” She asks softly, stepping toward me.

I shrug, returning my focus to the string, picking at the little plastic piece on the end.

“Fallon.” Ava’s voice is more stern this time. Stopping in front of me, she nudges my chin up with her left hand.

My eyes flash to the ring nestled on her finger. It’s a gorgeous ring, one that fits her so well. It’s a simple design with diamonds running along the band, a ruby stone in place of the typical diamond focal point. When I heard that Killian got the ruby in lieu of a diamond because she was his firecracker, his flame that ignited his soul and lit his darkness. Well, I might have burst into tears.

Definitely blaming it on my hormones. Because I was absolutely PMSing at the time and I swear I cry at the drop of the hat when Aunt Flow is in town. So it was absolutely that and not that I was filled with equal parts joy and jealousy.

The same feelings well up inside me now, bringing tears to my eyes.

I wonder what ring Arriana would get me.

Shaking my head, I push aside the thought. It doesn’t matter, because we can’t.

“It’s just a phase.”

A hiccupped sob escapes my lips and Ava immediately wraps her arms around me. “Okay, we need to talk.” She insists, leaning back to hold my gaze. “Wine and ice cream?” I mumble my agreement with a quiet sniffle. Squeezing her arms, she

releases me and twirls on her heels, beelining for the supplies in the kitchen.

Killian strolls down the hall, his stoic gaze traveling over his wife and me. “You girls okay?”

Ava smiles at him sweetly. “We’re fine. Go do your thing.”

Clearly not buying her response, he narrows his eyes at me briefly before he crosses the room and pulls Ava into his embrace. “I can stay if you need me to.” He offers quietly, stroking her cheek.

Ava leans into his touch with a shake of her head. “No, we’re fine. Just girl stuff.” She promises.

He studies her for a moment before pressing his lips to hers. Pulling apart, he murmurs something too quiet for me to hear. Ava darts her eyes to me and back, a blush forming on her cheeks. Killian smirks, grabbing her ass and pressing their bodies closer together with a groan before reluctantly releasing her.

“Call if you need me.” He instructs, heading toward the elevator. Stepping inside after the doors open, he draws our attention once more. “And for the love of god, don’t open this for anyone.”

Ava’s blush deepens, and she turns away from him without a word. Killian sighs, leaning back against the elevator wall with a shake of his head as the doors slide closed.

“So,” Ava’s voice pulls my attention back to her. “Red or white?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

“Wai-wait.” The man gasps, lifting his hands in a useless shield.

I tilt my head, a manic grin covering my face. “You want to play some more first?” He looks at me with wide, horrified eyes.

“Crazy bitch.” Killian mutters behind me.

I tilt my head in his direction, my smile widening. “Oh, you love me, grandpa.” His jaw tightens at the nickname, sending a thrill through me.

He makes it too easy.

Chuckling to myself, I return my attention to the man kneeling before me. Normally I would know more about our targets, but I’ve been...distracted. My mind keeps wandering back to Fallon and what could be distressing her so much.

My irritation grows at my lack of answers and this man being the reason I had to leave in the first place. Cocking my head, I twirl the knife in my hand, running my gaze down his battered body.

He might have already paid a little bit for his part in this all. And by a little bit, I mean he may be missing some fingers, toes, and one ear.

What can I say, I’m upset.

Sniffing, he cowers away from my attention, as if making himself appear smaller will protect him from my wrath. I bend to a crouch, snapping my hand out to grip the back of his head. “Sorry to cut this short, but I’ve got places to be, people to see.” He opens his mouth to protest but doesn’t get far as I stab the blade through the side of his neck.

A sickening satisfaction fills me as I see the end pierce through the other side, his lips opening and closing soundlessly as he chokes on his own blood around the sharp knife.

Beautiful.

Killian makes a noise of disgust, pulling my focus back from the sight of the man’s life slipping away.

I don’t know why I find such joy in taking the life of another. It’s just something that’s always been part of me. I was enraptured with violence and death even as a child, constantly trying to sneak peeks at the grownup movies my brothers got to watch because they were older and boys.

The hypocrisy from my adoptive parents always irritated me. As if being a sixteen year-old-boy somehow makes you better suited to watch mangled and mutilated bodies on TV. I don’t get why it would be any different for a thirteen-year-old girl, but whatever.

It wasn’t until I was nineteen that I fully came into my own realization of how sweet ending another life could be.

I walk down the aisle, pushing the cart and bobbing my head to the music in my headphones.

I'm so lost in my mission to finish the shopping list that I don't catch the man following behind me until I've purchased all my things and begun my trek back home.

"Hey, sweet thing." He calls behind me, his voice loud enough to hear over the playlist in my ears.

My spine stiffens as I tug the headphones out and speed up my steps. I can hear the heavy thump of his footfalls as he continues his pursuit. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end at the feel of his breath ghosting over my skin moments before he grips my arm and yanks my body to face him.

"Don't ignore me now, pretty girl." The man drags his gaze down my body with a lick of his lips. "What do you say we have us a good time?"

I shake my head, backing away as I try to pull free from his hold. "N-no, I'm good." I snap back, cursing myself for the shake of my voice. The fear and frustration build as my back presses against a firm surface, effectively having cornered myself between him and one of the buildings in my attempt to break free.

"Don't be like that, baby." He growls, pressing his disgusting cock against me. I suppress a gag as I feel the hard length on my thigh.

Breathing through my nose, I glare up at him. "Back the fuck off." I snarl, my anger burning off the fear trying to creep up.

He looks down at me, reaching his free hand up to run it down my neck. My eyes dart around the empty sidewalk, wishing I hadn't come alone.

I thought I was fine. That no one and nothing could hurt me.

I was wrong.

His hand encircles my throat, pulling a shocked gasp from me. It was the wrong thing to do as his eyes darken at the sound, his cock twitching against my leg. “That’s it, make some noise for me.” He groans, leaning closer.

My body is frozen as I try desperately to remember what my brothers taught me during one of the few times we all got along.

“Go for the low blow.” Spencer chuckles, squaring off against our brother.

Cooper stands his ground, beckoning Spencer to take his best shot. “Yeah, it doesn’t matter if it’s the ‘coward’s way out’, Arri. You’ve just gotta distract them long enough to get away.”

“Yup yup, a swift kick to the balls will do that.” Spencer smirks as he flies forward, knocking Cooper to the ground.

I can hear their laughter echo in my head, their words giving me the strength I need to get out of this, to get away from him .

Shifting so I can try to knee him, I let out a frustrated noise when I can’t move. The bags of groceries slip from my hold as I uselessly push my palms against his chest. “Get off of me.” I demand, my voice cracking as my attempts to free myself do nothing.

Undeterred by my continued demands, the man reaches between us, sliding his zipper down. I grit my teeth as I hear the metal sliding, the sound bringing me closer and closer to his gross dick. Closing my eyes, I brace myself for what’s about to happen, for what I can’t fight against.

Just when I'm about to give up all hope, the man is suddenly gone.

I blink my eyes open, looking around in shock. My gaze lands on the man kneeling a few feet from me, his hand twisted back so far I'm surprised it hasn't snapped. He whimpers and cries, pleading to be released. My eyes shift and I gasp at the person beside him.

Dressed in all black like some vigilante, the stranger stands above my assailant. The little light shining from a nearby street lamp reflects off his head. His eyes are shadowed, but from the set of his jaw I can see the animosity rolling off of him.

He glares down at the asshole at his feet. "You like picking on helpless girls, do you?" He seethes, twisting the man's wrist further. The other man shrieks, trying uselessly to free himself.

Shifting his gaze toward me, the mysterious man calls, "You okay, princess?"

A wave of shame hits me at how weak I must seem right now. My earlier frustration growing once more that I required saving, that I had to rely on someone to swoop in. Swallowing down the emotions, I make a mental vow to never let myself be this helpless again.

With my new set determination, I jerk my head, willing the shake of my body to calm down.

The vigilante's eyes soften before he returns his furious gaze back to the sniveling man at his feet. "I should put you in the ground for this." He snarls, bending to a crouch next to him.

I catch sight of something reflective in his hand and find my feet moving of their own volition. A desire to make my attacker pay nearly as strong as the frustration at my

own helplessness. I can feel the anticipation growing with each step.

Coming to a stop beside him, I lay my shaky hand on the mystery man's shoulder, pulling his attention to me. "Ca-can I?" I ask, cursing myself for the tremble of my lips and stutter of my words.

He studies me for a moment before inclining his head and passing over the blade.

My fingers close around the handle and I feel a settling deep in my soul, as if this moment is years in the making. Hidden thoughts and fantasies of letting out some of the burning need for violence bubbling up.

Without a word, I snap my wrist forward and stab my would-be rapist in the heart. Or what I had hoped would be his heart. I must have missed as he doesn't crumple into a bloody heap as I expected, but rather howls and tries to pull away.

A soft chuckle sounds beside me. "Nice try, wanna go again?"

My jaw sets as a renewed determination takes over. I roll back my shoulders with a jerk of my head.

I can do this.

He grips the handle and rips it from the man's chest, blood trickling from the wound. Taking the offered blade once more, I run my gaze over the man's body, trying to figure out where to strike next.

It's so different doing this than I imagined, than any media has portrayed. I always thought I would instinctually know what to do, but it's become apparent I was wrong.

"The throat is always a good bet." The deep voice breaks through my thoughts,

pulling me back to the present. My eyes zero in on my assailant's throat, watching his Adam's apple bob as he repeatedly swallows. "If you stab right through, sometimes you'll be able to see the blade poke out the other side. It's a pretty brutal way to go."

Brutal.

I like the sound of that.

Moving my arm out to get as much momentum as I can, I slam my hand against the man's throat, the blade sinking into his flesh. Peeking around his head, I smile as I see the end poking out the other side of his neck.

My mystery savior turned murder sensei whistles beside me, drawing my attention to him once more. I turn and find his face covered in a wide grin. "That was pretty badass, princess." He chuckles, releasing his hold on the dying man. Extending his hand to me, his grin widens when I tentatively shake it. "Name's Andrew."

I swallow, glancing at the sputtering man lying on the pavement before looking back at Andrew. "Arriana."

Who knew that night would be the beginning of, well, everything. Shortly after that first meeting, Andrew and I became close friends and one thing led to another and now I'm a super badass hitwoman with Andrew as my business partner.

A grunt sounds beside me as Killian picks up the deceased man's body and gets to work cleaning up the crime scene.

Okay, a super badass hitwoman with two business partners, one of which might not be my biggest fan. But I'm working on that.

"Fallon came by." Killian says, shocking me out of my thoughts.

I narrow my eyes at him, confused why he's telling me this. He's not usually a wealth of information and I have to typically pry anything from him. "Okay?" I ask slowly.

Shrugging, he continues his task. "She seemed upset." He moves his eyes to mine and a shudder runs down my body at the look in them. "Thought you'd want to know."

Okay, something is definitely wrong.

And I need to find out what.

I don't respond to him, working quickly to help clean up so we can get the fuck out of here.

I knew it was a dumb idea leaving things how I did. Estúpida . So fucking stupid.

My stomach churns with an unfamiliar anxiety as we work, Fallon's downcast expression haunting me with each passing second. I'm practically buzzing by the time we climb back into the car we rode over together in. My knee bounces the entire way back to our shared building.

As soon as Killian puts the car in park, I leap from the vehicle and rush inside, brushing past the doorman on my way in. Jamming my finger against the elevator button, I chew on my fingernails as I wait.

Killian joins me, stepping into the lift without a word, the forever stoic man.

Unless it's his relationship on the line.

I suppress an eye roll at the familiar scene and how I had comforted him at the time, but alas, the man has no words of wisdom or comfort for me.

Of course not. Stupid men.

He inserts his key into the elevator, twisting to unlock the doors so they slide open to reveal his living area. His penthouse is fancier than mine, but I don't need all this, my nice two bedroom condo with a beautiful view of Seattle is enough for me and mine.

Rushing into the room, I look around wildly. Ava comes down the hall, her hair wrapped up in a towel. "Oh." She mumbles, coming to a stop when she sees me.

My eyes narrow and I take a step toward her. "Oh?" I echo, something about her reaction to seeing me doesn't sit right, beyond our usual slight animosity toward one another.

Gulping, she adjusts the waistband of her sleep shorts, shifting her eyes between Killian and me. "Did, um, did you talk to Fallon?" Her voice is barely above a whisper, genuine concern filling her eyes.

Taking another step closer, I grit my teeth. "No. Where is she?"

I don't know what she sees on my face, but whatever it is is enough to trigger her fight and flight response. Squaring her shoulders, she opts for fight. "She's not here." Ava snaps, crossing her arms.

Okay, this bitch.

Before I can react further, Killian steps around me, blocking her from my view. "Enough." He growls, jutting his arm toward the elevator. "She's not here so leave."

I puff my chest out at him, my body humming with fear fueled anger. Deciding it's not worth the effort to deal with them right now, I spin on my heel and leave. My heart is pounding erratically in my chest the entire ride down to my floor. By the time

I slide my key into the door and push inside the apartment, I'm surprised I haven't had a heart attack.

"Fallon? Baby?" I call, closing the door behind me.

Quiet cries reach me and I run.

Sprinting as fast as I can, I dash down the hall and skid to a stop in our bedroom, my head whipping around for the cause of her tears. I come up empty, finding the only person in the room is Fallon. She sits on the edge of the bed, wringing her hands in her lap with her head dipped forward, her hair hiding her face.

I move to take a step forward to comfort her when my eyes land on the suitcase sitting on the floor beside her. A strangled noise escapes my throat at the sight, pulling her attention to me. "Baby?" I croak, taking a shaky step toward her.

Fallon watches me, tears streaming down her face.

"What's going on?" I ask, looking between her and that goddamn bag. She doesn't respond, the only sound her broken breaths around her tears. Kneeling before her, I take her hands in mine, silently begging her that I'm misreading this. But she doesn't deny it, she doesn't say a word.

After several moments of agonizing silence, I finally ask, my voice cracking, "Why?"

Fallon's eyes sadden further. "Because it's not real."

My heart spasms, my chest cracking open. "Not real." I repeat, trying to understand the words.

She extracts one of her hands, running her fingers through my hair. "I'm sorry." She

whispers.

I shake my head, pushing to my feet. “No.” I mumble, pacing the space in front of her. “ No. ” I repeat, more forceful this time. Fallon flinches, her fingers bunching up the fabric of her sweats. “Fuck that. It’s real.” I spin toward her, taking her face between my hands as I beg. As I lie my heart wide open. “ Mi vida , it’s real. We’re real.”

Fallon’s expression pains at my words, but it’s not enough, I can see it in her eyes.

“Please,” I beg, tightening my hold. “Please don’t leave me. I-” My voice cuts off as a sob breaks from my chest. “I love you.”

A sorrowful noise to match my own comes from her, but she doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t tell me the words back. Instead, she watches me with a broken look. One that conveys too much and too little all at once.

“Please don’t do this.” It’s a desperate plea. But the words aren’t enough, they’re not enough to keep her here with me.

Unsure what else to do, I slam my mouth to hers, hoping the connection with our physical bodies might be enough to tether her here.

She groans into the kiss, her hands going to my hair, clinging to me like I’m a lifeline.

If you need me so badly, why are you leaving me?

I can’t voice the question out loud, instead I put it into my actions. Pushing her back, I hover over her body, kissing down her neck. I grip the hem of her shirt, tugging it up and over her head. Her perfect tits captivate me, the thought of never seeing them

again breaking me apart further.

Leaning down, I take her pebbled nipple into my mouth, licking the sensitive nub. She writhes beneath me as I reach up and pinch her other nipple between my fingers.

See, you want me.

I slide my thigh between hers to add friction as she bucks her hips. Moving my mouth to her other breast, I nip and suck until she's a mewling mess beneath me.

Pulling back, I grip her sweats and yank them down her body, my eyes running over her bare flesh.

I need you.

I run my fingers down her chest, along her stomach, stopping just shy of her pussy. She arches into my touch, wordlessly begging me to go lower. My eyes flick up to hers, tears welling in mine as I find them streaming down her face.

Please don't leave me.

I shift down the bed and lower myself onto her, kissing along her thighs. The need to mark her, to claim her as mine, overwhelms me. I sink my teeth into her soft flesh, the sound of her crying out echoes in the room.

"Ple-please." She begs.

I don't know if she's begging me to stop, to keep going, to let her leave, or to force her to stay.

"Te amo." I whisper against her skin, wishing the words changed anything. A quiet

sob breaks from my chest again as I turn my face and spear my tongue into her pussy. The salty taste of my tears mingles with the sweet taste of her.

No pseudo vivir sin ti.

Please don't make me.

Sliding my tongue out, I push back in, fucking her with it as my soul cries out. Fallon whimpers, her body writhing under my attention. Sliding a hand up, I circle her clit with my fingers, my other hand gripping her thigh so hard I'm sure it'll bruise. Just another hopeless attempt to mark her as mine.

Mi vida.

My life. I won't survive without you.

The thoughts swirl as I build her up, her body tensing. Just as she grows close to her release, I sit upright, making her cry out, "Why?"

"Why?" I whisper, licking my lips and finding the taste of her on them. "Why?" I repeat louder, moving to hover over her, my legs straddling hers as I'm inches above her face. "You're right. Why ? Why the fuck are you leaving?" I growl, my hurt morphing into anger.

Her eyes widen, never having been on the other end of my wrath. "I-I-" She stammers.

I run my fingers down her throat, tracing down her body slowly. "You?"

"I-I can't do this." She cries, gasping as I shove two fingers inside of her.

“You can’t do what, baby?” I ask, curling my fingers. Her head pushes back into the pillow, body arching as I brush against her sweet spot. “Answer the question.” I demand, stopping my movements.

Her eyes fly open, a heat to match my own anger burning in the green pools. When I make no move to resume fingering her, she closes her eyes, releasing a heavy breath. “I can’t keep hurting you.” She whispers.

My heart stops.

“Baby.”

She doesn’t respond.

I rest on my forearm, gripping her chin with my free hand. “Baby, look at me.” Blinking her eyes open, she meets mine. “You’re hurting me now.” I murmur, running my thumb along her jaw.

She flinches, a fresh wave of agony crossing her face. “I know.” The words are barely a breath, a broken acknowledgement to what she’s doing. But it doesn’t stop her from ripping my heart from my chest and tearing it to shreds. “It’s better this way. It-” She takes a deep breath before continuing. “It’ll hurt less now than later.”

I search her eyes, desperate to find what changed, what happened to bring this all on. “There doesn’t have to be a later, mi vida. I love you. I fucking love you.” I curl my fingers inside of her, pushing my palm down on her clit. Her eyes roll back, breasts pressing against mine. “You’re my life. I-I won’t survive without you.” I admit, my voice cracking. “Please stay.”

My fingers brush against that spot again and her mouth falls open in a silent cry as her orgasm washes over her. I watch her closely, memorizing every small movement,

every little detail.

Because, even as I said the words, even as I laid my heart bare, I knew it wasn't enough.

She's already left me.

The moment she packed that bag.

She was gone.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

“What is it, baby?” Arriana murmurs, brushing my hair back as she leans forward to rest her chin on my shoulder.

I nestle back into her embrace, staring down at the empty page of my document. I’ve been dabbling in writing out some of the stories that have been circling in my mind. It’s been a while since I tried this, the last time didn’t end well when my parents discovered the nature of my stories and deemed them “sinful” and “ungodly” and demanded I throw everything out.

My heart pounds harder at the memory resurfacing, only adding fuel to my seemingly endless writer's block.

Sighing heavily, I lock my tablet and curl up against Arriana. “I don’t know why I can’t seem to get what’s up here,” I tap my forehead. “Down here.” Tapping my finger on the locked screen, I blink back the tears pricking at my eyes.

This is useless. I don’t know why I ever thought I could do this.

“Hey.” Arriana pulls me from my thoughts, turning her head to place a soft kiss to my throat. “It’ll come. I have total faith in you, baby.”

I wake with a start, instinctively reaching out beside me. My heart cracks as I find I’m alone in the dark room. I can still feel Arriana’s arms around me, a fading memory from my dream.

Curling up into a ball, I wrap the blankets around my shivering body, trying to warm the chill in my bones.

I did the right thing.

The thought repeats on a loop as I drift back to sleep.

I stare blankly at my desk, fighting back a yawn as the professor drones on about sentence structure and the use of Oxford commas. Something I usually would find at least mildly fascinating, but right now I'd rather be at home curled up with my favorite stuffy.

“Comma errors are one of the most common grammatical mistakes found in any given piece. Take this sentence, for example...” I tune out the rest of her words, my mind drifting to things it shouldn't.

Arriana and I snuggled up on the couch, Sir Ichabod held in my hands as I stroke his little furry head.

Arriana dancing to some horrendous k-pop music while I sit and watch, clapping my hands enthusiastically when she bows.

Arriana and I slow dancing at Ava's wedding, her arms wrapped around my waist and holding me close.

Arriana hovering above me, begging me to stay.

Arriana standing in the corner of the room with a blank expression as I walked out on shaky legs, clutching my bag like a lifeline.

I blink back the tears threatening to fall.

Maybe I shouldn't have left.

It's not the first time the thought has come up. In the weeks since I left and moved into Ava and Killian's spare room, my mind has whirled with constant regrets and anxieties.

My phone buzzes, pulling me from my thoughts. I glance down at the screen, biting the inside of my cheek to keep back the emotions. I haven't been able to bring myself to change her contact name and it hurts every time it pops up.

My Love *black heart emoji* *kissing lips emoji*

Sir Ichabod misses you

With the text is a photo of the adorable little chinchilla staring off into space.

My baby.

My heart breaks at the forlorn look on his face. When I first met the little guy, I was a little shocked. But after living with him for over a year, well, he stole my heart. Almost as quickly as his Mamá did.

"What is that?" I gasp, peering down at the fluffy ball of fur chittering away in its cage.

Arriana chuckles, opening the door and gently lifting its little body up to cradle in her arms. "This is Sir Ichabod, my pride and joy." She hums, nuzzling his head with her cheek.

A twinge pulls at my heart as I watch her affectionately speak with the little creature, something clicking inside at the sight.

I gulp, reaching a shaky hand forward. “Can I?” I whisper, my eyes locked onto Sir Ichabod’s movements. Shifting my gaze to Arriana’s, I find her looking at me with an intensity that scares me just a little bit.

This is our third date, but from the way she’s watching me...I can already imagine a lifetime with her. And that scares me, even more than the unpredictable bundle of fur held in her arms.

“Most definitely. It’s about time he met the center of his Mamá’s obsession.” She winks at me and the confusing mixture of fear and excitement grows at her easy admittance to what’s building between us.

Gulping back the emotions, I shift my attention back to the white furball. Taking a step forward, I hold my hand in front of his face as an offering. He sniffs my fingers before tilting his head and nudging my hand. A smile spreads across my face as I gently stroke his head. “Well, hello there, Sir Ichabod. It’s nice to meet you.”

I look up and find Arriana focused on me. Getting lost in her dark eyes, I can already tell I’m in trouble. Because I can feel myself starting to fall for her, and I’m terrified of what’s going to happen when I inevitably do.

I choke back the emotions that well up at the memory, quickly closing out of the text and locking my phone.

Why is she doing this to me?

Arriana has texted me several times a day. Every day. She refuses to give up and I hate it. But more than anything, I love it. Because she hasn’t given up on me , even though that’s not fair.

I left for a reason, and I shouldn’t want her to be hung up on a love that can’t

continue.

A love that was doomed from the start.

My phone buzzes again, but I ignore it, moving to pack up my things as class ends. Slipping out of the classroom, I duck my head and hurry across campus to the library.

I started spending more time here again since I left, needing something to occupy the lonely hours. Plus, while Ava has been thrilled to have me as a roomie, Killian isn't entirely the biggest fan. So I try to make myself scarce as much as possible.

All their loud sex definitely doesn't help matters either. Not that I have any interest in getting raided by a fifty year old man, but the sounds of their passion make me miss my own sex life.

It was a really fucking good sex life too.

Guilt gnaws at me at the thought as I adjust my glasses. Throwing my bag onto one of the empty study tables, I sink into a chair with a huff. I pull out my textbook and get to work on studying for the finals coming up in a few months.

Some people might think it's a little premature, but I pride myself in my perfect GPA and that doesn't happen without a shit ton of studying.

Hours pass before I come up for air, stretching the sore muscles from being hunched over. My eyes drift to my phone I had set face down to avoid looking at it. Chewing my lip, I slowly reach for it, my stomach flipping as I turn the screen toward me.

Six new messages

Well shit, aren't I popular.

I breathe a laugh, clicking on the notification.

Bestie *double pink heart emoji*

Hey babe, we're going out so

you'll have the place to yourself

I smile at the message from Ava, kind of wishing I had read it before I subjected myself to the uncomfortable wooden furniture.

Bestie *double pink heart emoji*

Okay, so lunch looks like it's gonna be an all

day and night adventure *winking emoji*

Be back tomorrow, enjoy yourself.

Watch some TV but DON'T start the

new episode without me!!!

I roll my eyes and quickly type out a response.

Me

I would never! *kissy face emoji*

Enjoy your sexy time *winking emoji*

Moving to the next messages, I see several from Arriana and one that makes my stomach drop. Ignoring the ones from my ex, I hover my finger over the last message.

It's just a text.

Blowing out a breath, I click on the message.

Mom

Hi honey. Why don't you come

over for dinner tonight? Your

brother and sister will be here

and we'd love to see you.

Rolling my lips, I debate my options.

I could go back to the home that isn't mine and wallow in my misery.

Or I could go to a family event and add more to my pain.

Although, this could count as one of my few obligatory visits.

Reading the text again, I make up my mind, typing out a reply.

Me

Sounds great. What time?

Her response is almost immediate. With a time set, I push back from the table and load up my bag. Turning toward the exit, I pull up the rideshare app and request a pickup. The app notifies me that my ride will be here in ten minutes, just enough time to grab a drink at the campus cafe.

Slipping my bag over my shoulders, I set off, my mind whirling with regret and nerves.

It feels like every decision I make lately isn't the right one. That, despite how much I'm trying to do the right thing, I'm just somehow making it all worse.

My phone buzzes again and I pick it up, spotting another text from Arriana. And, because I'm a glutton for punishment, I click on it.

My Love *black heart emoji* *kissing lips emoji*

I miss you too

My Love *black heart emoji* *kissing lips emoji*

Remember this? I'm

still your psycho baby

Below the message is a photo of the mug I bought her on our one year anniversary. The words my psycho lover printed on the ceramic, a bloodied knife resting below them.

My Love *black heart emoji* *kissing lips emoji*

I love you, mi vida.

Please, please just text

me back. Just once.

Locking the phone, I blink back tears. It hurts so much every time I read her words, but I can't bring myself to tell her off. I can't bring myself to break off all contact and block her number.

Because, even though I left, the truth is, I love her.

And I always will.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

Me

I love you, mi vida.

Please, please just text

me back. Just once.

I stare at the message, the read receipt glaring at me below it. I don't know what I expected. It's not like she has responded to a single one of my messages this whole time. I just can't bring myself to stop.

Maybe if she stopped reading them, maybe if she asked me not to reach out anymore. Maybe then I could stop.

Even as the thought crosses my mind, I know it's a lie. I can't stop, I won't stop.

A muscular arm reaches around me, plucking the phone from my hands. "What are you doing, Ree?" Andrew sighs, keeping the small device just out of reach.

"Give it back." I growl, hopping up in a futile attempt to retrieve my stolen property.

Tsking, he shakes his head. "Nope. This ,," He inclines his head toward his outstretched arm. "Is not healthy."

Glaring at him, I cross my arms. “So what? I’m not giving up on us.” I snap.

He sighs, his expression taking on a frustratingly pitiful look. “Princess...” I roll my eyes at the nickname. I’m far from the damsel in distress he found me as when we first met. But I haven’t been able to shake the nickname.

“Just,” I start and stop, my shoulders slumping in defeat. “Just give it back, please.” I avert my gaze, embarrassed to be showing this side of myself.

Andrew places a warm hand on my shoulder, waiting for me to look back at him. He studies my face for a moment before sighing again and handing me the phone. “Fine.” As I go to reach for it, he pulls the phone out of my reach again, making me growl in frustration. “On one condition.”

“What?” I snap, getting tired of his macho attitude.

Stupid ass men. Just because they’re bigger doesn’t make them better. If I didn’t like him, I’d have slit his throat already and taken back my phone all on my own. Thank you very much.

Andrew chuckles at my furious expression. “Come to dinner with me and the fam.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes. Sure, I like his family, but I don’t much care for being blackmailed into doing something. “Fiiine .” I grumble, holding out my hand.

Handing it over with a smirk, he pulls me into a one armed hug. “Mamma is going to be thrilled!” He laughs, ruffling my hair.

I shove him off, opening my phone again to see if there’s a message. My shoulders slump when I find the same thread of unanswered texts.

Maybe it will be good to get my mind off this. Just for one night.

“Cara mia!” Evelina cries, pulling me into a hug.

“H-hi.” I gasp, a smile breaking out on my face.

She pulls back just far enough to place a kiss on both of my cheeks, a grin to match my own on her face. “Oh, how I missed you!”

“Mamma.” Andrew warns, the effect lost as he chuckles.

Evelina turns to him, clucking her tongue. “And where have you been, amore mio ?”

Andrew blushes and looks away, avoiding her gaze.

Interesting.

I quirk an eyebrow at him, earning a scowl. A laugh bubbles from my chest as I mouth we’re talking about this later.

He glares at me, shaking his head and mouthing fuck off .

Evelina sighs, pulling our attention back to her. Finally releasing me from her arms, she straightens her apron and spins back toward the kitchen. “Dinner is almost ready. Go freshen up.” With that command, she struts off to finish her magic.

I elbow Andrew, chuckling, “Where have you been, ‘ amore mio ’?” He pushes me away, heading off toward the dining area. I follow after him, a permanent grin on my face.

Maybe he was right to invite me tonight. I really needed this.

As we grow closer, I can hear the sounds of bickering. Turning the corner, I take in the sight before me. Most of Andrew's siblings are seated around the table, except for two who are currently rolling on the floor, one with his head locked in the other brother's chokehold.

"Take it back." Noah growls, refusing to give in to Luca's desperate attempts to free himself.

I laugh watching the baby of the family be choked out by Andrew's second youngest sibling. The boys are so close in age they could almost be twins. My eyes drift over to find Mila and Beau distracted on their phones, the family's actual twins and oldest of the seven siblings.

I can't imagine giving birth to one child, let alone seven. Squeezing my thighs, I shudder at the thought.

Yeah, that's gonna be a big ol' nope for me and my vagina.

Looking around, I spot Rylee and Izabella, Andrew's other sisters, playing with his nieces and nephews. I take a deep breath, soaking in the love in the room, despite the aggressive showing between the two youngest.

"Let your brother go." A deep voice sighs. All eyes shoot up to watch Isaak Mikhailov walk into the room, a disappointed scowl on his face. Not many people intimidate me, but Andrew's father is one of those few.

The old Russian man is one scary dude.

He used to be a general in the military before meeting Andrew's mom and he's never lost the hard edge from war. Despite his gruffness, though, the man loves his family.

Rolling his eyes at the boys as they continue wrestling on the floor, he bends over to scoop up one of his grandchildren into his arms. “Zaychik.” He croons, nuzzling her head with his.

I smile, my heart melting at the display of such a gruff man showing such sweet emotions.

Not that I’d ever admit that that’s why I’m smiling.

Quickly schooling my features, I saunter over and flop down into a seat beside Mila. Andrew follows behind, taking the open spot next to me. Nudging my shoulder with his, Andrew smirks. “See? Aren’t you happy you came?”

I roll my eyes, muttering under my breath and crossing my arms. A small hint of my earlier grin breaks on my face despite my efforts.

Of course Andrew notices.

Laughing, he slaps my shoulder and reaches for the bottle of wine on the center of the table. I hold up a glass, nearly downing the whole thing when he fills it. He quirks an eyebrow at me, but doesn’t say anything as he refills the glass. His focus is pulled away as Noah and Luca finally come take their seats and begin babbling about some sports game.

Taking the moment of distraction, I pull up my phone to check and see if there are any new messages.

One new message

My body freezes as I see the notification.

With numb fingers, I unlock my phone and open the text.

Mi Vida

I need you

I leap to my feet, startling everyone around me, but I don't care.

She needs me.

The thought sends me into overdrive as I sprint from the room, the sound of Andrew's voice following me.

Running as quickly as I can, I dive behind the wheel of my car. The vehicle I learned to drive for my baby. Throwing it into reverse, I speed down the street, my fingers strumming on the steering wheel.

She needs me.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

This was a bad idea.

I knew the moment I stepped out of the car that it was a mistake coming here.

I should have just put on some sitcom and drowned my sorrow in a bottle of wine.

Taking a subtle breath to calm my nerves, I look around the table. My sister continuously throws scowls in my direction.

Scarlett, the perfect daughter.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. How easy she has it, with her perfect little family that mom and dad approve of.

She never had to say goodbye.

I can't help but glare back at her and her stupid husband. He sits quietly beside her, slowly chewing his food and looking about as dull as a sack of potatoes.

Okay, that's not fair. Maybe he's great and my sister just sucked the life out of him.

Laughing inside at the thought, the corners of my lips tick up, earning another scowl from Scarlett. I turn my attention away, my gaze landing on my brother.

Hudson is like me, a quote-un-quote black sheep of the family. Whereas my sin has

always been the desire for girls, his has been for boys. We bonded about it once upon a time, now it's fueled an endless resentment.

I can't really blame him, he got the brunt of my parents' attempts to "fix him". By the time I started to show interest in things my parents deemed unnatural, the conversion camps had already been shut down.

Hudson flicks his gaze to mine, his eyes narrowing just slightly before returning to the food he's been pushing around his plate for the last twenty minutes.

"How's school been?" My mother's voice draws my attention.

Picking up my fork, I stab into a piece of zucchini as I shrug. "Fine, I guess." I mumble, shoving the food into my mouth in hopes it saves me from having to answer anymore questions.

It doesn't.

"Hmmm, that's good." She hums. Sharing a look with my dad, she takes a sip of her drink before continuing. "You know, the Peterson's son was asking about you."

My stomach drops. Because of course this wasn't just a simple dinner invitation. Why would I ever think I could have a single dinner without their attempts to set me up with someone they deem appropriate. I take another bite, chewing slowly and avoiding everyone's gazes.

"I could ask about setting you up for a date." My mom presses, either not getting the hint, or more likely, not caring.

"She's not interested." Scarlett sneers, her cunt face leering at me. "He's too much of a man for her."

I flinch at her words, my mind flashing back to the person I do want to be with. Because she's right, I have no desire to be set up with the Peterson's son. Or anyone's son.

But isn't this why you broke up with Arriana? To do the right thing ?

My chest aches at the mental reminder. I'm so lost in my thoughts I almost don't hear my mother. Almost.

"That's enough, Scarlett." She snaps. "Your sister would be lucky to have such a fine man as Logan Peterson. Right, Fallon?"

Fuck.

What do I say to that? I don't want to go on a date with Logan .

I want...

I shake myself, nodding my head even as my soul dies. "Yes, Mom." I mumble, staring at my food, my stomach turning.

"See?" My mom claps her hands, making me jump. "Oh, Olivia will be so thrilled!" She continues to go on about all the plans that she has for me and my love life, but I can't hear her past the thundering in my ears.

This is a mistake.

I can't bring myself to say no, to tell her that my heart is already held by another.

I feel eyes staring at me and peek up, meeting Hudson's concerned gaze. I'm shocked at the genuine worry I see shining in his pale blue eyes. Averting my gaze again, I

slump in my seat and wish that the food was laced with arsenic or something, anything to end this miserable excuse for a life I have.

When I don't get my wish, I reach forward and take my glass of wine, downing it and quickly refilling the glass.

By the time I can excuse myself, I've polished off nearly a bottle of wine. I can feel the alcohol warming my blood, a welcome numbing to the overwhelming despair.

"What are you doing?" A deep voice rumbles behind me as I wait outside for my ride.

Glancing over my shoulder, I have to reach my arm out to steady myself as I wobble. "Wha-what do you mean?" I slur, blinking to get my eyes to focus.

Hudson watches me closely, folding his arms over his broad chest. "Why did you agree to go on that date?" He asks, his brow furrowed.

I shrug, the movement making me sway on my feet. "Don't have a choice." I mumble.

Hudson opens his mouth to say something else, but doesn't get the chance as my ride pulls up.

"See ya, broseph!" I chuckle, diving into the backseat.

The ride back to the skyscraper is silent, apparently my driver is against music or something. Needing a distraction from the swirling thoughts in my brain, I pull my phone out and begin scrolling through Insta. My vision is a little fuzzy as I like and comment on post after post, the alcohol making me more brazen than normal. One of my favorite authors shared a graphic of a sapphic book she's working on and I stare

at the photo for far too long.

Why can't I just have that ?

My fingers move on their own, taking me to my profile. I scroll through my photos, smiling at the most recent one of Ava and me snuggled up on her couch. I can almost hear our laughter as we had coached Killian on taking the best photo. He grumbled the whole time but couldn't hide the love shining in his eyes as he watched Ava posing.

The next photo is one of the Seattle skyline, taken from the fancy ass penthouse. It's a gorgeous view, and I couldn't help but share it.

I scroll again and stop, my eyes welling up with tears.

Staring up at me is a photo of Arriana and me. Her arms are wrapped around my waist as she presses a kiss to my cheek. Her short brown hair a stark contrast to my own long blonde locks. My eyes travel down her toned body, her full breasts are pressed against my side and the sight sends a shiver down my spine at the memory of what they felt like. My thighs shift as I remember the sensation of our bare chests rubbing against each other, the friction always sent a jolt straight to my core.

My eyes are closed in the photo but hers are open as she peers at me with what I can only describe as adoration.

Before I can stop myself, I close out of the app and pull up my text messages. Opening the chat, I scroll through her multitude of unanswered texts.

She loves me.

It can't be wrong if it's love, right?

With the alcohol making my thoughts a little hazy, I type out a text and press send, a warmth pooling low in my pelvis at the hope she'll see it. That she'll respond.

Me

I need you

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Arriana

I practically throw my keys at the valet as I run inside.

“Hello, Miss Beckett.” The doorman greets, inclining his head.

I mumble an incoherent response, brushing past him to the elevators. Pushing the button, a thought occurs to me. Glancing back at him, I bite the inside of my cheek but decide against asking, pulling up my phone instead.

Me

Where are you baby?

Text bubbles pop up immediately before disappearing and reappearing several times. I clutch the phone in my hand, willing her to just send the damn message.

Finally, a message comes through that lights my soul on fire.

Mi Vida

Home

It could mean a million different things, but I can’t help but hope that she means my home, our home.

With that hope, I press the button for our floor and wait. The ride up is excruciating,

my excitement and nerves making me restless. When the doors open, I nearly sprint down the hall. Stopping in front of the door, I take a deep breath and insert my key.

Please be here.

I push open the door and step inside, my heart stopping when I find Fallon standing in the living room. She's just as gorgeous as I remember, maybe even more so. Her cheeks are flushed and there is a slight sheen on her forehead as she wobbles unsteadily on her feet.

Stepping inside, I close the door behind me and cross the distance between us. "Are you drunk, mi vida ?" I watch her carefully as she giggles and nods her head.

My heart aches as I realize what this is. But I can't bring myself to stop, because I'll be whatever she will let me be. Whether it's her adoring girlfriend or her late night drunken booty call, as long as I get her , it's enough. It has to be.

"I m-missed you." She hiccups.

Pulling her into my arms, I inhale the scent of her. The soft smell of roses fills my nose, one that settles me. "I missed you too, baby." I murmur, kissing her cheek.

Fallon arches her neck, exposing her skin for my lips. I happily take the invitation, kissing down her throat. She moans, wiggling against me.

"I'm sorry." She sniffles, her hands clinging to my sides.

Brushing her hair back, I run my nose up her neck. "Shhh." I soothe before nipping at her jaw. "You're here now."

Fallon shakes in my arms, pressing her hips against mine. "Please." She begs, the

sound making me groan.

Fuck, I missed her begging.

“Please what?” I whisper, running my hands down her back to grip her ass.

She gasps, tightening her hold on me. “I need you.” She whimpers, her breath speeding up as I massage her plump cheeks in my hands. “Ple-please fuck me, take it all away. I need....I need...”

I pull back, kissing the tears streaming down her face. “It’s okay, I’ve got you.”

Lifting her up with my hold on her ass, I carry her to the bedroom, her legs wrapped around my waist. She grinds against me as I hurry down the hall. Unable to resist her desperate noises another moment, I spin and push her back against the wall, slamming my lips to hers. Our kiss is feverish as we try to funnel all of our need into the connection.

I slip my tongue into her mouth, moaning as she lets me in. “Baby.” I pant, stumbling back toward the bedroom once more. “Fuck, I need you so badly.”

“Me too.” She pleads, clawing at my shirt as I stagger into the room. “I need to feel you. Please.”

I dump her onto the bed, watching with a lick of my lips as she bounces on the mattress. Crossing my arms, I reach for the hem of my shirt and slowly pull it over my head. Fallon gazes at me with hooded eyes as I reach behind my back and unclasp my bra. Slipping the straps down my arms, I let it fall to the ground as I move to take off my pants.

Before I can remove them, she sits upright, reaching for me. “Let me.” She murmurs,

unbuttoning my jeans with shaky fingers. I run my hand through her hair, relishing in the feel of the soft locks that I missed so much.

She pushes my jeans and underwear down, helping me step out of them. Once I'm fully naked, I move to stand between her thighs, yanking her head back with my fingers in her hair. She gasps, her pupils blowing wide with desire.

I stare down at her hungrily, forcing myself to go slow, to enjoy every second of our night together. Running her hands up my thighs, she slips one between my legs and teases my slit. "Are you just going to stare at me all night?" She asks breathlessly, circling my clit with her soft fingers.

Groaning, I pull her head back further. "I'm just enjoying the moment, baby." I murmur, not missing the pain that flashes through her hazy eyes.

Releasing my hold, I step back. "Strip down and get on your hands and knees." I wait to make sure she's going to listen before stepping around the bed. Going into the walk-in closet, I hunt for our box of supplies, a smirk lifting my lips when I find it.

Grabbing out the lube and one of our favorite toys, I head back into the bedroom. My breath catches at the sight before me.

Fallon is perched on the bed on her hands and knees, like the good girl she is. Her back is arched, ass pointing up in the air, her golden hair falling around her like a blanket of sunshine. Noticing my return, she turns her head toward me, running her gaze down my body. Her eyes widen when she spots what's in my hand, a knowing smile spreading across her face.

Returning her smile, I cross the room and climb onto the bed behind her, setting the lube and strap-on down beside me. I run my hands over her ass, gripping her cheeks and spreading them open for me. A groan slips past my lips as I stare down at her.

“You’re so perfect.” I breathe, leaning down to slide my tongue from her slit up to circle her tight little hole.

Fallon whimpers, pushing back against my face. Stretching her further, I push my tongue inside her asshole, my pussy clenching at the moan she lets out. I slide one hand down, pushing a finger inside of her soaking cunt. “Fuck.” She gasps, rocking her hips back.

Adding another finger, I slowly push them in and out, spearing the fingers to stretch her open for me. “That’s it, baby.” I praise. “Fuck yourself on my tongue and fingers.” She whimpers again and rotates her hips, doing just that. I twist my wrist to move my thumb over her clit, circling the sensitive bud as her body tenses up. Curling my fingers, I can feel her pussy clench around them as she comes, a cry erupting from her.

Sitting back on my heels, I grab the discarded items, uncapping the lube to pour it over both ends of the dildo. Fallon collapses against the mattress, rolling on her back to watch me with heavy lids. I work my hand over the plastic, getting it ready as I rake my gaze over her body.

Slipping a hand between my thighs, I push two fingers inside of my pussy, groaning as her eyes dart to the movement with a lick of her lips. “You drive me crazy.” I mutter, slowly pushing my fingers in and out.

Fallon pushes upright, climbing onto her knees and crawling over to me. Flicking her eyes up to mine, she leans forward and slips her tongue in beside my fingers. A choked noise escapes my throat as I feel her match my pace. She hums against me, eating my pussy with a ravenous hunger.

I can feel myself tense up as the sensations build, pushing me closer and closer to a release I didn’t know if I would get to experience again. Sensing my impending

orgasm, she slides her tongue up my slit, slowly circling my clit. Her warm breath against my sensitive nerve endings is nearly enough to push me over the edge.

“Fallon.” I moan, tipping my head back as I get lost in the intoxicating feeling of her lips and tongue. A soft pleasurable noise slips from her in response to my growing desperation to let go. I speed up the pumping of my fingers as she licks and sucks, every sensation building me up and up and up until...

“Fuck.” I groan loudly as my body jerks, the movements in my wrist halting as waves of pleasure roll through me.

For a moment I forget everything, I forget all the pain and anger from the last few weeks. I forget the loneliness and heartache. All that exists is this moment of connection and pleasure shared between us.

As I come down from my moment of ecstasy, I slowly pull my fingers out and push her back against the mattress. She stares up at me, her chest rising and falling heavily with each breath. With my eyes zeroed in on her perfect tits, I adjust the straps around my hips and line up the dildo with my entrance, groaning loudly as I push it inside of myself.

“Fuck.” Fallon mutters, biting her lip so hard I’m worried she’s going to break the skin.

Shuffling forward, I tilt my hips to press the other end of the dildo against her pussy. With my eyes on hers, I slowly push inside, moving my hands to grip her hips. We both groan when it’s fully seated inside her, the feeling of us being connected in this way is overwhelming.

I can’t lose her again. I can’t lose this.

The thought passes through my mind, an unwanted intrusion to our night. I swat it away and choose to focus on us, on the pleasure we are giving one another.

Pulling my hips back, I thrust forward, watching as her tits bounce with the movement. She writhes beneath me, lifting her hips up to meet each of my thrusts.

“Shit. Fuck. Oh god.” Fallon gasps, her hands clawing at the blanket. “I’m-I’m going to-”

Tightening my hold on her, I pull her towards me, slamming my hips forward. I can feel the pressure building as I listen to her cries, the sound igniting a nearly feral need within me.

“Yesyesyes. Oh my god, please. I’m so close.” She begs, her eyes squeezed shut, head pushed back into the mattress. “Oh fuck!” She screams as her body shudders.

I speed up my movements, shifting a hand to slip between my thighs and circle my clit as I chase my own climax. “Fuuuuuck.” I groan, my hips stuttering as my body tenses once more.

We both pant as we come down from the high of our shared release, avoiding the reality that we know faces us in the morning. After several moments, I pull out and remove the strap-on, tossing it over the side of the bed to deal with later.

Fallon smiles sleepily up at me, the combination of liquor and orgasms pulling her toward the land of unconsciousness.

Climbing off the bed, I slip into the bathroom to quickly cleanup before grabbing a rag and returning to the room to do the same to her. After dropping the rag into my hamper, I walk back to the bed and pull the covers down, climbing in beside her. Covering us with the blanket, I circle her waist with my arm, pulling her back against

me.

She hums, settling back into the warmth of my embrace. It's not long before her soft snores fill the room. I move my free hand to stroke her face, finding she forgot to take off her glasses in her drunken state. With a quiet chuckle, I remove them and carefully stretch to set the frames on the bedside table, placing a kiss on her forehead as I settle back into the bed.

"I love you, mi vida ." I whisper, wishing it was enough to keep her.

I wake with a groan, reaching my arm out over the empty space beside me. Peeking an eye open, I confirm I am, in fact, alone.

"Just fucking perfect." I groan again, throwing my arm over my eyes.

I knew what last night was, I knew the moment I saw her swaying on her feet. But I did it to myself anyway.

And I'd do it again.

Rolling to the side of the bed, I drop my feet to the floor and slowly push myself upright. I stumble to the bathroom, turning on the shower and brushing my teeth while I wait for the water to heat up. Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I fight against the melancholy threatening to consume me.

"I can't do this."

"It'll hurt less now than later."

Fallon's words repeat in my head, only serving to further my downward spiral of misery. I slam my palms down on the counter, glowering at my warped reflection.

“Hurt less my ass.” I grumble, pushing away from the sink.

After a quick shower, I towel dry my hair and pull on some clothes. My phone buzzes from my jeans still lying pooled on the floor. I take a step toward it and notice the strap-on next to the bed, my chest spasming at the reminder of last night. Pivoting, I scoop up the sex toy and quickly clean it up before returning it and the lube to their spot in our closet.

Best to be prepared in case Fallon decides to drop by unannounced again.

Hunting for my phone, I finally locate it and hold my breath as I see the multiple messages. Most of them are from Andrew wondering what the fuck happened to me last night. There’s even an annoyed text from Killian demanding I respond to Andrew so he stops blowing up his phone.

My lips quirk at the thought of the old man being bombarded by my friend.

One message remains, and I take several breaths to prepare myself for whatever it might say. Closing my eyes, I release one last exhale before clicking on the text. My heart shatters at the words reflecting up at me on the screen.

I don’t know what I expected. A heartfelt declaration of love? If that was the case, she would have been here when I woke up.

I tuck my phone in my back pocket and snatch my keys. Storming out of the apartment, I slam the door behind me. The need to release some of this pent up frustration consumes me so I text Andrew asking for a job, any job, it doesn’t matter. His response is immediate, details of a hit along with a bunch of texts demanding to know what happened and if I’m alright. I can’t respond to his concerns, not now.

Instead, I thank him for the info and exit the building, on the hunt to let out my need

for violence to settle the turmoil inside. My mind wanders back to the text over and over the entire drive. The whole time I hack and chop at the target, even as I scrub up the blood and stage the crime scene, my mind is focused on her words.

Mi Vida

I'm sorry. It won't happen again.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

“I know I fucked it all up. Believe me, I know. I regretted leaving that church every single fucking day.” Running a hand through his hair, he blows out a breath. “I was so hurt I didn’t stop to think how much it was hurting you too. How much I was hurting you.”

He pauses, his shoulders slumping. “I wish I could say I would do things differently if we went back, but I don’t fucking know. I was just a kid and my mom, she was...”

I put my hand on his arm, pulling his attention to me. “I know.” I say, aching at the sorrow I find in his eyes.

He holds my gaze briefly before nodding. Reaching up a hand, he covers mine with his own. “No matter how much I was hurting over her, I never could have imagined the pain I would feel at the loss of you.”

My phone buzzes beside me, pulling my attention from the book. I blink several times to fight against the moisture pooling in my eyes. The broken words of a broken boy hitting a little too close to home for my liking.

Unknown number

Hey sis it’s Hudson. I got your

new number from mom. Look,

can we talk? It's important

I stare at the phone in shock. Except for the dinner several days ago, I haven't spoken to Hudson in years, and now he wants to talk?

My thumbs hover over the screen as I contemplate my response. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to connect again, I miss my big brother.

Taking a deep breath, I begin typing out a reply when my phone goes black, Mom filling the screen at her incoming call. I sigh heavily as I slide to answer. "Hello?" I try and fail to hide the hollowness in my voice.

Oblivious to my discontent, my mom's cheery voice comes through the speaker. "Well, hello to you too, Fallon. I have some great news, honey." My stomach drops, her good news is hardly ever something that I can get excited about. "We've got a date!"

My brows furrow as I try to decipher what she's talking about. "Huh?" I ask lamely when I come up blank.

Sighing dramatically, my mom clucks her tongue at me. "You and Logan. Remember the Peterson's son you agreed to have dinner with? You're not going to back out on me now, are you?"

Fuck. Right. Logan .

I gulp, wishing I could back out, could do anything besides go on this date. "Right, um, when?"

I barely hear the rest of the conversation as my mom rattles off all the information, my mind traveling back to the night I agreed to this travesty. And then to the rest of

the night after.

Arriana's beautiful body moving above me as we connect in a way that feels so right I'm having a hard time remembering why it's wrong. The weight of her arms encircling my body as I drift off to sleep, a peaceful slumber not filled with nightmares or depressing memories.

"You're going to have so much fun! And the babies, ohmylord you two will have the most gorgeous babies." My mom's excited babbling brings me back to the present, back to the plans being made to marry me off to an "acceptable" match.

I mumble something in response that's neither an agreement nor a protest to her insane declarations. I have no interest in this man or having his children, but that's all I am to my mom and those who follow her religious ideologies. A vessel to marry off and bring about the next generation of believers .

My melancholy mood worsens as my mind wanders to a future I have no desire taking part in. One in which I already feel like I'm suffocating.

I hear myself end the call, but can't pull out of the downward spiral I find myself in. Spearing my fingers in my hair, I pull on the roots in an attempt to feel something besides the empty hollowness in which I'm drowning.

Glancing down at the book resting in my lap, I read the title.

Lost in Life

A slightly hysterical giggle bubbles up from my chest as I read and reread the words.

How ironic. I'm feeling pretty lost right about now too.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

“You seem awfully quiet.” I ignore Andrew’s attempts at conversation, focusing intently on the target across the field. “Yo, Earth to Ree.”

Sighing, I click the safety on and slip off the noise reduction earmuffs. Leveling him with an annoyed glare, I snap, “What?”

“Wow.” He laughs, holding his hands up. “Bit touchy there, aren’t ya?” I roll my eyes, crossing my arms and giving him a look I hope conveys my level of annoyance.

It’s been several days since Fallon effectively removed herself from my life once and for all. She’s completely cut me off, won’t even look at the messages I send anymore. My only solace is she hasn’t blocked my number, all my messages still showing as delivered a small reassurance in this hellscape I find myself in.

I can feel myself reaching a boiling point. A point that, if I let myself fall entirely into the anger and pain, I don’t know if I’ll be able to claw my way out again. Not that I’d want to if she wasn’t there waiting for me.

If it wasn’t for Andrew, I’d have already gone off the deep end, of that I’m certain.

And even still, I can’t decide if I’m grateful or if I want to let out some of this never ending aggression on him and disappear.

“You’ve got that scary psycho murderer look going on right now. And I don’t really enjoy being on the receiving end of it.” He chuckles, but I can hear the slight twinge

of anxiety in his voice.

Snorting, I shake my head, sliding my earmuffs back into place. I turn back toward the target, flick off the safety, and shoot off three rounds. I remove the ear protection and set the safety once more on the small handgun before setting both down and taking off. Bouncing down the field, I snatch up the paper target and return to Andrew, shoving it into his hands. “If I wanted you dead, Drewbie, you’d be dead.” I whistle as I walk away, not having to look back to know what he sees.

A paper target with three bullet holes. One in the heart, one in the head, and one in the dick.

“You know, you scare me sometimes!” Andrew calls out, making me laugh my first genuine laugh in a long time.

Glancing over my shoulder, I wink at him. “Good.”

There’s a brief moment of stunned silence before he barks a laugh, his heavy footfalls sounding shortly after. “Seriously though, Arriana. You seem off, even more than usual.” Andrew elbows my ribs, smirking to hide the worry in his expression.

Sighing, I run a hand through my hair as I pull out my phone. I know there’s no getting out of this conversation, not when he’s got his mind set.

Without a word, I open my very one-sided text conversation with Fallon and hand it over to him. My fingers itch to be doing something as I watch him scroll back and read through the multitude of unanswered messages. His expression grows more and more concerned with each one, his forehead creasing and a slight scowl on his face.

“This is...”

“Pathetic?” I cut him off, snatching the phone back and rereading some of the most recent texts.

Me

What do you mean you’re sorry?

There’s nothing to be sorry about,

it was a perfect night baby

Me

Baby. Please don’t do this

Me

Fallon. Fallon please

Me

I love you mi vida. I love you so fucking

much, we can figure this out together.

Please don’t ignore me

I shake my head, locking the phone and shifting my gaze to stare out across the empty field. Memories I had long since repressed trying to surface once again.

“Mamá? Plea-please don’t ignore me.”

I blink, shaking my head once more to push aside the intrusive cry. A distant memory, the day my life changed forever.

Closing my eyes, I focus instead on Fallon's beautiful face. Her iridescent eyes, pale complexion, naturally peach tinted lips. Long flowing blonde hair the color of a perfect sunrise.

My mind travels to the little things, to the imperfections and personalized aspects of her appearance that make her her .

Like the slit in her eyebrow, her slightly off center glasses as the frames are bent from repeated use, her chipped nail polish. Always chipped. I don't know how she manages to do it, but I've never seen her with a perfect polish. The faint scar line that's just beneath her chin. A small tattoo on either side of her spine of a pair of broken wings, feathers cascading below the wings in crumpled forms.

I envision every bump, every curve, every soft angle of her perfect body. From head to toe, I picture her in my mind's eye and feel the distress inside grow at the realization that this might be all I have now.

Memories.

Clearing my throat, I slip my phone into my pocket and open my eyes to find Andrew watching me. "You got clean up today?" I jerk my head toward our set up.

He nods, opening his mouth to say something, but I cut him off. "Thanks, Drewbie." Blowing him a kiss, I dart away, desperate to get home and surround myself with the things that will keep her memory alive.

"It'll hurt less now than later."

For the umpteenth time, I replay her words, trying to convince myself that there's some truth in them. But I can't, because deep down I know it's a lie.

She's mine. She always has been. Always will be.

I don't care how much more it will hurt later, I don't care about anything other than getting my baby back into my arms.

Drewbie

Got a job, want it?

I glance at my phone, a smile spreading on my face. Andrew and I have spoken several times since I bared my miserable state to him. I want to be annoyed at his mother henning, the constant check up messages and excuses to hang out.

But, oddly enough, all I feel is gratitude. It's been a long time since I've had someone care about me this much outside of Fallon, and even then, the first time someone who truly knows who I am. What I am. And still accepts me.

Me

Bet your sweet ass I do *winking emoji*

Drewbie

eye roll emoji very professional

Me

middle finger emoji

The text bubbles pop up and disappear several times, making me chuckle as I imagine Andrew trying to think of the best comeback. After a while, he gives up as the bubbles disappear.

I shake my head, tucking away my phone. I know he'll get me the info when it's ready, even if he's pissy when he does it.

Pushing up from the couch, I walk into my bedroom with the intent to shower and get ready for when the hit comes through. Sir Ichabod chirps from his crate, derailing my plans.

"My precious baby boy." I croon, crossing the room and unlatching the metal to pull him into my arms. He chitters away, nuzzling against me in an attempt to roam free.

Chuckling, I set him down, watching as he darts about the room. An uneasy feeling settles low in my gut as I watch him, a gnawing sensation I've become familiar with in the time I've been separated from Fallon.

As he moves to explore the rest of the apartment, the melancholy spreading through me deepens. It makes no sense, but as I watch him disappear, all I can feel is the emptiness my life is. A feeling I haven't had in a long time.

I slam the door, stomping into the house.

"Stop it right there, young lady." Linda calls out, emerging from the kitchen. Her hands are covered in flour, the apron she has tied around her waist also sprinkled with the white powder.

Rolling my eyes, I flip her off and continue my furious stomps down the hall. I beeline toward the room that has become my bedroom, opening and slamming that door as well.

This fucking sucks.

Kicking off my shoes, I fling my body face first down on the bed. I want to scream, I want to cry, I want to do something to get rid of this feeling inside of me. But somehow I know it won't do any good, nothing I do now can change what happened.

A quiet knock sounds on the door. "Go away." I grumble against the bedding, too drained to lift my head to shout the demand.

The door creaks open anyway and I let out an exasperated breath, pushing up on my hands to glare over my shoulder. "I said go away, Li-" My words cut off as I spot, not my adoptive mother, but one of the other boys her and her husband adopted and expect me to call my family.

Even though I have a family.

Had a family.

"Hey, Arri." Cooper murmurs, his easy going smile only serving to aggravate my nerves.

Huffing, I crawl up the bed and slump back against the headboard, leveling him with a venomous gaze. "What do you want, Cooper?" I bite out, crossing my arms.

He glances over his shoulder before closing the door and crossing the room. "Can I?" He gestures to the empty space beside me.

I shrug my shoulders, already feeling the volatile emotions beginning to fade, leaving behind an empty ache. Not that I'd admit it to anyone, but I'd rather not be alone when the worst of it hits.

Cooper crawls up beside me, bending one of his legs and stretching the other out in front of him. “Rough day?” He finally asks after a few moments of silence.

I scoff, rolling my eyes. “Guess you could say that.”

It really was one. Stupid Suzie Crawford found out what happened to my parents, my real parents, and made it her personal mission to terrorize me all day. Not that it’s any different than any other day with her, but this one hit extra hard as she poked fun at my dead mother and incarcerated father.

“Wanna talk about it?” Cooper offers, pulling me from the painful thoughts.

I shrug again, staring at the corner of the room. We sit in silence until I can’t take the quiet anymore. “What do you want me to say?” I snap. “My life sucks. I miss my parents. I miss my home. I miss my language .” Sighing heavily, I run a hand through my hair, wishing things were different.

It doesn’t matter that I’ve been here for several years already, that all the therapists, case workers, and judges think I should be “well adjusted” because I’m now in a “normal” home life. I’m never going to feel at home. Not here. Not where I’m not understood on the most basic level.

“Would it help if I learned?”

The quiet question startles me. Turning my gaze to meet his honey eyes, I find something reflected back at me I didn’t think I ever would again. “What do you mean?” I look away, refusing to accept the possibility I could have a friend. That there could be someone who cares about me enough to want me happy.

“Your language. Teach me.” Cooper nudges my shoulder with his, a twinkle in his eye. Almost as if he’s excited to learn.

I shake my head, pulling my knees up to my chest. “Don’t pretend you care.” I mutter, resting my chin on my bent knees.

Cooper scoffs, clutching his chest with his hand. “That is offensive. I do care.” When I don’t respond, he gently places his hand on my shoulder. “Please, give me a chance.”

Swallowing around the emotions the memory brings up, I pull out my phone, opening the contacts. My finger hovers over Cooper’s name, but I can’t bring myself to reach out to him. He’s got his own life, his own worries. He doesn’t have to add on his little sister’s bullshit, no matter how close we grew to be as kids.

An incoming text makes my decision, the expected details for the job. Clicking on the message instead, I quickly peruse the info before setting down my phone on my dresser and heading into the bathroom to get ready.

While I won’t be able to alleviate some of these feelings right now, at least I’ll have something to focus on in the meantime. Something to distract me from the aching sorrow that’s become my constant companion.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

I fidget with my glasses, glancing around the crowded restaurant. A shiver runs through my body when the door opens and a cold breeze from outside blows in.

I really should have worn a jacket.

Reaching a shaky hand forward, I pick up my glass of water and take a sip. I can vaguely hear Logan saying something, but can't bring myself to care enough to listen. My mind keeps going back to my drunken night with Arriana.

The feel of her hands on me, of her tongue licking all the right places, the sound of her groaning as she fucked me.

I shift in my seat, trying to alleviate some of the growing pressure at the memories.

"So, what do you do?" Logan's voice filters through my mind, bringing my attention back to the present.

I'm on a date.

Right.

Clearing my throat, I tuck my hair behind my ear as I take another drink of water. "Oh, me?" I mumble, glancing up at him.

He's an attractive man. His dark hair is trimmed short, a layer of stubble lines his

jaw. Sharp cheekbones and a pair of bushy eyebrows accentuate his brown eyes.

I blink as I stare at his eyes, the color reminding me so much of someone else. Someone I shouldn't be thinking about, but can't seem to stop myself.

At my silence, he chuckles and nods his head. "Yes, you." He looks around the room. "Unless there's another gorgeous girl I was supposed to meet for dinner." Horror overtakes his expression as he gasps, "Oh shit, you are Fallon, right?" My eyes widen until a smirk covers his face.

Oh, he's fucking with me.

Rolling my eyes, I let out a quiet laugh, twirling my water glass in my hands. "Ha ha." I flick my eyes up to his, a smile tipping up the corners of my lips at the boyish grin on his face.

Leaning forward, Logan clasps his hands on the table. "So, tell me all about you ." He insists.

The rest of the date goes...well. I hate to admit that I actually had fun once I loosened up a bit. His personality was playful and easy to get along with. We talked about everything and anything, save for the one thing my mind couldn't stay away from. But at the end of the night when we pulled up to the condominium, my stomach dropped.

Sitting beside him, I pick at my nails. "So, um..." I mumble, trying so desperately to want this.

It's the right thing.

I peek at him out of the corner of my eye, finding him watching me with a look that

has me gulping.

This is how it should be.

Logan reaches a hand toward me, tucking my hair behind my ear as he leans closer. My breath catches as I force myself to stay still. His lips press to mine and I feel...nothing.

I sit there, allowing him to kiss me. I can't tell if he's getting any real enjoyment out of it either, until his hand slips down to my thigh and he moans into my mouth.

Gasping, I lean back, fumbling with the door as I try to find the handle. "This was, um, fun." I blurt out, releasing a small breath of relief when my fingers close around the cold metal. Opening the door, I clamber out backward, leaving a shocked Logan halfway bent over the seat.

Without another word, I give him a small wave and dash inside. I don't know what he's thinking. Well, maybe I do. He's probably thinking I'm crazy or something along those lines.

I groan as I can almost hear what my mom is going to say when she finds out. Because she will. All the women in her circle are gossips, The Real Housewives level. And while I enjoy watching the drama unfold on the screen, I loathe being involved, let alone the center of it.

Fumbling with my purse, I pull out the spare key that Killian made for me when I moved in, breathing a sigh of relief when I twist the lock and the doors open to my temporary home.

Ava looks up from the couch where she's snuggled up to her husband. Her smile fades as she studies my expression. Extracting herself from Killian's arm, she walks

over and pulls me against her. “Oh, Fallon.” She murmurs, running her hand down my hair.

I cling to her, dropping my bag on the floor. A quiet cry breaks free from my chest as my body shakes.

“Shhh. It’s okay, babe.” Pressing her cheek to my head, she wraps her arms around me in a tight hug. “Do you want to talk about it?” Ava asks, her tone concerned.

I know what she’s thinking. What I would be thinking if the situation were reversed.

Shaking my head, I pull back and wipe the tears away. “No.” I hiccup, bending to pick up my purse. “I’m f-fine. I just...I think I’m going to take a bath.” I can feel two sets of eyes follow me as I trudge down the hall, but I don’t look back.

After I gather my things from the bedroom, I head toward the guest bath, pausing my steps when I hear low voices drift down the hall.

“I’m worried about her.” Ava’s voice sounds, the worry bleeding into her tone.

“I know, baby girl.” Killian soothes. “But she needs to figure this out on her own.” Ava sighs heavily in response.

I don’t wait to see if they say anything else. Slipping into the bathroom, I start the water, testing the temperature before putting in the drain plug and pouring in my rose scented foaming bath soap. I watch the bubbles form as the water fills the tub, my mind whirling with thoughts I don’t know how to fight.

I felt nothing.

My mind drifts back to the kiss, to Logan pressing his soft lips against mine.

No, that's not true.

Tears fill my eyes, the drops falling to add to the liquid filling the bath.

I felt guilty.

Like I betrayed her.

A strangled noise leaves me as I bury my face in my hands.

If this is the right thing, why does it hurt so fucking bad?

“Hey, baby.”

I smile up at Arriana. Closing my book, I move to perch on my knees so we're eye level. “Hey.” I breathe, running my hands along her sides and resting them on her hips.

A sly smirk lifts the corner of her lips. Glancing at my discarded novel, she bends to snatch it up. “And what do we have here, hmm?” My cheeks flame as I watch her open to the page I left off. As she reads, her brows slide higher up her forehead and her eyes widen. “Well, I...have some questions.”

I shrink back into the couch, wrapping my arms around my knees. Refusing to meet her gaze, I look anywhere but directly at her.

“Is that...are you interested in playing some of this out?” My head shoots up and I stare at her with wide eyes. Huffing a laugh, Arriana sinks into the seat beside me, pulling me into her lap. “I might have different equipment, baby, but you say the word and I'll make your fantasies come to life.”

I open my mouth to reply, but the words stick in my throat as the room melts away. A scream catches in my throat as I watch Arriana disappear, only to find myself all alone, bound and gagged in a darkened room.

Thrashing against the binds wrapped around my wrists and ankles, I scream into the cloth, desperate to escape this hell I've found myself in.

"Fallon. Baby, it's okay, I'm right here."

I whip my head around the room, trying to find her in the darkness, but I can't.

"Arriana." My cry is muffled by the cloth shoved between my teeth, and no matter how many times I try to free myself, I can't.

I'm trapped. Alone. And fucking terrified.

Gasping, I shoot upright, a hoarse cry escaping my lips as my consciousness fights for dominance. I blink several times, trying to adjust my eyes to the dark room. With a sense of relief, I lift my arms to find they're free, the binds of my dream just that. A dream.

Sucking in deep breaths, I work to calm my racing heart. As my breathing evens out, a deep sense of loneliness settles over me, seeping into the deepest parts of my being.

I don't know if I can keep doing this.

"I don't know if I'm strong enough." The thought slips out as a quiet whisper.

Curling up into a ball, I hug my knees to my chest and do something I didn't think I would ever do again.

I pray.

“Please, just...help me do the right thing.”

My whispered plea goes unanswered as all my prayers have, but I still find myself crying out for help. Begging for someone to listen, because I don't know what's right.

When I remember that kiss with Logan, I feel sick, I feel wrong . But when I remember all the moments, all the memories with Arriana, I feel my soul crying out for her.

But does that make it right? Does me needing her more than I need the breath in my lungs, does that make what we had good ? Or does that mean they were right, that I'm wrong, that I'm broken and sinful and destined for hell because of who I love?

My questions whirl in my mind, a tumultuous blend of terror, hope, guilt, and shame. And even still, I get no answer, no divine sign from the almighty. No burning bush or strike of lightning.

I get nothing but an empty bed and an aching soul.

“Okay, spill.” Ava demands, leaning her hip against the counter.

I chew on my lip, looking down at the steaming cup of coffee in my hands. I'm exhausted. After my breakdown last night, I was able to doze off again for a few more hours of restless sleep as my dreams and memories bombarded my subconscious, only serving to further confuse me.

Huffing, Ava pushes off the counter and opens the cupboard. I peek up at her, watching as she stretches up and pulls down a bottle. I raise an eyebrow as she spins around, a conspiratorial grin on her face. “Don't tell Killian.” She whispers, her smile

widening when a small grin of my own pushes up my lips.

Walking toward the island, Ava unscrews the bottle of Irish whiskey before pouring some into my coffee mug with a wink. I giggle, bringing the spiked drink to my lips and swallowing some down. Choking on the harsh burn, I try to keep from spilling the hot liquid all over myself. “Jesus, Ava.” I laugh, shaking my head.

“What?” She asks innocently, turning to pour some of the amber liquid into her own coffee.

I chuckle and take another sip, enjoying the warmth traveling down my chest as I swallow. A few more drinks and I can feel some of the anxiety seep away, replaced by a fuzzy glow, a lightness I haven’t felt since before the wedding.

Ava watches me as she sips her own Irish coffee. “So,” She starts, raising an eyebrow. “Ready to tell me what happened last night?”

I roll my lips, reaching up a hand to adjust my glasses before running my fingers through my hair. “Nothing happened.” I mumble, my face flushing at the lie.

Ava rolls her eyes, scoffing, “Bullshit.” I glance up at her, my eyebrows raised. “Oh, don’t give me that look, babe. You came in practically in tears then ran off.” Leaning over the island, she holds my gaze while reaching out a hand to take my trembling one, stroking my skin with her thumb. “You can tell me anything, you know that right?” I nod, biting my bottom lip. Her lips tick up on one end as she snickers, “I’m not above chopping some balls off if I have to.”

I stare at her with wide eyes before bursting into laughter, the alcohol making us both a little giddy as we fall into giggles.

“Okay, but seriously.” Ava laughs, wiping her finger under her eyes. “Did something

happen on the date?”

Staring into her hazel eyes, I gulp down one more drink of liquid courage and nod my head. Ava’s forehead creases, but she doesn’t say anything, giving me the space to gather my thoughts.

“Things were fine. Logan was...nice.” I shrug, chewing on my lip again. “Actually, I kinda had fun.” I admit, guilt eating me up at the admittance.

Ava offers me a small smile, continuing her soothing strokes on my hand.

Taking a deep breath, I press on. “We finished dinner and he drove me here and, um...” I trail off, squeezing my eyes shut.

It wasn’t cheating. We’re not together anymore.

It doesn’t matter how many times I tell myself it, I can’t help how I feel.

“He kissed me.” I whisper, ducking my head and hiding behind my hair.

Ava doesn’t say anything, the room falling to a heavy silence as she processes both my words and reaction. After several long moments, she squeezes my hand, waiting for me to look up before quietly asking, “Did you like it?”

Ava knows. She knows how I felt about her, how I feel about Arriana, how I’ve always felt about members of my same sex. But we’ve never talked about it, not really.

Something about having to form the words, to admit the truth out loud, it’s too much.

“It’s a phase.”

A tear slips down my cheek as I shake my head.

Ava's eyes soften as she lets go of my hand and swipes away the teardrop. "That's okay, babe." She reassures me.

I shake my head again, setting down my mug a little more forcefully than I mean to. Leaping back to avoid the coffee that spilled over the side, I throw my hands up in the air. "Is it though?" I cry, all of my desperate feelings crashing into me, a storm of confusion raging inside.

Ava silently grabs a kitchen towel from its hanger on the island and wipes up the spilled coffee. I watch her clean up my mess and it makes me angry.

It's my fault.

Gripping my hair at my scalp, I pull hard as I swallow down a frustrated shriek.

Why can't I be normal?

The thoughts swirl in my head. The desire to be the perfect child, to do the right thing. The need to make everyone else happy.

"But what about me?" I mumble the words out loud. "Wh-why can't I have what makes me happy?" Looking up at my concerned friend, my voice breaks as I sob, "Why is that so wrong?" What little energy I had left escapes with the question, a deep exhaustion settling into my bones. Sinking my head into my hands, I give into the painful ache and let the tears flow freely down my cheeks.

"Oh, Fallon." Ava breathes, dropping the towel and coming around to wrap me up in her arms. "What will make you happy?" She asks, squeezing me tight against her.

I hiccup, shaking my head. “It do-doesn’t matter.” I mumble miserably. Because it doesn’t. It never has.

“Hey.” She snaps, holding me out at arms length to level me with a stern look. “It does fucking matter. And whatever it is, we’re going to make it happen. Do you hear me?”

My lips tremble as I nod my head, willing the words to be true. I want so desperately to be happy, to stop this aching emptiness inside of me.

Ava’s expression softens as she returns my nod. “Okay, good.” Rubbing her hands up and down my arms, she insists, “Now, tell me what you want.”

Taking a deep breath, I slowly release it as I feel something click inside of me.

I can’t keep doing this.

The right thing can’t feel this wrong.

The thought feels like an answer. Like I’ve finally gotten a response to my desperate pleas.

The right thing can’t feel this wrong.

I repeat it to myself, my certainty growing. Letting my eyes close, I picture the last time I was happy. A small smile spreads across my face as I relive the memory.

“You are stunning, mi vida .” Arriana hums, circling my waist and pulling me back against her. “How did I get so lucky? ? Qué hice para merecerte ?”

I giggle, trying to finish applying my makeup while being held captive in her arms.

“You know I don’t understand a word you say when you speak in Spanish, right?”

“Hmm.” Arriana hums. “ Está bien. Te ese?aré. Tenemos todo el tiempo del mundo .”
I roll my eyes at her in the reflection, unable to hide the smile on my face.

Sure, I really don’t understand anything she’s saying to me, but I love when she says it.

“Want to know another promise, baby?”

I giggle again. “My love, I didn’t even know you made me a promise.”

Ignoring me, Arriana gently moves my hair back, leaning to whisper in my ear, “ La próxima boda en la que estaremos es la nuestra, mi bella diosa .”

Blinking open my eyes, I can’t contain the smile that has spread across my face at the memory. I still don’t know what she said to me, but I do know one thing.

I was happy.

So, I open my mouth and voice the thing I want more than I’ve ever wanted anything.
More than reality drama, more than books, more than the words themself.

Opening myself up, I finally make the decision to say fuck it to everything and everyone else.

Because this feels right. The way I feel when I think about us.

And that’s what I’m going to go with from now on.

The love that bubbles up at the thought of her.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

I sip at my coffee, leaning back in my seat, feet propped up on the dashboard.

It's been days of surveillance and almost time to be able to act. I can feel the excitement buzzing beneath my skin growing the closer it comes to being time to let out my need for violence.

This particular hit is one I've been looking forward to, and one I know Killian is going to be pissed he missed out on. I mull over the particulars of the job, the target a familiar name.

Thomas Fox.

My mind wanders back to the hit that changed everything. The one he ordered.

I slip on one of the uniforms, glancing down at the fake ID to find my name for this job is Juliette Cassidy. Peeking over at Killian's, I let out a quiet chuckle at his. Casper Montegoul doesn't quite fit the brooding man, but I like the nod to our purpose here. Just adding a few more ghosts to the world.

Killian waits for me to indicate I'm ready before we proceed toward the house. Something about this job isn't sitting well with me. It's not the first time we've been sent after someone I would deem unworthy of meeting their maker, but this particular case has me fidgeting as we grow closer.

We pause at the front door, readying ourselves for what's about to come next. I wait

for the usual excitement to build up, but find an uneasy feeling in its stead.

Killian looks to me, waiting to make sure I'm ready. Pushing down the unfamiliar feelings, I give him a curt nod. He reaches forward and raps his knuckles on the wooden door.

"Hold on!" A voice calls out from the other side.

We wait in uncomfortable silence for several moments before the door is opened, revealing a boy in his late twenties. Our target, Kenneth Ellington.

He eyes us suspiciously, angling the door between his body and ours.

Smart guy.

I allow the smile at the thought to spread on my face, hoping it helps to alleviate some of the tension.

Killian steps forward, extending his hand. "Hi, I'm Casper, and this is-"

"Juliette." I cut him off, smiling wider at Kenneth.

Killian proceeds with the ploy, explaining to him that we're here to install some sort of solar stuff. Whatever he says is enough to earn the trust we need to make our way inside.

Each step that brings us closer to ending Kenneth's life fills me with dread. It's infuriating. Usually the promise of bloodshed has me bouncing on the balls of my feet. But this time?

I glance around the walls, finding evidence of the humanitarian our target is. That

mixed with all the information I bribed Andrew into giving me on how sleezy the man who ordered the hit is. Well, none of it sits well with me. But we don't get a say in it, not while Charles is in charge.

We pivot toward the living room, Killian having dropped the ruse and directing Kenneth toward his fate. "I really wish we didn't have to do this." Killian's admittance surprises me.

I study him closely, finding the same hard set to his jaw and uneasy tension lining his shoulders. Somehow the fact that this job has him just as unsettled as me makes things better yet infinitely worse.

Surprising me further, Killian offers for him to leave a goodbye message. Something unheard of in our profession. Once finished, Kenneth hands over the paper and pen he was given to scribble his last goodbye. "Thank you." He murmurs.

My eyebrows raise at the words, definitely another first.

"You didn't have to give me a kind death." He explains. "Didn't have to allow me to say goodbye." A quiet hiccup breaks free from him, and I find I have to blink back moisture in my own eyes. "I don't know how you ended up here, but there's some good in you. Don't let the darkness consume you. There's not enough light in the world as is."

I blink away the memory, watching the empty house as the sun begins to set. It's only a matter of time now before Thomas will be home and I'll be able to pay him back for what part he had in the ending of that boy's life.

I still often think about what the world would be like if Kenneth had been allowed to live. He was snuffed out too soon, and I'll make sure Thomas feels the full extent of the loss.

While it probably doesn't make up for it, Killian and I made the decision early on that our company would make anonymous donations to the various charities that Kenneth had contributed to before his early demise, all made in his name.

When Andrew brought the idea of forming our own business after Charles' death, I had the idea to name our company FindingLight after the hit that changed everything. The one that opened both mine and Killian's eyes to the way things were but didn't have to be. And, while it might seem like an oxymoron due to the nature of our business, I've found the name often serves as a reminder to hold onto our humanity amidst the darkness. To find the light where we can.

Plus it looked really good on paper. Much better than the back up plan of Three Amigos Killing Crew.

Chuckling to myself, I make up my mind to text Killian the info, knowing he'll be upset to have missed out on the chance to avenge Kenneth's death.

Grandpa

On my way

I settle back into my seat, taking another drink, relishing in the anticipation of the kill. A grin spreads across my face.

I've got some ideas.

Thomas climbs out of his fancy sports car, clicking the button to lock the doors. The beep echoes loudly in the darkened streets.

"Thanks for reaching out." Killian murmurs, surprising me.

Pushing aside the shock, I clap his shoulder. “Sure thing, old man. Wouldn’t be the same without you.” I let out a quiet chuckle as I climb out of the vehicle, slipping on a pair of gloves.

Walking around the front of the car, I meet Killian, waiting for his signal to proceed. There’s no clever ruses this time around, only simple, clear cut murder. He nods his head and we both pull on masks, needing the extra precaution given the high profile case.

A smile lifts my lips as we creep up to the front door. I spot the sign on the window stating the house is under the protection of surveillance and have to stifle my laugh. People underestimate what someone is capable of if given the right resources and know how. And with our in-house computer genius, the monitoring system has already been disengaged.

Killian makes quick work of lock picking the front door, pushing the door open silently and waving me inside. I salute him as I pass, earning an eye roll.

The entryway is dark, only lit by a small motion sensor light plug in. The sounds of a TV echo down the hall, making our destination clear.

This is too easy.

I grow giddy at the thought, ready for something to go my way.

We sneak down the hall, pausing just at the entrance to the living room. I peek around the corner, finding our target facing away from us, his focus on the TV as he nurses a beer bottle. Looking to Killian, I jerk my head toward the back of Thomas, reaching into my pocket to pull out the hunting knife I brought along.

We slip into the room, circling Thomas to block the exits to the room.

“Hate to spoil the ending, but he dies.” Thomas jumps at the sound of my voice, whipping his head in my direction. I shrug, gesturing toward the TV. “Sorry not sorry.”

He looks at me with horrified eyes, gulping and demanding, “Who are you?” I smirk at the quiver in his voice.

Taking a step closer, I twirl the knife in my hand, watching the blood drain from his face. “Me? I’m no one. Just an instrument of destruction. A method of demise.” His confusion mingles with the palpable fear. Sighing heavily, I place a hand on my hip, waving the weapon around in the air with my other. “A hired hand. Murderer for sale. Any of this ringing a bell?” I can see the moment it clicks in his mind and the satisfaction I feel as the remaining color drains is indescribable.

He leaps to his feet, darting toward the other exit, only to run into the hard wall of muscles that is my co-conspirator for this job. Killian grips his arm, jerking him around to face me without a word.

Tsking, I slowly cross the room with a shake of my head. “Tommy, Tommy, Tommy.” I hum. “Did you really think you could get away?”

Thomas shakes in Killian’s hold, looking feverishly between us. “Wh-what are you doing here? I p-paid. I did nothing wrong!” His cries grate at my nerves, the audacity of the asshole to act like he’s innocent in all this.

“You did nothing wrong?” I echo, cocking my head at him.

He nods wildly, the stupid idiot thinking he’s somehow found a way to talk his way out of this. “Y-yeah. Just ask Charles,” I chuckle in response, my laughter growing as he awkwardly joins in. He laughs nervously, glancing between us again. “See? So, just check with your boss and we’ll be all square. Chalk this up to a mi-

misunderstanding.”

My quiet laughter dies out as I bring the tip of the blade to his chin, lifting his head with the slightest pressure against his skin. “Charles is dead.” My emotionless declaration sucks the air out of Thomas’ lungs.

“Wait, b-” Before he can say whatever bullshit he was about to spout out, I angle my wrist, slicing into his flesh. He shrieks, tugging against Killian’s grip, the blood trickling down his jaw drips onto his body and the floor with his erratic movements. “You fucking bitch !” He shouts, his eyes wild with rage.

I smile sweetly, reaching my free hand forward to tap his head. “Now, now. No need for name calling.” Looking over his shoulder, I meet Killian’s gaze and jerk my head toward the couch Thomas was seated on.

Without a word, Killian drags him across the room, not even flinching at his desperate attempts to break free. Once in front of the sofa, he shoves Thomas down, crossing his arms to block his exit.

I skip across the room, giddy with the bloodlust pulsing through my veins. “Thanks, grandpa.” I singsong, laughing at his scowl. “So, we made Kenneth’s death quick and painless. I’m thinking we do the opposite for Tommy boy here. What do you think?” Thomas whimpers at my question, only serving to further my enthusiasm.

Killian surprises me by smiling my way. “I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but I agree.”

The pure euphoric response that comes from his agreement has me ripping off my mask, needing to fully enjoy the moment. “You hear that, Tommy?” I whisper conspiratorially, leaning behind the couch to speak low into his ear. “This is going to hurt.” On the last word, I stab the blade into his shoulder, relishing in the scream that

erupts from him.

Killian glances around, snatching up the TV remote and turning up the volume to drown out the cries.

I rip my knife from Thomas' flesh, watching the blood pour from the wound. Something in the howls of pain and crimson liquid settles the frustration that has been building up inside of me since my last encounter with my baby. I find the nerves ease as I inflict pain on this asshole.

With that thought fueling me, I grip one of his wrists, jerking his arm up. "Wh-what are you doing?" He cries moments before I jab the blade into the palm of his hand. His shrieks echo loudly in the room, tears pouring down his face.

"Hey, there there. It will all be over soon." I soothe, releasing his wrist and patting the side of his face with my bloodied hand. I set the knife down on the couch behind his neck, gripping his wrist once more. Bringing his hand up in the air, I proceed to snap each of his fingers before doing the same to his other hand.

"Ple-please sto-" His plea is cut off as I press the blade against his throat.

"Not so fun when you're on the receiving end, is it?" I hum, reaching into my back pocket to pull out a pair of knitting needles. Holding them up, I glance up at Killian. "You want to do the honors?"

He looks between Thomas and me, his expression unreadable behind the black ski mask. After a few moments, he reaches forward and takes the offered needles. "For Kenneth." Is all he says as he jabs each one into Thomas' eyes.

I take a step back, removing the knife from his throat as I watch his body jerk. The needles must have hit some sort of nerve or wire pathway or something in his brain as

his twitching continues long after the life has drained from his body.

Looking up from the dead man, I meet Killian's gaze, a smile spread across my face.
"That was fun."

He grunts his agreement and begins the arduous task of cleaning up. Once we've erased any evidence we were in the room, we exit the house and make our way toward our vehicles. Without a word, Killian climbs into his car and drives off, leaving me to gape after his sudden exit.

"Here I thought this would be a whole bonding moment." I grumble under my breath as I climb into the back of the van, quickly changing and shoving the knife, soiled clothing, and gloves into a trash bag to dispose of later.

After a quick inspection of myself in the rearview mirror, I climb into the driver's seat and begin my journey home. I can already feel the melancholy settling in again at the thought of returning home to my empty condo.

An infuriating realization hits me as I grow closer to my home.

The kills aren't enough anymore.

Not after I've had her . I called her my life, and I never realized how true the name was. Because my existence is empty without her.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

I wring my hands in my lap, my leg bouncing. I haven't been this nervous about seeing her since that night, but this time it's for an entirely different reason.

I probably should have texted her, given her some sort of heads up. I'll blame the liquor in my system for this momentary lapse of judgment. Not that I drank that much, only the one spiked coffee, okay maybe two.

The sound of the lock twisting sends my already erratic heartbeat into overdrive.

What if she doesn't want me anymore?

I shake my head at the thought. If the constant messages she still sends me are any indicator, I think I'll be welcomed back with open arms. At least I hope so.

Standing up from the couch, I fiddle with the teddy nightgown. It's one of Arriana's favorites, and I might have worn it on purpose in hopes it would put more points in my favor.

The door swings open and Arriana slumps through the doorway, her expression exhausted and downtrodden. Slinking into the apartment, she pushes the door closed and leans her forehead against it with a heavy sigh.

I gulp, shifting on my feet.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

Before I can give the thought too much focus, she pushes off the door and turns around, her eyes widening when they land on me. I smile awkwardly, ducking my head to peer up at her through my lashes.

“Mi vida ?” She whispers, blinking her eyes as if she thinks I’m a mirage.

My smile widens as I nod my head, whispering back, “Hi.”

Time freezes as she slowly drags her gaze down my body, her eyes darkening as she takes in the blush colored lingerie. Her tongue flicks out, licking her lips as she drops her keys and phone on the counter. Taking a step toward me, she hesitates, darting her eyes up to mine.

My brows furrow as I watch her study my face. Her eyes sadden as she finds whatever it is she was looking for. “What is it?” I mumble, feeling like I’ve made a big mistake.

She doesn’t want me anymore. Why would she after I ripped her heart to pieces and lit it on fire?

Walking toward me, she stops and slips a hand under my chin, lifting my gaze to meet hers. “Are you drunk again?” My frown deepens at the question.

Shaking my head, I start to say no, but then remember the two, alright fine, three drinks I had earlier. “I mean, kind of, but-” My words cut off as I watch her close her eyes, her face distorting in pain.

Reaching a hand up, I trail my fingers down her face, shivering at the electricity sparking at the touch. “Why does that make you sad?” The question slips out before I can stop it.

She flinches, blinking open her eyes. “No reason, mi vida .” Arriana murmurs, sliding her hand on my chin around the back of my neck. Pulling my face toward hers, she presses her lips against mine.

I grip her shirt, clinging to her as I moan into the kiss.

Her fingers tighten on the back of my neck, her hips pressing against mine. “Fuck, I missed you.” She breathes against my lips.

I roll my hips, needing to feel her, to reconnect as I claim her, claim us . She slips her free hand down my body, teasing my lips before pushing a finger inside of my pussy. I moan again, opening my mouth and allowing her to slip her tongue inside.

This is right.

I don’t know why I ever let their words convince me otherwise.

Arriana pulls her hand from me, a whimper slipping from my lips at the loss. Chuckling, she strokes my hair. “It’s okay, baby. I’ve got you.” Pressing a kiss to my forehead, she pushes me onto the couch so I’m lying on my back, moving to straddle my body.

I watch as she pulls her top off, her nimble fingers removing her bra to reveal the most perfect pair of breasts I’ve ever seen.

Fuck, I missed them.

Reaching my hands up, I massage the soft pillows, relishing in the groan that she releases at my touch. Biting my lip, I flick her nipples, wishing I could take them between my teeth.

Sensing my desire, Arriana chuckles, bending over to hover her tits over my face. I latch onto one of her breasts, licking and sucking on her pebbled nipple. A warmth pools low in my pelvis as she wriggles from my attention. Releasing her breast, I run my thumb over the hard nub. "I missed you." I whisper.

Arriana laughs again, pulling my focus to her. "Are you talking to me or my tits?" She chuckles.

My face flames at her question. Because I was absolutely talking to her breasts. Sticking my tongue out, I successfully avoid the question.

She shakes her head, a small smile ghosting her lips. Sitting upright, she reaches into her pockets to empty them. I catch sight of her pocket knife and another flash of heat hits me. Before I've had the conscious thought to do so, I grip her wrist, stopping her from dropping it onto the floor.

She lifts her eyebrow at me, a slow smirk covering her face. "Oh, you want to play?" She asks, flicking open the knife.

I nod, my breath coming in pants.

Humming, she shifts down my body, moving to kneel between my legs. I hold my breath as she presses the flat edge of the blade against my thigh, gliding it up my skin.

"So fucking perfect." She praises, pushing a finger inside of me as she twists the knife to press the sharp edge against my thigh. I gasp as the blade breaks my skin, not enough to do any real damage, but enough to send a confusing mess of pleasure and pain signals to my heightened libido.

Curling her finger inside me, she moves the blade to my other thigh. I resist the urge

to lift my hips, needing to feel more. Chuckling again, she adds another finger, the burn on my thighs increasing the pleasure from her fingers pumping in and out of my pussy.

I can feel the pressure growing as she works me up, fucking me with her fingers and marking me with her blade. Twisting her wrist, she presses her thumb against my clit. “Oh god.” I gasp, my back arching from the overwhelming sensations.

The sound of the knife clattering on the floor distracts me momentarily before Arriana covers my body with hers. Still pumping her fingers and circling my clit, she presses her lips to mine, forcing her tongue into my mouth.

I groan, spearing my fingers into her short hair. Holding her as close to me as I can, I whimper into her mouth when her free hand moves to pinch my nipple. “Please.” I beg around her lips, near delirious with need. I don’t know what I’m begging for, whether it’s for my release or for her or both. All I know is I need it. I need it all.

Speeding up her movements, she fucks me hard with her fingers, my cries growing louder with each thrust of her wrist. “Oh fuck, oh fuuuuck.” I cry, arching into her as my vision darkens and my body convulses.

Tears prick at my eyes as I come back down, my head swimming from the overwhelming sensations. Moving my hands to cup her face, I peer into her beautiful brown eyes, my heart breaking at the pain shining in them. Taking a deep breath, I will myself to say the words. To tell her how I feel. How I’ve always felt.

Arriana watches me, her face growing confused then concerned as I continue to stare at her wordlessly. She opens her mouth to say something, but I silence her with my lips.

Pulling apart when we’re breathless, I hold her gaze once more as I whisper, “I love

you.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

"I love you."

The words repeat in my head on a loop. It's the first time she's said them since she left, and I don't know what to do.

Is this a drunken expression of some deep desire? Or has she come back to me, where she belongs?

I can't let myself hope for the latter, my heart won't be able to handle that level of agony. To have the proverbial carrot dangled in front of me, just to watch it be tossed away again when the morning comes.

Peering down at her with a smile that doesn't reach my eyes, I move my hand up to stroke her face. "Te amo, mi vida." I murmur, my heart cracking open as she nuzzles my hand.

She smiles up at me, opening her mouth to say something when a loud buzzing fills the room. Her eyes dart to her phone lying face down on the coffee table.

Sighing, I push up, reaching over to grab it for her.

Fallon props up on her elbows, pressing a soft kiss to my lips before taking the cell phone. Her smile fades as she looks at it. I quirk an eyebrow, looking down to see Mom flash across the screen.

The phone stops ringing and she releases a breath of relief until it starts buzzing again. Her forehead creases as she flicks her eyes between me and the phone.

I cock my head at her, gesturing toward the device. “You gonna answer that?”

She bites her lip, looking nervous as she nods her head. My eyes narrow, but she quickly avoids my gaze, sliding to answer. “Hey, Mom, now’s not the best-”

Her words are cut off as a hysterical cry comes through the speaker.

“Wow, slow down. What happened?” Fallon’s face falls, tears welling up in her eyes. “Where are you?” She asks, her voice barely a whisper. Listening intently to whatever is said, she hangs up the call and lets the phone fall onto her chest.

My heart beats wildly, the need to take away the pain I can see radiating from her nearly overwhelms me. “What is it, baby?” I murmur, stroking back her hair.

With trembling lips, she lifts her eyes up to me, the tears welling up slipping down her face. “My brother.” She whispers. “He-he’s been in an accident.”

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Fallon

I'm going to be sick.

This is not how I imagined the night going, not by a long shot.

I sit in the chair, my back ramrod straight. Arriana sits beside me, my hand clasped in hers a small comfort that does nothing to quell the terror as we sit and wait to find out how bad it is. How bad he is.

My mind keeps flashing back to our last conversation and his text I never answered. He had tried so hard to open up the communication, but I didn't listen. Instead, I brushed him off, and now...

A choked sound breaks free from my chest. Arriana immediately pulls me into her arms, pressing a kiss to my forehead and rubbing soothing circles on my back.

I can feel my family's stares at the familiar way she comforts me, but I can't bring myself to care.

I'll have to tell them eventually, why not at the same time we wait to find out if Hudson's habit killed him this time.

A hysterical laugh bubbles up.

Forever the disappointments.

Scarlett sneers at me as my parents watch me like I've lost my mind.

Maybe I have. Maybe this is what it feels like to go crazy.

Before I can get too lost in the thought, calloused hands cup my face, tipping my head back. I blink around my tears at Arriana as she watches me with a worried expression. Reaching up, I run my thumb over her furrowed brow, only making her frown deepen.

"Baby," She whispers, her eyes shifting to my family and back. "Are you okay?"

I laugh again, shaking my head. "No. No, I'm not okay." My voice comes out louder than I mean, but I can't stop it, can't keep back the words screaming to be heard. "This is all such bullshit. If he never...if he didn't have to..." I take a deep breath, trying to piece together the right words from the jumbled mess of my mind. "If he hadn't been forced to hide himself, to fight against who he is, then he would never have turned to those goddamn drugs and we wouldn't be here now."

My words hang in the silent room, a heaviness settling over us as everyone soaks in their meaning.

My mom speaks first, gaping at me. "Are you seriously implying this is our fault?" She gasps.

I turn my gaze to her, the mental exhaustion and alcohol still buzzing in my system allowing me to voice what I never thought I could. "Yes. He's here because of you. Because of what you did to him."

Scarlett scoffs, rolling her eyes while my mom and dad share a look. My dad turns his gaze back to me. "Fallon, you can't possibly blame us for your brother's reckless actions."

Leaping to my feet, I ball my hands into fists. “Actually, yes I can.” I snap, shaking from the anger and sorrow coursing through me. Arriana places her hand on my lower back but doesn’t say anything, simply showing her support with the touch. I relax slightly, knowing I’m not alone.

Taking a deep breath, I move my gaze over my family, the ones who have hurt us so deeply I’m not sure the wounds will ever heal. “You forced him to push down who he is. You sent him to that goddamn camp . No fucking wonder he turned to drugs to numb the pain.” My voice shakes as I all but scream the words in their horrified faces. “Sure, you might not have put the needle in his arm, you might not have forced him onto that motorcycle. But you did cause this. You caused it all.”

When the last word leaves my lips, all the anger flees with it. I’m left with an endless hollowness inside, a never ending despair. Sinking into my seat, I drop my head in my hands.

Please be okay, Hudson.

My heart cries out for my brother, wanting him to have the chance to find himself. And wanting, more than anything, to get the chance to reconnect - to show him he’s not alone in all this.

I send up a silent prayer to a god that doesn’t care about people like us. About those who don’t fall into his perfect little cookie cutter human mold. But even still, my agonized pleas rise to the heavens, desperate they’ll be heard.

Please.

Hours pass and no one says a word. The only time we speak is when the nurse comes out to provide updates on Hudson’s condition.

A police officer stopped by at one point to discuss the accident, only serving to fuel my frustration with this godforsaken world as he all but painted my brother as the run-of-the-mill junkie.

Asshole knows nothing.

I had to bite my lip to keep from lashing out at the beat cop for just doing his job.

I hardly recognize myself anymore, the revelations of the last 24 hours hitting me hard amongst the emotional turmoil I find myself in. Pushing back up to my feet, I stumble toward the restroom. I can sense Arriana following behind me and can feel the stares of my family boring into my back. With a shake of my head, I realize I don't care. It doesn't matter what they must be thinking, it doesn't matter what they'll say to me the next time we're alone.

Fuck them.

Why did I care for so long what they thought?

Pushing open the door, I make a beeline for the sinks, splashing cold water onto my face. Arriana rubs soothing circles on my back as I collapse against the counter. Burying my face in my hands, I sob. The sound of my cries echoing in the tiled room accompanied by the running water.

Arriana doesn't say anything, doesn't offer me empty words of comfort. Instead, she stays with me, not leaving my side as I break apart.

Gripping the counter, I peer at my reflection in the mirror. Noting my bloodshot eyes, disheveled hair, and blotchy cheeks. I look such a mess, and I can't bring myself to care.

“Why?” I whisper to no one in particular, staring into my blank eyes.

“I don’t know, baby.” Arriana murmurs, stroking her hand down my hair.

I nod my head, because of course. Who the fuck knows why anything happens.

My mind wanders to the books I love so much, remembering the trauma and tragedy my favorite characters had to go through to get their happily ever afters.

A watery laugh slips from my lips as I can’t help but wish this was a book, that I could somehow know that I was destined for my happily ever after. My mind drifts to my brother once more.

That we both are.

But I push aside the thought, because this isn’t a story, it isn’t just words on a page, and in life you’re not guaranteed happiness.

My chest spasms as I stumble away from the counter and toward one of the stalls.

Maybe life will be kind, maybe it will imitate art.

Maybe, just maybe, we’ll all make it out happy in the end.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

Stretching, I suppress a groan as I lean to whisper in Fallon's ear. "I'm going to get some coffee, I'll be right back." She nods wordlessly in response.

It's been hours since her breakdown in the bathroom and she hasn't said a word since, just stared off into the corner. I'm trying to be patient, but the waiting is making me restless. Not that I know her brother well, or at all. But I can see the effect all of this is having on her, and it's driving me crazy not to be able to do something, anything to help.

Ignoring the glares being sent my way by her family, I walk to the other side of the lobby toward the several vending machines lining the wall. Making my way over to one that dispenses the good bean juice, I put in some change and wait for the machine to give me the much needed caffeine.

I watch the dark liquid pour into the paper cup, the tension in the air nearly suffocating. I can hear whispered conversations happening behind me and I can't hold back the memories the sound brings to the surface.

"I heard she was expelled from her last school because she was selling drugs. Like father, like daughter."

The whispered snickers reach me as I try to hide behind my metal locker, hoping if they don't notice that I've heard them, they'll just move on.

"See, I heard that she wasn't selling the drugs," Suzie's voice echoes loudly in the

hall, not even attempting to pretend to be secretive. “She was using them, and that she tried to blow a teacher to keep from getting in trouble.”

A round of gasps sounds at her blatant lie. If she really knew anything about me, she’d know I would have zero desire to get anywhere near a dick.

I shudder at the thought, quickly removing my textbooks and shutting my locker door. Turning away from the clique gossiping about me, I try to walk away, but don’t make it far.

“Where are you going, freak?” Suzie calls out, another round of snickers sounding from her entourage.

My feet freeze and I can feel a warmth spreading up my neck as I fight back the rage bubbling inside. All around us, students pause in their trek to their next class, eager to witness the brutal treatment of a fellow classmate.

Malditos pendejos.

“Well?” Suzie demands. “Where are you going?”

I gulp back the anger and embarrassment, squaring my shoulders and turning to face her. As I pivot, my eyes land on Spencer as he watches from across the hall. He glances between me and the clique of mean girls, averting his gaze and mumbling something to his own friend group.

I try to pretend like the reaction doesn’t hurt, almost able to convince myself of it. It’s not like we’re actually related or anything, just two fucked up kids forced to live together, not sure why I’d expect him to help me.

Returning my focus on my tormentor, I raise the books in my arms. “To class. Ya

know, where you should be. Unless you wanna continue failing all yours.” I shrug my shoulders, biting back the satisfied smile at her horrified expression.

Scoffing loudly, she flicks her hair behind her ear. “I’m not failing.” She retorts, placing her hand on her hip.

“Oh, that’s right, because you’re the one blowing the teacher.” Her eyes widen almost comically, and I can’t contain my laughter as I appear to have hit the nail on the head.

Suzie’s face flushes before heating up, her hands fisting at her sides. With a huff, she spins on her heels and stalks down the hall.

“I hope he’s giving you at least a B for your troubles! Unless you’re also as mediocre at giving head as you are at insults.” My laughter grows as she lifts her middle finger over her head, not even bothering to look at me, or maybe too angry to form a response.

Either way, I seem to have made my way out of this one on my own. Again.

My levity dies off and I spin on my heel, marching away from the scene and can only hope I won’t have to deal with any more insults thrown my way. At least for one day.

The coffee machine spurts, the sound drawing me back to the present.

A hushed voice reaches me, the speaker obviously not trying that hard to be quiet. “Who is she?” The one I’ve gathered to be Fallon’s sister asks. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end at the sound of her voice, the tone so similar to the snide drawl of the girl who made my life a living hell growing up.

Their mom glances at me as I make my way back toward her daughter. “I don’t know, but I don’t much care for how touchy those two are.” Fallon’s sister nods her

agreement, throwing a scowl in my direction.

I smirk back at her, lifting my middle finger.

She gasps in response, clutching her chest like she's a 1950s housewife.

Snickering, I sink into the seat beside my girl, handing her one of the cups. She takes the coffee, bringing it to her lips and taking a small drink. Leaning back into my chair, I sip at my own drink, wishing things had gone differently.

I'm still not sure where we stand, never having had the chance to dive more into her confession before Fallon received the call.

"Oh fuck." I gasp, shooting upright. Fallon looks at me, her eyes wide at the sudden outburst. Patting her thigh, I give her a reassuring smile. "I forgot to feed Sir Ichabod." Some of the tension in her shoulders relaxes at the explanation. Slipping my phone out of my pocket, I shoot off a quick text to Andrew asking him to swing by my place to take care of my baby boy.

Drewbie

You got it princess *salute emoji*

I chuckle, typing out my reply.

Me

My hero

Drewbie

Always

I'm hunting for the perfect GIF response when a throat clears, drawing my attention away from the screen.

A haggard looking, middle-aged man stands on the edge of the lobby. He's dressed in a pair of green scrubs, a brighter shade of lime green scrub cap covers his head. He slips his finger under the surgical mask covering his face, hanging it around his neck as he looks around the room. "Huxley family?" He calls, drawing the attention of the rest of Fallon's family.

I take Fallon's hand in mine, gently squeezing to reassure her that I'm here, that she's not alone. She squeezes back, her grip remaining tight as the surgeon explains Hudson's condition.

"Things were a little touch and go for a moment, but," He pauses, a weary smile crossing his face. "He should make a full recovery."

"Oh, thank god!" Fallon's mom cries, clinging to her husband. Fallon's sister smiles politely back at the surgeon, not hiding the obvious lust in her eyes as she drags her gaze down his body.

Fallon sniffles beside me, her body shaking. I gently pluck the coffee from her hand and set the cups on the floor. Turning back to her, I wrap her up in my arms, murmuring, "He's going to be okay, mi vida ." She nods her head against my chest, fisting my shirt in her hands. Setting my chin on top of her head, I tighten my hold. "Everything's going to be okay."

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

I rub my eyes, exhaustion setting in. Now that we know Hudson's going to be okay, I reluctantly agreed to Arriana taking me back home.

Home .

A smile lifts my lips as I lean my head against the chilly window.

My hand reaches for hers, interlocking our fingers as I bring our clasped hands to my lap.

She's my home.

And I've finally returned.

The early morning light filters into the room, momentarily blinding me as I blink my eyes open. Slapping my hand around, I search for my glasses, sighing when my fingers brush against them.

Snatching up the frames, I slip them on my face before I stretch, letting out a soft noise as my muscles loosen. I turn my head, squeaking as I find Arriana propped up on her elbow as she watches me. "Creepy much." I mutter, unable to hide my grin.

She hums, running her finger down the center of my chest. A shiver runs through me at her soft touch. "You stayed." She murmurs, tracing the edge of my breast.

I blink at her, tilting my head to the side. “Um, yeah?” I respond lamely.

Why wouldn't I have?

A familiar anxiety gnaws at me at the thought.

Maybe I screwed it all up. Maybe it was too little, too late.

Humming again, Arriana slides her hand down further, circling my belly button before slipping under the waistband of my stolen sweats. “I love seeing you in my clothes.” A warmth spreads through me at the possessiveness shining in her eyes. “It makes me feel like you're mine.” She whispers, leaning to hover her lips over mine. “All mine. ”

I shudder, my lips brushing against hers as I whisper back, “I am yours.” Holding my breath, I wait for her response, knowing whatever it is will be my answer.

Please still want me to be yours.

She searches my eyes, a hint of desperation filling the chestnut orbs. Her eyes darken at whatever she finds, a smug smile spreading across her face. “Mine.” She growls, taking my bottom lip between her teeth.

I gasp as she bites down, the warmth pooling in my pelvis growing as I whimper. The sound flips a switch in her. Before I can react, she yanks me down, gripping my sweats and tearing them off my body. My breaths come in heavy pants as I watch her discard her own clothes.

Peering down at me, she raises an eyebrow at my tank top. I wiggle on the mattress, desperately trying to remove the offensive material as quickly as possible. Somehow I manage to tangle myself up in the blanket, tank top, and my own hair. I let out a

frustrated groan, yanking futilely on my self imposed trap.

Arriana chuckles as she helps to untangle my mess before gripping the thin fabric of my tank. A loud rip sounds as she tears it off of my body.

Holy shit.

That is way hotter in real life than in my books.

My eyes are wide as I peer up at her, my own personal sex goddess. “That was...” I mumble, licking my lips.

Arriana smirks down at me, sliding the destroyed fabric off my body before moving to palm my breasts. I groan, arching into her skilled fingers as she massages my tits. “You alright there, baby?” She chuckles, flicking my nipples.

I mewl at the sharp sting, my body shaking with the need for more. “I...I need-” My words are cut off as she leans down and takes one of my nipples between her teeth, twisting the other between her fingers. “Oh fuck.” I gasp.

Arriana licks away the sting from her bite, running her tongue up my chest and neck. Her hot breath fans my ear as she breathes, “What do you need, baby?” Her voice is husky, showing how affected she is by this, by me .

I blink my eyes open, pulling her face toward mine. “I need you. Please, I need to feel you, I need to taste you.” I don’t know if I’m making sense, my need making me nearly delirious.

She licks her lips, her eyes darting to mine. Lifting a hand toward my face, she pulls down on my lip, tracing it with her thumb. “You trust me?” Her voice is barely a whisper as she asks the question, her eyes remaining fixated on my trembling lips.

Unable to get words past the lump in my throat, I nod wildly, my heart thundering in my chest from the nervous excitement at the promise her quiet question holds.

She bites her lip, shifting her eyes between mine before commanding, “Lie back.”

Scooting down as quickly as possible, I wait for whatever she has planned, my heart beating impossibly faster.

She shifts on the bed, moving to straddle me backwards, her ass facing me.

Oh.

My eyes widen as I realize what she has planned.

Oh, holy fuck.

Adjusting her position, Arriana moves her hips back so her pussy is hovering over my mouth. “You ready to eat, baby?” Without a second thought, I lift my hands to grip her thighs and pull her down on my face. A startled gasp sounds from her, making me smile. “I’ll take that as a yes.” She laughs, lowering her face to my own pussy.

I slide my tongue up her slit, lapping at her clit before plunging inside her delicious cunt. A moan slips through my lips as she does the same to me.

Oh-oh god. Oh fuck. Shit.

I can’t make a coherent thought to save my life, too lost in her pleasure and my own. My fingers dig into the backs of her thighs as I pull her further down, suffocating myself on her.

Our moans fill the room as we build each other up, licking and sucking like it’s our

last meal.

My body shakes as I feel my orgasm building, the sensation enhanced as I feel her quivering above me.

Working my jaw, I push my tongue in and out of her pussy, chasing her release just as much as my own. My eyes roll back as wave after wave of pleasure crash into me. Digging my fingers in harder, I pull her hips impossibly closer to my face as I blindly fuck her with my tongue, groaning as I'm rewarded with the sweet taste of her cum on my tastebuds. Her body shudders as I lick her through her orgasm, lapping up every drop she'll give me.

When the last of the tremors fade from both our bodies, Arriana carefully lifts her leg over my head, shifting around to collapse beside me. Her arm drapes over my stomach as she nuzzles my neck.

Lifting a tired arm, I brush my fingers through her hair. "I love you." I murmur, enjoying the post-orgasmic bliss.

Her arm tightens around me before she slowly pulls back to prop herself on her elbow and peer down at me. "You do?" My heart breaks at the disbelief on her face and in her voice.

I did that.

I broke the woman I thought was unbreakable.

Lifting my hand up to stroke her cheek, I bite my lip as I nod. "More than anything." My voice quivers at the quiet admittance, nervous energy bubbling up with each passing second following my whispered words.

She studies me for a moment longer before a wide grin breaks across her face. “ Yo también. Te amo, mi vida. Te amo más que la vida misma .” I don’t know what she said to me, but from the feverish kisses she places all over my face and my mouth, I can probably guess.

Because I don’t need to speak the language to know what love sounds like. What it feels like.

I giggle as she continues to assault me with her affection. “Okay, okay.” I laugh, playfully pushing her away.

She growls and comes back, nipping at my jaw again. “ Eres mía, cariño. ” She murmurs against my skin, running her hand down my side.

My brain grows hazy with lust and I try to remember why we can’t just lie in bed all day. Because that’s what I really want to do, but there’s some reason that...

“Hudson!” I gasp, sitting upright, a wave of guilt hitting me at the reminder of my brother and what he must be going through at this moment.

Arriana grumbles, crossing her arms and flopping back on the bed. “Couldn’t give me five more minutes.” Her grumbled complaint has me forcing back a smile, the shame from seeking pleasure when Hudson needs me melts away.

I needed this moment to reconnect with her, to show her that I’m here to stay and that, no matter what may be happening around us, that I’m not going anywhere. My happy place is by her side and nothing will ever convince me otherwise again.

Unable to keep the grin off my face, I roll my eyes at her before climbing off the bed and walking into the closet. My eyes land on our special box. Pausing my steps, I glance over my shoulder before quietly lifting the lid. I run my gaze over the array of

toys, one in particular sparking my interest. An idea sparks and I cover my mouth to hide the giggle.

This is probably a terrible idea, one I'm most certainly going to regret.

Despite my hesitation, I reach into the box and grab the toy, darting into the bathroom to prepare for what is about to be the best or worst decision I've made.

I shift uncomfortably in the passenger seat, seriously regretting my lust-driven decision to wear this thing .

"You okay, baby?" Arriana asks, reaching over to take my fidgeting hand.

I nod at her, biting my lip.

Shifting her eyes to me and back to the road, a sly smirk forms on her face. "Mmhmm." She hums, interlacing her fingers with mine and bringing the back of my hand to her lips.

I wiggle again, trying to alleviate some of the growing pressure between my thighs.

Why in the world did I think this was a good idea?

I watch Arriana, noticing the heat in her eyes, and I know my answer.

I did this for her because, while she wouldn't ask me to put myself in an uncomfortable position, I know what she wants, and I want to do anything and everything I can to bring about the smile currently resting on her face. The one that reflects how happy she is in this moment with me, with us .

Blowing out a slow breath, I close my eyes and lean my head back against the

headrest, focusing on the steady vibrations. My breath hitches when the pattern changes. The consistent buzzing now travels from my clit to my pussy, like a mechanical finger dragging through me and back. “Oh fuck.” I groan, lifting my hips into the sensations. “You-you can’t do that.” I gasp as the intensity increases.

Arriana chuckles beside me, dropping the controller onto her lap. “Oh, mi vida ,” She smirks. “ You can’t dangle this present in front of me and not expect me to open it. To play with it.” Winking at me, she returns her attention to the drive.

Groaning, I cover my eyes with my arm.

Yup, a really bad idea.

Arriana

I shouldn't fuck with her, but I just can't help it. My beautiful nymph has given me a gift that I can't resist.

Fallon squirms in her seat, her fingers tightening in my hold a clear indicator of the effect our little toy has on her. We pull up to the hospital parking lot and I circle the parking spots, wanting to prolong this moment. After the fifth pass, she turns to me, arching her eyebrow. "Are you going to park the car sometime today?"

I chuckle, loving the sass only I can pull from her. "Yes, dear." I hum, pulling into an empty space. The moment the car is shifted into park, Fallon climbs onto my lap, crushing her lips to mine as she rotates her hips. I groan, gripping her hips and aiding her movements.

Gasping into my mouth, Fallon breaks the kiss, trailing her lips down my throat. "I can't..." She breathes, moaning as I dig my fingers into her. "I can't go in there with this thing ." Leaning back, she peers at me with a sheepish look, her face flushed from the vibrations on and in her pussy.

Sliding a hand between us, I push up her skirt, my fingers pushing her panties to the side. "Does my baby need some help?" I murmur, watching her eyes roll back as I slide a finger into her needy cunt alongside the vibrator.

Shifting my hand, I press down on the part of the toy resting on her clit, making her whimper. I release her hip with my other hand, fumbling around for the remote. Pressing the button to change the pattern once more, I bite my lip as I watch her move

her hips, fucking herself on my finger and the toy. “So perfect.” I praise, adding another finger, her walls gripping me so tight I can hardly move the digits.

“Ar-Arriana.” She pants, her movements growing more desperate as she chases her release.

I can’t take my eyes off of her, completely enraptured with the otherworldly creature before me. “ Tan jodiamente hermosa .” I whisper, my voice full of the wonder I feel.

“What-” Fallon gasps, her eyes squeezing shut tighter. “What does that mean?” Her voice is breathy as her body tenses.

Shifting my free hand, I palm her breast, my other hand working in and out of her pussy. “It means you’re so fucking beautiful, mi vida . Mi propia ninfa . You’ve enchanted me, baby.”

Fallon whimpers at my words, leaning forward to crush her lips to mine. I groan into the kiss, slipping my hand to the back of her neck to hold her against me. A few more pumps of my fingers is enough to send her careening over the edge, her cries swallowed by my mouth on hers.

Sliding my fingers from her, I gently remove the vibrator, holding her gaze as I push the curved end between my lips. A moan sounds from my chest as I taste her on the plastic device, the vibrations knocking uncomfortably on my teeth not enough to detract from her intoxicating flavor.

“That is so fucking hot.” Fallon breathes, biting her lip as she watches me slowly slide the toy out of my mouth. Her emerald eyes are fixated on my movements as I click off the vibrations. The post-orgasmic haze fades quickly when her gaze shifts to the windshield.

Shooting upright, she whips her head toward the window, her face blooming. “Oh fuck. Oh fuck . We did not just do that here .” She whispers, horrified at the realization.

Her flustered demeanor and the blush forming on her cheeks are nearly too much to resist. With a quiet chuckle, I move to palm her chest, pinching her nipples through the fabric of her shirt. “We most definitely did.” I watch her body tremble from my continued attention on her breasts. “I’ve got a few more ideas of other things we could do too.”

Whipping her head back to me, Fallon’s eyes widen as she shakes her head vigorously. “No. No, bad idea.” Even at her adamant denial, I can tell how much the idea turns her on. Mixed in with the desire burning in her eyes, I can also see guilt, no doubt for seeking her own pleasure while her brother is laid up in a hospital bed not that far from us.

With a reluctant sigh, I hold my hands up in surrender. “Okay, baby. I’ll be good.” I wink at her, gripping her hips and throwing her back into the passenger seat. A soft gasp sounds from her as she hits the seat, her hair tangling around her face.

I laugh, loving the pouty frown she throws my way at the treatment. “Good my ass.” She grumbles, pushing upright and fumbling with the door. She moves to climb out of the vehicle and I can’t resist the urge to swat her ass. “Hey!” She squeaks, leaping out of the car and spinning to face me. Pointing a finger at me, she covers her perfect behind with her other hand. “Behave.” She warns, her face flaming as she flicks her eyes around the busy parking lot.

“Cualquier cosa para ti, cariño .” My chuckled words do nothing but earn me another scowl from my beautiful nymph. “Okay, okay.” I agree. “Nothing but my best behavior from here on out. Scout’s honor.” I hold up the three-fingered salute.

Fallon watches me warily as I climb out of the car and come to stand beside her. “Promise?” She asks, her eyes shifting between the hospital and me.

“Promise.” I murmur, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

She relaxes against me, removing her hand protecting her butt. Unable to resist the urge, despite my very real and very serious pledge just moments before, I smack her ass cheeks with both hands, grabbing a handful and pulling her closer. My mouth covers hers, swallowing the shocked gasp she lets out.

“Disgusting.” A snide voice sounds behind us, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Releasing my hold, I slowly turn to face the intruder, keeping Fallon tucked behind me. My eyes land on her sister and I wish I could say I’m surprised, but her cruel comment solidifies my first impression of just who this woman is. “What did you say?” I hiss, trying to keep my voice level for Fallon’s benefit.

This is her family after all.

“I knew there was something going on between you two.” The bitch replies, her lip curling in disgust. “You disgusting homos are going to burn in hell for this.”

A quiet whimper sounds behind me and all I see is red. All the logical thought I had flees as I hear my baby’s pain at this nasty woman’s words. I fly across the parking lot, throwing my fist into her face. The delicious sound of cartilage crunching followed by the sight of blood trickling from her nose calms some of the rage at her homophobic bullshit.

Fallon’s sister shrieks, clutching her bloodied nose. “You fucking bitch !” She cries, taking off toward the convenient hospital. “You’ll pay for this!” She screams,

throwing a nasty look over her shoulder that I meet with a wiggle of my fingers.

A small hand fists the fabric of my shirt, pulling me back toward Fallon. “You really shouldn’t have done that.” Her warning loses a little of the effect as she tries to contain her laughter.

Attempting to be serious, she steps around me to hold my gaze. “Scarlett can be a real cunt about things if she gets upset. A real ‘where’s your manager’ type, if you catch my drift.” Fallon worries her bottom lip, her eyes following after Scarlett’s disappearing form before looking back at me.

I move my hand up to tug her abused lip free from her teeth. “Let me worry about that, baby.” I soothe, running my finger over the indents left from her teeth.

Studying my face for a moment, she releases a heavy breath. “Okay. Can we go visit my brother now? Or do you have any more trouble to start?” Her eyebrow arches, a hint of a smile ghosting her lips showing she’s not really upset despite her words.

“After you.” I half-bow, gesturing toward the hospital entrance. Fallon giggles, the melodic sound lighting my soul once more.

She’s mine. This time I’m not letting her go.

I follow behind her as she makes her way toward her family. A family I’m starting to suspect played a key role in my girl’s earlier departure.

If my suspicions are accurate, a family that is going to pay dearly for causing pain to me and mine.

Fallon

I shouldn't be this happy. It's really fucked up the amount of enjoyment I got out of watching Arriana break Scarlett's nose. I felt like a kid on Christmas Day.

It wasn't necessarily the actual broken nose that I loved so much, even though that was also satisfying. No, it was seeing her stand up for me. Something I've witnessed once before, but that memory is filled with too many negative ones to really give me the same satisfaction I know this one will.

A chill runs through my body as the wind whips around us, blowing my hair into my face. My knees ache from the hard concrete and my right eye throbs, a painful reminder of the hell I've found myself in.

I'm not getting out of here.

Tears stream down my cheeks at the thought, the hopelessness I've been fighting back creeping up once again.

"Glad you could make it." The evil man's voice rings out moments before he sighs and grips my hair. I can't stop the pained cry that sounds as he yanks my head back.

"Don't touch her." My eyes widen, darting toward the voice.

Arriana.

My heart thunders in my chest, drowning out everything around us.

She's here.

Another sharp tug on my head has me crying out again. "Ple-please just let me go." I beg.

Arriana takes a half-step toward me, trying to sooth me with her words. Making promises I don't know if she can keep. "It's okay, baby. You're gonna be okay."

I shake my head, trying to clear the memory before it brings about worse ones. Ones that still feature in my nightmares.

"Baby, are you alright?" Arriana's concerned question pulls my attention back to her.

I blink several times, pushing away the emotions threatening to overwhelm me. Squaring my shoulders, I tip my chin. "Yeah, I just...let's go see Hudson." I chicken out, not wanting to get into all of it right now. The need to hold onto this bubble of happiness we've found amidst the chaos of everything else fuels my decision to swallow my feelings.

Peeking at Arriana out of the corner of my eye, I can feel the nerves build up, getting trapped in my throat and making it hard to swallow. I know I'm not going to be able to hold in all the emotions, but I don't want to ruin what I've just gotten back.

I'm going to need a girls night with Ava. And soon.

At the thought, I pull out my phone as we make our way into the hospital.

Me

Wine and Bachelor soon?

Bestie *double pink heart emoji*

Yessss. Tomorrow?

My eyes flick to Arriana as I chew on my lip. A gnawing guilt churns my stomach as I turn to my friend instead of her. It's not that I think she would have an issue in me seeking the comfort of my friend, but rather that I don't want her to think I'm distancing myself again. Especially not after we just got to a decent place.

Sensing my gaze, Arriana glances at me with a quirk of her eyebrow. "What is it, mi vida ?"

I glance at my phone and back again. "Um, so this is totally not related to all the stuff that just happened because that was hot. Like it shouldn't have been, but it totally was." I take a deep breath, wishing I could talk like a normal person, but when I get nervous it's like I lose complete control over my brain and my mouth just kinda spews everything.

Arriana chuckles, brushing her fingers down my neck. "Tell me what's going on." Her eyes are twinkling with humor at my word vomit and it helps alleviate some of the anxiety.

"I kinda need to talk to Ava." My voice trails off as Arriana's expression falls.

She quickly recovers, masking whatever reaction she had and smiles at me. "Whatever you need." Leaning over, she presses a soft kiss to my forehead.

My heart blooms at her easy acceptance, even if she's not thrilled by it, she wants me to be happy. To have what I need. "I love you." I whisper, losing myself in her dark eyes.

“I love you too.” She breathes, brushing my hair behind my ear. “So fucking much. Te amo, mi vida .”

I smile at her, my heart beating wildly as I enjoy this moment. Having her back in my life once more. And despite everything else happening, I find I’m happier than I have been in a long time.

I stifle the noise that threatens to escape at the sight of Hudson.

His dirty blonde hair, closer to a light brown than blonde, is a disheveled mess on top of his head. His face is covered in bruises and cuts, most of which still look painful despite the worst of them being covered in gauze and bandaging. His left arm is covered in a cast along with his left leg.

The part that looks the worst isn’t the physical injuries, it’s the emptiness in his pale blue eyes. Like his soul has checked out and left behind the empty shell of a man before me.

My mom is sitting in a chair beside his bed, chirping on about some gossip. She’s so wrapped up in her story she doesn’t notice our entrance.

Ignoring her, I walk up to Hudson, taking his unwrapped hand in mine. “Hey.” I whisper, waiting for him to turn to me. My smile strains at the unfocused look in his eyes.

“Hey.” He mumbles, his voice hoarse from the anesthesia.

My eyes tighten at the sound. Noticing a sheen of sweat on his forehead, I look around for something to dab it away. Coming up with nothing, I pull down the sleeve of my shirt, holding the fabric in my fist as I dab my wrist on his skin. “Have they given you anything for it?” I ask, leaning forward to whisper the question in his ear.

Hudson shakes his head, his face cringing at the movement. “No, they tried, but...” His eyes shift to where our mom and Arriana are having a hushed conversation in the corner of the room. My chest aches at the realization Arriana did that for me, she pulled my mom away so I could have this moment with my brother.

Shifting his focus back to me, Hudson lowers his voice further as he continues, “Mom threw a fit about it when the nurse tried, and she just won’t leave.”

My teeth grind. How dare this woman continue to cause pain to her own children, all because of some archaic beliefs. “You’re an adult now.” I remind him, my heart breaking at his flinch from my words. “She can’t make choices for you anymore.”

He shakes his head, a haunted look on his face. “That’s just it. I know that, but I can’t...” His voice trails off.

My heart spasms, knowing what he means without him having to voice the words. Turning my attention to the two women in room, I call out, “Hey, Arriana?” She looks at me curiously. “I’m kind of hungry, would you be able to get us some food?” I look pointedly between her, my mom, and the door, hoping she’ll get the hint.

And she does. Because that’s how she is.

“Of course, b-” Catching herself, she clears her throat. “Fallon.” Turning her attention toward my mother, Arriana offers a blinding smile. “Would you care to join me...?” Her sentence hangs, an invitation for my mom to offer her name.

“Penelope. But call me Mrs. Huxley.” My mom replies, watching Arriana with barely concealed suspicion.

“Of course, Mrs. Huxley.” Arriana gestures toward the door, not missing a beat. “Would you join me?”

My mom looks over at us, her forehead creasing. “I don’t know. I probably shouldn’t leave Hudson...”

“It’s okay, Mom.” I cut in. “I’ll be here with him.”

She narrows her eyes before sighing. “Okay. I could use a break from this place anyway.” Her nose ticks up as she looks around the hospital room. As they leave the atmosphere physically changes with the woman, who gave birth to us but could never be classified as motherly outside of that fact, exiting the room.

Turning my attention back to Hudson, I look around until I locate the call button. Giving it a couple minutes to ensure they’re gone, I push the button and wait. A few moments later a tired voice filters through the speaker. “Everything okay in there?” The nurse asks, an anxious edge to her tone no doubt due to my lovely mother.

“Hi, yes. Well, no. Can we get some of the meds to help my brother with his come down?” I ask, keeping an eye on him. His eyes tighten but he doesn’t otherwise react, staring off into the distance again.

The nurse’s voice comes through again, softer this time. “Let me talk to the doctor.”

I press the button once more. “Thank you. And, if you could hurry before...” I trail off, not wanting to air our dirty laundry for the hospital staff but not sure what else to say.

Her quiet laugh sounds through the speaker, “Yes. I know exactly what you mean. I’ll put a rush order on the request.”

A smile spreads on my face at the response, grateful to have someone in our corner. Looking back at Hudson, my grin fades, worry bleeding through at his continued checked out state. “Hud?” I say softly, brushing his hair back from his face. He rolls

his eyes in my direction but doesn't respond otherwise. "Are you okay?" I don't know how else to ask the burning questions inside of me.

Why he got on that bike? What's going on in his life that he still feels the need to destroy his body with the harmful chemicals? Why he had reached out? Why he looks so goddamn empty ?

He blinks at me and sighs. "No, Cher, I don't think I am."

My breath catches at the nickname. One we haven't used in years. "Do you wanna talk about it, Egg?" Hudson's lips tick up at his nickname.

Cher for cherries. Egg for eggplant. It was a silly little secret we shared before things went sideways, the nicknames a reflection of our preferences. Before they sent him away and he came back a shell of who he was before.

Hudson opens his mouth to say something, but is interrupted by a quiet knock on the door. We turn toward the sound, watching as someone wearing a white lab coat walks into the room. I excuse myself to give Hudson some privacy to speak with his doctor alone.

My mind races as I lean back against the wall outside of Hudson's room. Something about the look on his face, it reminded me of Ava's after she...I shake my head, scoffing at the idea. What are the chances I almost lost two people to that? Even still, a small nagging voice in the back of my mind doesn't let up on the thought.

Whatever happened, I'm going to be here for him. I'm not going to let him go through this alone. Not anymore.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

I twist the knife in my hand, pressing the tip against my finger just hard enough to leave an indent but not pierce the skin.

“We’ve got to be careful for the next few weeks.” Andrew informs us, running a hand over his head.

My eyes trail over him, surprised by his disheveled appearance. His eyes are bloodshot and the usual care he puts into his outfits is lacking as he’s dressed in a rumpled t-shirt and ratty pair of black sweats. His muscles bunch as he drags his hand down his face and over his beard.

I raise an eyebrow at him, but don’t say anything. It hits me that I’ve been so caught up in my own life, I’ve not asked about what’s going on in his. Guilt eats at me at the realization, but I push it away. Now isn’t the time.

“Why, what happened?” Killian rumbles beside me, his gruff tone a reminder of the serious implications Andrew’s words hold.

Clearing his throat, Andrew flashes his eyes to me before looking back to Killian. “There was a...problem. With the last hit.” He mutters, avoiding my gaze.

Oh shit.

“A problem? What kind of problem?” Killian demands, gripping the desk across from Andrew.

I gulp, my mind going over the job. I know I was a little distracted by everything going on with Fallon and I had gotten a little carried away in the poetic justice of Thomas' murder, but I can't think of anything that would have tied us to his death.

"There, uh, they found a nanny cam hidden at the, um, crime scene." Andrew forces out, trying to keep Killian's furious gaze on him, but it's pointless. We all know whose fault it was that this has been connected to us, to me, and it wasn't the man conveying the information.

Killian slowly straightens to his full height and turns toward me. "A camera." He bites out between gritted teeth.

I just had to take off my mask.

I shrug at him, pushing down my fear.

This is so not good.

Fuck.

Taking a step toward me, Killian clenches his fists, his nostrils flaring. "Are you fucking kidding me?" He growls.

I flip the knife up in the air, catching it by the handle and doing it again. "Oh, calm down, grandpa." I chuckle despite the anxiety churning inside me.

I can't get caught. I can't.

Forcing a smile on my face, I reach up on my tiptoes and tap his forehead. I'd like to pat the top of his head, but my arm just won't quite reach, so good enough. "Don't worry your pretty little head. We'll be fine, right Drewbie?" I flick my eyes to

Andrew's, a little of the worry bleeding through as I silently beg him to tell me I'm right. That everything will be okay.

Andrew sighs heavily, making my stomach sink. "Let's just be extra cautious." He says instead of assuring me. "I'll keep an eye on the case and we'll do what we need to. Money talks, so it might be time we use it to do some of the speaking for us."

I swallow down the worry at his response, clasping my shaky hands behind my back.

Killian seethes at me, blowing a breath out between his bared teeth. "Fix this." With that super helpful input, he strides out the door, pulling up his cell phone. No doubt going to check on his girl.

My girl flashes in my mind and I gulp, nerves pinging inside of me as I worry about what could happen to her if I were to get caught.

"Hey." Andrew's soft voice reaches into my paralyzed state, pulling me back to the room. "It's going to be okay, Ree. We'll figure it out."

I nod mutely, turning to exit the room.

Fuck.

Fallon

“Ugh, he’s so hot .” Ava groans, shoving a small handful of popcorn into her mouth, her eyes glued to the TV screen.

I laugh, taking my own handful of buttery goodness. Popping one kernel in at a time, I admire the man candy that’s the star this season of the Bachelor. While I like to watch more for his counterparts, I can appreciate a fine looking man from an outsider perspective.

Ava and I bonded over our love of reality TV before I brought her into my smut addiction. Now we enjoy both pastimes together.

“He is.” I agree, flopping back on the couch. I’m grateful Killian and Arriana had somewhere to be tonight because I really needed some alone time with Ava.

“Mmhmm.” Ava hums, her hand reaching blindly for her wine glass. “Oh fuck!” She gasps, watching in horror as the red wine tips and spills all over the hardwood. Leaping up from her seat, she runs to the kitchen, grabbing an armful of towels from a drawer before sprinting back toward the spill. “Shit. Shit . Please don’t stain.”

I watch as she frantically soaks up the red liquid, definitely staining the towels. A laugh bubbles up from my chest, earning me a sharp glare from my friend. I hold up my hands in surrender, trying to force back the giggles.

Ava narrows her eyes at me before cursing again and resuming her attempts at cleaning. “It’s not funny.” She grumbles, effectively spreading the liquid further with

her hurried movements.

“I think you’re making it worse.” I chuckle, tossing a popcorn kernel into my mouth and munching as I split my focus between her and the TV.

Sighing, she throws her hands up in the air and sits back on her heels. “If you’re such a fucking expert then you deal with it.” She snaps. My eyes widen at her outburst.

Her breaths come in short pants before her own eyes widen slightly and she closes them. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she whispers something too quiet for me to hear before her breathing begins to even out.

I watch her curiously, tilting my head. I can only assume she’s trying to calm herself down, but I can’t understand why she had this level of freakout to begin with. “Oh shit.” I breathe, realization dawning on me. “God, I’m such an idiot. Is this one of your things?”

Ava nods her head, continuing to focus on calming herself.

“I’m sorry, babe.” I murmur, slipping off the couch to join her on the floor. Taking one of the unused towels, I begin to mop up the wine.

Ava takes several more minutes before she blows out a heavy breath and joins me in the clean up. “I never realized how often I overreacted to things before I started therapy and had to really look at my life.” She explains, pushing to her feet and scooping up the soiled towels. “Usually it’s triggered by something.” She shrugs, turning to the hall.

When she returns to the living area and snatches up her now empty wine glass to refill it, I finally respond. “Wanna talk about it?” I take my seat on the couch again, curling my legs underneath me.

Ava pauses her steps, her shoulders tensing before slumping once more. “My mom used to scream at me if I made a mess as a kid.” She shrugs again, moving to pour more wine into her glass. Taking a sip of it, she looks over at me. “Guess I just reacted out of habit. Sorry.”

My heart breaks for the little girl Ava was. The little girl who should have been shown love, but was instead subjected to verbal and emotional abuse. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry about.” I assure her. “I love you. All of you .” Patting the seat beside me, I offer her a smile. “Now, do you wanna come lose ourselves in Tucker and all his delicious muscles?” I wink at her, my smile widening at the watery laugh she lets out.

“Fuck yeah.” Ava giggles, rushing back over to the couch and flopping down next to me, her earlier outburst forgotten.

“I don’t know, I just feel like there’s something more going on.”

We’re now curled up with mugs of hot cocoa, having replaced our wine with something a little more comforting as we talk. I find myself grateful to have this moment with her, but also dreading voicing my concerns out loud.

“Have you asked him about it?” Ava asks, sipping on her cocoa.

I nod my head, watching the small marshmallows slowly melt into the chocolate. “Yeah, he said he wasn’t okay and was going to say more but never got the chance.”

“Mmm.” She hums.

I wait for her to elaborate, but she doesn’t. “Mmm?” I repeat, quirking an eyebrow at her. “That’s really all you’ve got?” Ava shrugs at me, her lips ticking up in a smirk as she tries to hide behind her mug. “So helpful. Thank you.” I sigh dramatically.

Ava giggles, feeling the effect of the bottle and a half of wine we polished off together. “Look, I never said I was some great advice giving person or anything.” She laughs harder at the look on my face.

“I know that, but...I really could use a little more.” I try to hide the desperation in my voice, but fail.

Ava studies me before setting her drink down and clasping her hands in front of her. “Okay. Sorry, Fal. Let’s look at this again. So, your brother had a real shitty ass childhood, then found some...unhealthy ways to cope, and now he’s in the hospital as a result.” I nod my head solemnly, somehow hearing the words summarized makes them sound both not as bad and infinitely worse all at once. “Okay.” She says slowly, rubbing her chin. “And you’re worried there’s more to the story?”

I nod again, fidgeting with my glasses. “Yeah. He looked at me like,” Biting my cheek, I glance up at her, feeling terrible for bringing it up but needing someone to know. Someone who might understand. “He looked like you did. You know, after .”

Ava looks at me confused for a moment before realization sets in. “Oh fuck.” She breathes. My head bobs once more, my shoulders slumping. “ Fuck . That’s really not...” Running her hand through her hair, Ava’s eyes fill with a pained understanding. “Oh Fallon, I’m so sorry.”

I don’t realize I’m crying until a teardrop falls into my cocoa with a splash. “Yeah, it’s whatever.” I mumble, averting my gaze from her concerned one. “I just don’t know what to do, you know? Like, how do I help him?” My heart aches as I long to make this better, to do something .

“Sometimes all you can do is be there for him.” She reassures me, reaching forward to take one of my hands in hers. “Just know, whatever he says, whatever happens, none of this is on you.”

I bite my cheek harder, the metallic taste of blood filling my mouth as I break the skin.

“Hey.” Ava directs my attention back to her, waiting for me to meet her gaze before continuing. “ It’s not your fault .” Her eyes are filled with tears, threatening to overflow at her insistent words. Her and I both know she’s not just talking about Hudson in this moment, and it’s almost too much.

My mouth opens and closes silently, unsure how to respond because, yeah, I did blame myself. A part of me still does.

I should have known.

What if Killian hadn’t gotten there in time?

What if...

I shake my head, pushing aside the familiar thoughts. Ones that often plague me in the worst possible moments.

“Yeah, I know.” I mumble instead of voicing any of the anxieties.

Before the conversation can go any further, the distinct sound of the elevator dinging fills the space. Ava and I meet each other's gaze as we wait for the doors to slide open. When they do, the sounds of a heated argument filter into the room.

“It was fucking reckless and stupid.” Killian growls, stomping inside.

“Yeah, well, how was I supposed to know, old man?” Arriana retorts, huffing as she follows him.

Spinning on his heels, he runs both hands down his face. “We can’t afford this kind of thing to come back on FindingLight.” He sighs, his face showing the weariness he feels.

“You think I don’t know that?” Arriana snaps, throwing her hands in the air. “What about me, huh? What if it comes back on-” Her words cut off when she sees us sitting on the couch, watching them intently. “Oh, hey, baby.” She forces a smile on her face, unable to hide the worry in her eyes.

Glancing at Ava, I find her brows furrowed, a slight frown on her face. I turn my head back to our other halves. “What’s going on?” I ask, unable to push down the uneasiness building inside.

“It’s nothing to worry about.” Arriana reassures me, coming up to place a kiss on my forehead. “You ready to go home?”

I blink at her, trying to keep up with the conversation changes in my buzzed state. “Okay.” I draw out the word, looking between the three in the room as I push to my feet.

After saying goodnight, I follow Arriana into the elevator, trying to keep the panic at bay. It’s not until we enter our apartment before I say anything. “Arriana,” I start, watching her closely as I ask again, “What’s going on?”

She studies me for a moment, her eyes flashing with worry and...fear.

I gulp, not liking the emotion on her. She’s fearless, not whatever this is.

“I fucked up.” She admits, dropping her eyes to the floor. “You don’t know what I do, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

I flinch at the reminder her words bring, my mind flashing back to the last time I was involved in her so-called work .

“What’s such a pretty girl doing with someone like her anyway?” The evil man asks, running his hand down my chest and stomach. I flinch back from his touch, cowering into the wall in hopes he’ll just leave.

It’s a stupid hope.

“Mmm, maybe you just need the right man to remind you what you’re missing out on by being with some other bitch.”

My eyes widen as I take in his meaning. Shaking my head, I curl into myself, tugging at the rope that’s keeping my wrists behind my back. “Don-don’t touch me.” I whisper, trying and failing to make my voice strong.

The man huffs a laugh, his expensive suit and perfectly polished appearance a stark contrast to the monster I’ve met that lies beneath the surface. “You think I would want you?” His laughter grows at the thought, as if he couldn’t imagine a more ridiculous concept. “Sweetheart, I don’t do sloppy seconds to one of my employees.” He runs his eyes down my body, making me shudder under the predatory gaze. “Even ones as exquisite as yourself.”

Much to my relief he pushes to his feet and leaves the room, flicking the light off and closing the door behind him. I’m left in complete darkness, my breathing speeding up as I try to figure out what the fuck is going on.

I shudder, still able to feel the weight of his gaze on me even now. The man who claimed to be her boss, the man who threatened me, kidnapped me, just by association.

Yeah, really don't want to get involved in that again.

Noticing my reaction, she sighs, running a hand through her hair. "That, that right there is exactly why I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to cause you pain, mi vida ." Looking up at me again, she holds her hand out. "Just come lie with me." Her words hold a plea that I don't understand, but I'm too tired and emotionally drained to try to look into it further.

"Okay." I agree, allowing her to lead me to the bedroom.

She proceeds to carefully undress me before doing the same to herself. Climbing into the bed, she pulls me back against her, nuzzling my neck and placing soft kisses on my skin. "I love you." She whispers, something about her inflection makes me agitated, but the feeling subsides as she strokes my hair.

She begins to hum, the sound of her voice lulling me into a sense of comfort. Before long, I find myself drifting off to sleep. Comfortable in her arms.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

I can't sleep.

Peering down at my beautiful girl, all I can think about is what's about to happen. Things escalated quickly following our brief meeting earlier, Andrew's worried update that sitting and waiting it out might not be possible after all came through shortly after we left.

I should run, that's what Andrew suggested. Hell, even Killian pushed for the idea. Although I can't help but wonder if part of his reasoning was to simply get me out of his life.

But I can't do that, I won't do that. Because I'm not leaving her, and I'm not dragging her away from everything and everyone she knows because of my mistake.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand. Carefully extracting myself from Fallon, I roll over and pull up the message.

Drewbie

The warrant has officially been issued.

You've gotta get out of here

Me

I can't

Drewbie

Princess, please. I'll clear this up but you

can't be there when they come for you

I look at Fallon's sleeping form, biting my lip.

If I'm not here, what happens to her?

I close my eyes, blowing out a heavy breath.

Me

I can't do that to her.

You'll figure it out

GIF of a man throwing finger guns

with the words "you got this"

Drewbie

eye roll emoji you've got too

much faith in me

Me

Not possible. You're my hero,

remember? *winking emoji*

Drewbie

Can't wait to say I told you so

Me

Whatever *eye roll emoji* *kissy face emoji*

I close my phone and set it back down, moving to cuddle Fallon once more.

We'll figure it out.

I hold onto the thought as I close my eyes and will sleep to overtake me.

A loud pounding on the door pulls me from my sleep. I sit upright, my heart thundering in my chest.

Fuck, this is it.

Fallon mumbles in her sleep, throwing the comforter over her head to drown out the noise. Leaning over, I press a kiss to the top of her head before slipping out of the bed.

Quickly pulling on some clothes, I stop before Sir Ichabod's cage. Gently lifting him up, I nuzzle his furry head. "My perfect little man." I coo, running my fingers over his back. "Mamá loves you, be good for your other Mamma now." His little squeaks as he chitters in response break my heart. "I'm going to miss you." I whisper, my

voice cracking as I kiss his head and set him back inside his little home.

The pounding on the door grows more insistent. “I’m coming, I’m coming.” I grumble, slipping from the room in search of a pen and paper. Walking into the spare room, my eyes land on Fallon’s journal.

Sorry, baby.

Snatching it up, I tear out a blank page and scrawl out quick a note. I set down her journal and quietly sneak back into our room to set the paper down beside Fallon on my empty pillow.

With one last forlorn look at my slumbering girl, I turn and make my way toward the front door. I unlock it, pulling open the door to reveal two uniformed officers waiting on the other side.

“Arriana Beckett?” One of them asks, a short, scruffy looking man with hardened features.

I nod my head, forcing back my shoulders. “Yeah, who’s asking?”

The other cop, an older woman with her hair tied up in a tight knot atop her head, pulls a pair of cuffs from her belt. “You’re under arrest-”

The rest of her words fade as she turns me around and cuffs my wrists. I can’t focus on her, my eyes landing on a horrified Fallon clutching the notepaper and watching the interaction from the shadows with tears flowing down her face.

She moves to take a step toward me, but I shake my head, hoping the two officers don’t notice her presence. Fallon freezes, lifting a hand to cover her mouth as her body shakes.

I'm sorry. I love you. I mouth to her, my heart shattering as I'm ripped away from my entire world.

The last thing I see is Fallon sinking to her knees, reaching a hand out to me.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

She's gone.

The words repeat in my mind on a loop as I stare at the empty doorway, clutching the notepaper to my chest.

After what felt like hours, I push up onto shaky legs and stumble out into the hall. Glancing both ways, I try to see some sign of where she went, but only find the empty hallway.

My heart hammers in my chest, feeling like it might burst from the force of its beating.

What is happening?

The sound of crinkling pulls me from my shocked state long enough to look down. Forcing my locked fingers to slowly uncurl, I move the note away from my chest, my eyes scanning over the words once more.

I'm sorry. I love you.

They're not enough.

I need her. And I need some answers.

Without another thought, I stumble out of our apartment down the hall and slip into

the elevator. Pressing the button for Ava's condo, I stare blankly at the light as it moves its way up the floors. The elevator comes to a stop, but I find it too hard to move.

A drop hits my arm and I realize I'm crying. The moment the realization hits me, my legs crumple.

Sinking to the floor, I curl against the wall, hugging my legs to my chest and burying my face against my knees.

Why?

My sobs fill the elevator as my soul cries out.

Why is this happening?

I suck in useless breaths, my lungs screaming for oxygen that I can't seem to get no matter how many inhales I take.

I can't...I can't...

I cry harder, my body shaking.

Please, please don't take her away from me.

I don't know who I'm crying out to. It's not like anyone's listening, and if they are, they don't care. That's clear enough.

"Please." The plea slips from my lips, nearly incoherent around the hiccupped sobs still wracking my body.

The sound of voices breaks past my hysterics moments before the doors slide open, light flooding into the dimly lit elevator.

“Fallon? Ohmygod, what happened?” Ava gasps, rushing inside and falling to her knees before me.

She’s gone.

I can’t get the words out, instead my cries grow louder.

Glancing over her shoulder, Ava snaps at Killian, “Find out what’s going on.” He grunts a response that I can’t hear as I get lost in my mind.

She’s gone.

I just got her back. And she’s gone.

I jerk away when soft hands gently grip my arms. “Shh.” Ava soothes, urging me to my feet. “Let’s get you inside. Come on.”

I try to respond, I really do, but I can barely hold myself together right now, let alone move.

When her attempts are unsuccessful, Ava releases her hold on me, disappearing and leaving me alone in my sorrow.

I’m alone.

Another sob breaks free at the thought, bringing with it another wave of uncontrollable hysterics.

Strong arms gently slide behind my back and under my legs, lifting me with little effort. I stiffen in Killian's hold as he strides into the penthouse and deposits me onto the couch. Curling up into a ball, I clutch Arriana's note to my chest and close my eyes, tears still streaming down my face as I picture her being handcuffed and dragged away.

What did you do?

Arriana

“So, this is fun.” I chuckle. “You guys ever take these out for a joyride?” I twist my body to indicate the handcuffs on my wrists, wriggling my eyebrows at the rearview mirror.

“Quiet.” The woman officer snaps, keeping her eyes on the road.

I snicker, turning my gaze to the back of the other cop. “Well, Tight Knot, is obviously no fun in bed. What about you, Scruffy? Got a kinky side to ya?” His jaw works as he tries to ignore me, but that’s enough of an answer. “Oh yeah, freaky man you are. You know what the real question is though, Scruffy?” I pause, waiting for him to ask me. When he doesn’t, I sigh heavily. “The question is, are you the big man officer in your role play or are you the prisoner?”

His shoulders tense and Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows at my question. I chuckle, clapping my hands together the best I can with them cuffed behind my back. “Good for you, little role reversal.”

“Enough.” Tight Knot barks, smacking her hand on the divider.

I sigh, slumping back into the bench seat. “Fine, just thought we could make some conversation.”

Neither respond, and the rest of the ride to the police station is silent.

Really, I had an alternate reason behind my attempt at engaging the stiff in a

conversation. Every moment of silence gives my mind the space to replay Fallon dropping to her knees. The sight of her reaching for me helplessly.

My teeth set on edge at the memory, a nearly uncontrollable rage building at the pain of my baby at the hands of these two officers.

The sound of the door yanking open pulls me from my thoughts. “Let’s go.” Scruffy grunts, reaching in and dragging me out by the arm. His grip tightens as he leads me into the station.

I scan the lot, looking for an escape, but come up empty. My shoulders slump as I resign myself to my fate.

You better get me out of this, Andrew.

“So, what are you in for?” I ask, sinking onto the hard bench beside one of the several women sharing the small cell space with me.

She glances at me, her eyes glassy.

“Shit.” I curse, leaping out of the way just in time before chunks spew from her mouth. “Going to go with public intoxication.” I cringe at the smell of vomit, only making this situation that much worse.

Closing my eyes, I try to imagine the scent of roses, clinging to the hope of getting out of here and back to my baby. Despite my efforts to hold onto the promise of freedom, my mind wanders back to another time, another night I had spent locked up in a cell similar to this one.

“I didn’t do anything!” I snap, yanking against the officer’s hold.

He tightens his grip, dragging me down the hall toward the holding cell.

Each step that brings us closer to the confines only serves to fuel my anger. “Come on, man. Just let me go.” He still doesn’t respond, simply unlocking the door and sliding it open just to shove me inside.

“Fucking bullshit.” I grumble, rubbing the sore spot on my arm from his bruising grip. Sighing heavily, I look around the small space for somewhere to wait out the time until I’m released. I spot an empty corner and settle onto the hard bench seat, pulling my feet up to rest my chin on my bent knees.

After several hours of torturous lockup, I hear a familiar voice echo down the hall. “I’m so sorry, Officer. I just don’t know what has gotten into her.”

My teeth set on edge at the sound of my adoptive mother’s apologies. It’s not like she’s a terrible person, but somehow that makes it worse. I wish she was an awful human because it would make hating her that much easier.

“Arriana.” She sighs as her and the cop from earlier come to a stop on the other side of the bars. The door clangs open and I push to my feet, making my way quickly out of the cell.

The walk out of the police station is full of stilted silence, only serving to make me angrier. She should be furious at me, having to come down to bail me out in the middle of the night. But, instead, Linda doesn’t say a word.

It’s not until we pull up to our house that she speaks.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Linda turns toward me, her face exhausted. “Why do you keep doing this?” She watches me, pleading for an answer I can’t give her.

Shrugging my shoulders, I pick at the skin along my nails. “I didn’t do anything she didn’t deserve.” I mumble.

“Deserve?” Linda echoes.

I bob my head, refusing to look up at her.

She lets out an exasperated noise, her voice laced with the same exhaustion as her expression had. “You’re telling me that sweet girl deserved to have her arm broken? In what possible world would anyone deserve that, Arriana?” Linda doesn’t give me a chance to respond, opening her door and climbing out of the vehicle.

I watch after her, replaying the words that Suzie Crawford had said to me, the same ones she has tormented me with for years now.

“Oh, hey, it’s the psycho freak . Why don’t you just go back to Mexico where you belong, or better yet, why don’t you just join your mother?”

My teeth set on edge, the sound of her snickering filling my ears as she repeatedly poked fun at my late mom. As my mind replays the years of torment, I find I wish I had done more than break her stupid little arm.

Exiting the car, I slam the door shut and stomp inside. I’m greeted by the sounds of a heated discussion as I enter the house I’ve been forced to call home.

“What are we going to do about this, Henry?” Linda asks her husband. His reply is too quiet to hear, but I can only guess it would be something I don’t want to hear anyway.

Turning away from their voices, I walk to my room and nearly run into Spencer as he exits his own. “Nice going.” He scoffs, crossing his arms and blocking my path. “Do

you have any idea what this is going to do to my reputation? It's already bad enough that I'm saddled with Cooper and his awkwardness, and now I've got to deal with this." He waves his hand up and down the length of my body. "I'm officially going to be branded as the brother of the girl who got the cops called on a party. Who's going to invite me out again with that hanging over my head, huh?"

I roll my eyes, pushing past him. "Not everything is about you, Spencer." I snap, ignoring his continued complaints.

Stalking into my room, I slam the door shut and lean back against it, closing my eyes and trying to calm my breathing. No matter how badly I tried to fit in, I just can't seem to make it work. Always too different to blend into the crowd.

Mamá used to praise those differences, whispering how much she loved all the things that made me me as she would gently stroke back my hair.

Now I have no one who loves me, no one to offer comfort when my world starts to fall apart.

All I have is a family that's not my own, and now a rap sheet to show just how fucked up my future promises to be.

A quiet knock sounds on the door and I release a heavy sigh. Pushing upright, I crack it open, peeking through the small opening to see who's on the other side.

"Hey, Arri." Cooper smiles softly. "Can I come in?"

I debate saying no, but find the ache for someone, anyone to be on my side is too great.

Without a word, I swing open the door and cross the room. Climbing onto my bed, I

cross my legs and lean my head back against the headboard.

Cooper slips inside, shutting the door behind him and taking his spot beside me. We sit in silence for a long time, something we've done on many occasions now. Often just seeking comfort in the presence of each other without the need for words.

A quiet laugh sounds beside me, and I slowly turn my head to look at him. "What's so funny?" I demand, my eyes narrowing as his laughter increases.

Cooper chuckles, nudging me with his shoulder. "She totally deserved it."

A smile pulls up the corner of my lips as I'm reminded that I'm not alone. Not entirely.

"She did, right?" My own quiet giggles join in with his, and I can feel some of the heaviness lift from my chest with it.

"Lo siento. " Cooper murmurs as our laughter dies off. "I should have stood up for you."

Shaking my head, I pull my knees up to my chest. "Naw, hermano . It'll just make life worse for you. Puedo manejarlo. " I lift my shoulders in a small shrug, wishing more than anything I didn't have to.

Cooper's hand covers my knee. Squeezing his fingers, he ducks his head to meet my gaze. "Sure, you can, but you don't have to."

A loud clanging noise gets my attention and I blink my eyes open. "Arriana Beckett?" Another one of the uniformed officers calls out.

"That's me." I singsong, a grin spreading across my face as I cross the holding cell.

The officer grunts, sliding open the barred door. “You’re free to go.”

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. Catching myself, I roll back my shoulders and saunter out, following behind him after he locks back up the cell.

We round the corner into the main area of the police station and I let out a sigh of relief as I find Andrew waiting for me on the other side of the room. I pass by Scruffy on my way out, throwing him a wink. “Stay freaky, Officer.” His face reddens and he clears his throat as he quickly turns away from me.

Chuckling, I take my personal effects and head toward Andrew. “Hey, Drewbie! I knew you could do it.” I praise, nudging him with my shoulder.

Andrew smirks at me, shaking his head. “You have no idea what I had to do to get you out of here.” Gesturing toward the door, he follows behind me.

Once outside, I spin in a circle and wrap my arms around him. “Thank you.” I whisper, dropping the usual carefree front I put on.

Andrew hesitates before hugging me back. “Anything for you, Ree. You’re family, you know.”

“I know, I just...I wouldn’t have survived in there without her.” I admit, extracting myself from his embrace.

The silence in response is almost deafening.

Taking a step back, I shift my gaze to his face, finding his eyes averted. “What? What is it you’re not telling me?” I demand, growing uneasy at his continued silence.

Gulping, he runs a hand down the back of his head. “The charges were brought from

Fallon's sister, Scarlett Jennings. Something about you breaking her nose?" He finally looks at me, raising an eyebrow.

I snort, shrugging my shoulders. "She insulted my girl."

Andrew shakes his head, trying to hide his own grin. "Well, those were easy enough to get dropped, but..." My stomach drops at the look on his face. "Your mugshot got flagged. I had to pull in every favor I had and grease a lot of palms to get you released before formal charges were filed because, Arriana, they've linked you to the murder."

Shit.

"Shit." I mumble, echoing my thought out loud.

"Yeah, shit." He agrees, gesturing toward his newly acquired truck. "We gotta go, like now."

I follow behind him without another word, climbing inside the vehicle. Once we're settled in, I turn toward him. "Now what?"

Shifting the truck into reverse, Andrew glances at me before backing out. "Now we hide you."

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

“What do you mean she’s not coming back?” Ava hisses, her voice carrying down the hall. “What are we supposed to tell her?”

I stare down at the book in my lap, reading the words but not understanding a single one.

It took several hours for the hysterics to calm down, and even still the rest of the night I had spent curled up on the couch a second away from tears. Even now, almost twenty-four hours later, I find the overwhelming emotions suffocating.

My only solace had been the hope that Andrew would be able to get her out of whatever trouble Arriana had managed to land herself in. I wasn’t sure how her friend was going to manage that, but apparently he has connections or something like that.

But the hushed words of my friend dash that hope away.

Setting the book down, I climb off the bed and make my way toward the living space where Ava and Killian are perched in the kitchen. “What’s going on?” My voice is hollow as I ask the question, knowing if I let out even a fraction of the emotions bubbling up, I’ll be a blubbery mess once more.

“Fallon.” Ava breathes, darting around the island to pull me into her arms. “How are you feeling?”

I shrug, glancing over her shoulder to Killian whose gaze remains fixated on his

phone. “Fine.” I mumble, pulling out of Ava’s embrace. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

She glances behind her, scrunching up her face. “Um, I’m not sure how to tell you...” Her voice trails off.

“Arriana isn’t coming back.” Killian grunts, not looking up.

Ava gasps, reaching over to smack his arm, hissing, “ Killian .”

He glances up, narrowing his eyes at her. “Watch it, baby girl.” He warns.

Ava tries to hide the flinch at his words, but we all notice. Killian’s expression softens, and he takes her hand. “I’m sorry. There’s just a lot...” Trailing off once more, he looks down, immediately pushing to his feet. “I gotta take this.” Exiting the room, he holds the phone to his ear without saying a word.

I watch mutely after him, my mind replaying his words over and over.

“Arriana isn’t coming back.”

“Arriana isn’t coming back.”

She’s...

Clapping my hand over my mouth, I hiccup a sob, trying to keep up the patchwork dam I’d built around the sea of emotions.

“Hey, no, none of that. We’ll figure this out.” Ava soothes, tightening her hold on me. “Why don’t I get us something to drink, hmm?” Without waiting for a response, she steps back and begins her hunt for something to comfort me in liquid form.

I don't respond, I can't respond, too lost in my head.

Is this what it felt like for her? When I left, did it feel like a piece of her was ripped away? Like she'd never be whole again. How could I...

My mind replays broken bits and pieces of memories, splicing them together in a horrible slideshow of my worst moments.

Packing my bag, I feel the tears stinging my eyes. I know this is the right thing to do, that it'll be better for both of us. But it hurts so damn much.

One painful memory bleeds to another.

I wake up, finding the bed empty. The sound of muffled voices reaches me from down the hall. Stretching, I groan as my sore muscles pop. My hand lands on a piece of paper on Arriana's pillow. Flicking my eyes to the doorway, I shoot upright and snatch the page, squinting to read it in the dim light. My heart shatters as I read the words.

Blinking, I push away the memories, but I can't stop the thoughts.

Why is this happening to us?

Are we never going to be happy?

Do we not get to be?

"We finally found each other again." I mumble, the pain inside breaking free.

Ava sets a mug in front of me, gripping my bicep and squeezing. "I know, babe. And we'll get her back, I promise."

I nod my head, even though I don't believe it. I can't believe it. Because it's becoming clear our love was doomed from the start.

Taking the warm cup, I gingerly lift it to my lips, sipping at the velvety chocolate and wishing I had something a little stronger. Something to numb some of this pain.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

The music fills the cab of the truck, some country song I've never heard of, but if Andrew's terrible singing is any indication, it's gotta be one of his favorites.

I smile, kicking my legs up on the dash and shouting over the music, "So, where are we going?" My heartbeat speeds up at the promise of getting to see my baby again. It's the one thing that has kept me going throughout this whole ordeal.

Andrew glances at me, reaching over and turning down the radio's volume. "I've got a connection who runs a half-way house of sorts in Spokane. She said you could stay there until the heat dies down a bit."

I nod my head, tapping my foot to the beat. "Okay, cool. Is it safe?" My mind pictures Fallon amongst a bunch of degenerates and my teeth set on edge. Might be the teensiest bit hypocritical. I know I can hold my own, but my beautiful goddess? Not so much.

"Safe enough." Andrew grunts, glancing down at his dashboard as it lights up with an incoming message. Sighing, he picks up his phone and quickly taps on the screen before dropping it once more, the sound of ringing filling the cab. The call connects to silence and Andrew's lips twitch. "Hey, Killian."

"Andrew." Killian's deep voice filters through the speakers. "Avamarie is...concerned."

Andrew shifts his eyes to me then quickly back to the road. "Yeah?" He responds, his

fingers tightening on the steering wheel.

My eyes narrow. Something's up. Something they're not telling me.

"Yes. Her friend showed up in hysterics last night." Killian continues, and my heart stops.

Fallon? Oh baby...

"We finally got her to calm down, but I think she overheard Avamarie and I talking about Arriana and her situation ." Sighing heavily, Killian pauses before saying, "Look, Andrew, I don't know if she's going to be able to handle being separated for long."

My skin crawls at his words. Slowly pushing upright, I slip my legs off the dash, turning in my seat to level Andrew with a glare that very few have survived being on the receiving end of. "Andrew..." I hiss between my clenched teeth.

Killian lets out an exasperated noise at the sound of my voice. "I'll let you both figure that out. But I suggest you do so quickly. She's not doing well." The call disconnects and the music resumes. The country twang grates on my nerves, making an already volatile situation worse.

Slowly moving my arm, I switch off the radio and a hushed silence fills the vehicle. "Andrew, I love you, I do. But you have five seconds to tell me what the fuck is going on." I don't have to tell him what I'll do, he's seen enough to use his imagination.

Gulping, Andrew shifts nervously in his seat. "See, the thing is..." His voice trails off before he clears his throat and tries once more. "It's not safe for her. You have to know that."

I breathe through my nose, trying to focus on the feel of the breath filling my lungs and emptying once more.

He's right. And I hate it.

"I can't do this without her." I whisper, my shoulders slumping at the realization that I'm going to have to. To protect her.

"I know." He murmurs, reaching over and squeezing my thigh. "But, hey, it's just temporary, right?" He offers, giving me a small comforting smile.

I turn my gaze to the passenger window, releasing another heavy breath. "Right. Temporary."

"Whelp, here we are." Andrew groans as he stretches his muscles.

What should have been only a few hour trip took twice that as we made several detours and stopped along the way in various locations to ensure there was no one on our tail.

"Finally." I grumble, looking at the two story family home in front of us. "This is the place?"

Andrew chuckles at my disbelieving tone. "The one and only. Come on, time to meet Billie." Climbing out of the truck, he beelines for the door, leaving me to scramble after him.

As I follow behind him, I look around the street. It's a typical middle class suburban neighborhood. White picket fence, two point five children, kinda place. Not somewhere I would expect to hide a semi-fugitive.

But if Andrew says it's safe.

Shrugging at the thought, I come to a stop beside Andrew. He knocks on the door, clasping his hands in front of his body.

A few moments later, the door slides open to reveal a very tall, robust woman. "Andrew." The woman smiles, holding out her arms in a welcoming gesture.

Andrew beams at her. "Billie." He replies, gesturing toward me. "This is Arriana, the woman we spoke about."

"Oh yes. Hi, dear." Billie turns her blinding smile on me. "Welcome to my humble abode."

Inclining my head, I try to mirror her smile, but it falls flat. "Thank you. This definitely isn't what I was expecting." Andrew elbows my ribs, his grin straining. "What?" I snap. "It's not."

Billie chuckles, waving us inside. "Come, come. Let's get you settled." We enter the home, Billie following behind us. "I think you'll fit in just fine." She whispers to me, a conspiratorial grin on her face. Brushing past us, she turns to the right and up a small staircase. "This way."

Before we can follow, Andrew grips my arm firmly, halting my steps. "You need to watch yourself here, Ree." He murmurs, careful to keep his voice down.

Rolling my eyes, I pull my arm from his hold. "I can take care of myself, and you know it." I wink at him, taking off up the stairs.

Sighing heavily, Andrew follows behind me, shaking his head and mumbling under his breath.

We find Billie waiting outside of one of the several doors lining the hallway. “This room will be yours. Well, you’ll share it with a couple other girls, but this is where you’ll be while staying here.” I peek into the room, finding two bunk beds on either side.

My eyes narrow as I scan over the small space. It looks suspiciously like a prison cell hidden inside of a non-imposing family home.

“Problem, dear?” Billie asks, some of the earlier warmth having drained from her tone.

Need to be careful. Got it.

Turning toward her, I throw on a blinding smile of my own, slipping on my carefree mask. “Not at all, just admiring the accommodations.”

Billie studies me for several heartbeats before returning to her cheery self. “Fantastic.” She quips, clapping her hands together. “I’ll let you get all settled then.” With that, she turns on her heels and disappears down the hall.

I wait several moments before turning to Andrew and demanding, “What is this place? Really.”

He rubs the back of his neck, glancing over his shoulder. “It’s somewhere people go when they have nowhere else. But it’s temporary, I swear.” Gripping my shoulder, he squeezes as he promises, “I’ll get this all cleared up so you can get home.”

I release a heavy breath. “Okay.” With another look around the small space, I spot a notepad and pen resting on one of the two dressers smooshed into the room. Quickly crossing the room, I snatch it up and scribble out a note, ripping off the paper and folding it. I turn back toward Andrew, handing him the folded page. “For Fallon.” I

explain.

He inclines his head, slipping the paper into his back pocket. “I’ll be back for you.”

“I know.” I whisper, glancing around the room once more. “Just be quick. Please.”

Andrew’s expression softens as he pulls me into his arms. “I will.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

My phone buzzes, rousing me from my restless slumber.

I haven't gotten much sleep without Arriana.

It's not like this is the first time we've been apart, but something about this feels so much heavier, like we're fighting against forces beyond our control that are hell bent on keeping us apart.

Groaning, I slip on my glasses and pick up my phone, blinking at it several times until the screen comes into focus. My brows furrow at the caller ID. Sliding to answer the call, I press the phone to my ear, "Hello?"

"Hey, Cher." Hudson's voice filters through the speaker.

At the sound of his tired voice, I'm hit with a pang of guilt. In all the commotion with Arriana, I had completely forgotten my brother.

God, I just keep failing the ones I love.

"Hey, Egg." I whisper back. "How are you feeling?"

A quiet laugh sounds, breaking as he groans. "Like I got hit by a truck, and then it backed over me to finish the job."

"I'm so sorry..." I don't know what else to say. What else can I say?

“Yeah...” Hudson mumbles, his voice trailing off. There is an uncomfortable silence before he clears his throat. “Look, um, I called to ask a favor.” My eyebrows raise in response.

“You need me to do you a favor?” I clarify, unable to hide the incredulous tone in my voice.

“Don’t sound so surprised, sis.” He chuckles. “You don’t give yourself enough credit, you know.” He inhales a sharp breath, cutting off his quiet laughter.

My lips tremble as I try to keep back the well of emotions once more. “What-” It’s my turn to clear my throat as I push past the lump in my throat. “What do you need from me?” There’s a brief moment of awkward silence after my question. I pull the phone away from my ear to make sure we didn’t get disconnected. “Hud?” I try again.

“Can, um, can you come stay with me for a while?” Hudson whispers, a hint of shame in his tone. “I...I need to get clean, I can’t keep doing this . But...I can’t do it alone.”

I sit in silence as I process his words.

He needs me?

My first reaction is to say no, that I need to be here for Arriana. But then I remember the conversation with Ava and Killian, the one that proved there was nothing I can do but sit and wait.

Maybe it would be good to focus on something else, on someone else. Just for a little while.

“Fallon?” Hudson asks, his discomfort evident in his tone. “If it’s too much-”

“I’ll do it.” I cut him off.

There’s a moment of silence before he whispers, “Really?”

A small smile breaks through, the first one I’ve been able to muster since Arriana was taken away. “Really.”

2 1/2 months later

Hudson groans again from his room, setting my teeth on edge. I’m excited that he’s finally exploring himself, but would really like it if he could do it somewhere else. Anywhere else.

Another loud moan sounds from his partner and I can’t take it anymore.

Snatching up my phone and keys, I slip my feet into a pair of boots. I pull on one of my puffy winter jackets and exit the small apartment.

I miss the condo that Arriana and I shared, but Hudson needed me and refused to leave his own place. I’m starting to wish I had put up more of a fight at the time as I now trudge my way through the several inches of snow, my numb fingers trying to move on the screen to open up the ride share app.

Maybe I should go see her.

The thought passes through my mind again as it has multiple times a day since Arriana was arrested. But then I remember her note, the one she gave Andrew for me as a goodbye.

Mi vida,

I'm so sorry to have to tell you this way.

I'm going to have to go away for a while but I'll

be back. I love you so much and know this has

nothing to do with you or us. I need you to not

come visit me where I'm going, it's very

important that no one knows

our connection for your safety.

Te amo

I blow out a heavy breath, hunching my shoulders up in an attempt to hide from the
bristling chill in the air. The app tells me that my ride will be here in a few minutes so
I take the time to warn my friend of my drop in.

Me

911

Bestie *double pink heart emoji*

You okay babe??

Me

Yes. No. Uggggh, Hudson is getting

his freak on and I just can't listen to

it anymore *crying emoji*

Bestie *double pink heart emoji*

HAHAHAHA go Hudson!

Bestie *double pink heart emoji*

Wanna come over?

Me

Already on my way *hiding

behind hands emoji*

Bestie *double pink heart emoji*

See you soon! *kissy face emoji*

A small smile pulls at my lips as I tuck my phone away. Bringing my frozen hands to my face, I blow on my fingers in an attempt to stave off the bone chilling cold. My mind wanders to my missing other half.

Why did you have to do it?

A familiar sorrow fills me as I'm reminded once again of my part in her arrest. When

I found out Scarlett had pressed charges, I went ballistic.

Slamming the door open, I storm into my parents' house. Because, of course she'd be here, the perfect little suck up cunt.

Voices filter down the hall, signaling my destination.

Stomping down the carpeted hallway, I round the corner and freeze, my eyes traveling over the group of ladies all sitting in a circle. My gaze lands on the books clutched in their hands.

Fuck.

Squaring my shoulders, I ball my hands into fists and will my anger to carry me past the fear clawing at my soul.

"Fallon." My mom calls, surprise filling her tone. "I wasn't expecting you." Glancing around at the other women in the room, a wide smile breaks out on her face. "Are you here to join us for bible study?" My chest tightens at the excitement in her voice.

Shaking my head, I move my gaze to Scarlett, my eyes narrowing at her. "No." I respond to my mom. Taking a step forward, I raise a hand and point a finger at Scarlett as I snarl, "What the fuck did you do?"

Gasps fill the room at my question, no doubt the self-proclaimed pious women losing their shit at my curse.

"Language, young lady." My mom snaps.

I ignore her, taking another step toward Scarlett. My fury must be evident in my face as she cowers back at my approach, moving to gently cradle her bandaged nose. My

lip pulls back in a sneer.

I wish Arriana had done worse than break her stupid nose.

I'm shocked at the thought, but I can't ignore the truth in it. This woman, my sister, just stole away the most important person in the world from me.

"You took her from me." I enunciate each word, closing the distance between us until I'm towering over her.

Scarlett's eyes are wide with fear, but she pushes past it, glaring at me and pointing at her nose. "She broke my nose. She assaulted me." Quiet murmuring sounds around us, and my heartbeat thunders as I clench and unclench my fists in an attempt to fight against the anxiety clawing up my throat. "Besides," Scarlett sneers, pushing upright as she sees my resolve falter. "I did it for you, sis."

I blink at her, stumbling back half a step. "For me?" I echo.

She pushes to her feet, her eyes traveling over all the women in the room before landing on me. "Oh yes, Fallon. To save you."

My lungs seize as her words bring back years of painful memories. Of pastors and elders, of my parents and their friends, of god-fearing, hate-filled people telling me throughout my life what I want and who I am is wrong. That I need saving.

Scarlett smirks at me, noticing the effect her words have. "Poor thing, so confused." She croons, reaching a hand out and running it down my hair.

I flinch at her touch, desperately needing to get away from her and her venomous words. I just got my head on straight when it comes to Arriana and me, I can't have her words poisoning my mind. Not again.

Shaking my head, I back away slowly, carefully avoiding the judgemental gazes of the other women in the room. “You’re-you’re wrong.” I stammer, my voice shaking. “I don’t need saving. I’m-” I take a deep breath and try to make my voice more steady. “I’m just fine the way I am.”

Scarlett’s expression saddens in fake concern. “No, Fallon, you’re not.” I catch the twinkle of hate in her eyes as she proceeds to fuck me up all over again. “That’s the devil talking, sis. Don’t you know homosexuality is a sin?”

I blink away the memory as my ride pulls up to the curb. It’s gotten harder to hold onto my certainty that I made the right choice with Arriana being gone.

“It’s just a phase.”

The familiar words play through my mind, the same ones I’ve heard my whole life.

No. No, that's hate talking.

Climbing into the back seat, I rub my hands up and down my arms, trying to warm myself up. But no matter how much the heater in the car warms my body, it does nothing to fight against the chill in my soul.

The doors slide open and I force a smile on my face as I’m greeted by Ava. “Hey, babe.” She beams, gesturing for me to come in. “You hungry?”

Following behind her to the kitchen, I go to say no but the smell of Chinese food in the air makes my stomach growl.

Chuckling, Ava pulls down another plate, shoving it into my hands. “I’ll take that as a yes. Eat up.” She moves to the opposite side of the island, taking a seat beside Killian. He grumbles something under his breath, earning a swift kick from his wife,

if the strained smile on her face and furious look on his are any indicator.

I slowly set the plate down, looking between the two. “No, I’m fine, thank you.” I mumble.

I’m not going to come between them. Not anymore than I already have.

Since Arriana was taken, I’ve spent way too much time here than is fair. When I wasn’t helping Hudson in his recovery or at class, I’ve been here.

“You know what, I forgot I have an early class. I should just...” I turn on my heel and walk toward the elevator, my heart thundering in my chest.

“Wait! Fallon!” Ava calls behind me.

I press the call button for the elevator and smile over my shoulder. “Sorry to bother you both.” The doors slide open as Ava reaches my side.

Before I can step inside, she grips my arm. “Fallon.” She presses, ducking her head to catch my gaze. “You are not a bother. Ever.”

“Sometimes.” Killian grumbles from across the condo, his deep voice carrying across the space.

Ava snaps her head in his direction, her expression furious. Closing her eyes, she breathes heavily through her nose, blowing the air out slowly. “Ignore him.” She sighs, blinking open her eyes. “Please, stay.” Her pleading tone is almost enough to make me listen, but the quiet scoff that sounds from across the room at her insistence makes up my mind.

Shaking my head, I lift up the corner of my lips. “I’ve gotta go.” I pry her hand off

my arm and slide into the elevator. My eyes meet hers as I push the button for the lobby. I quickly avert my gaze at the worry I find reflecting back at me.

The doors close and I release a heavy breath. The weight on my chest growing heavier with each floor I put between us.

There's a reason I haven't let myself be alone for too long since Arriana was ripped away. A reason I'm trying to ignore.

"You blew off Olivia's son for her?" My mom shrieks in my ear.

My heart thunders as I clutch the cell phone tighter, seriously regretting answering her call. I'm not sure what I expected, I should have known better. Especially after what happened at her bible study.

"You don't understand." I murmur.

My mom scoffs, "Understand what? That you're with a...a..." She clears her throat before continuing. "What happened, Fallon? You know that's a..." She trails off again, her voice pained.

Taking a deep breath, she whispers, "I'm worried about you."

I gulp, fisting the fabric of my shirt in an attempt to calm some of the anxiety building inside. I know where this is going, and I don't know if I have the strength to say no.

"You're coming to church with us this Sunday."

The elevator dings open to the lobby, the sound pulling me from my memory. Shaking myself, I exit the building and look around the darkened street.

My eyes land on a bar a couple blocks away and I find my feet moving before I make the conscious decision to do so.

One drink couldn't hurt.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

2 months later

One hundred and forty-four days and...

I glance at the clock sitting on the wall of the dining room.

Seventy-three minutes.

That's how long it's been since I was arrested.

I'm seriously regretting the decision to not listen to Andrew to take Fallon and run.

Not that I'll ever admit that to him.

At first I was relieved when Andrew told me that my arrest was for assault and battery on Scarlett. The stupid bitch deserved it, and that was easy enough for him to bribe my way out of.

However, that relief was quickly dashed when my mugshot ran through the system and was flagged in connection to Thomas' murder.

Fucking bullshit.

The added level of severity to my crimes has made things more difficult to clear my name.

“Shouldn’t be much longer.” Andrew assures me.

I sigh, running a hand through my hair as I look over the small park we decided to meet at today. He’s been saying the same thing for the last three months with no luck. Changing the topic, I massage my aching shoulder as I ask, “How’s Fallon?”

Andrew’s eyes sadden before he shifts his gaze around the busy park. “Not great.” My heart cracks at his quiet words. “She’s staying with her brother, helping him during his recovery from what I’ve gathered, but…” His voice trails off as he rubs the back of his neck.

“But what?” I press, turning to fully face him.

Andrew flicks his eyes down before looking back up at me. “We just need to get you back home.” He says instead of answering my question.

I wasn’t able to get more information out of him at the time, and still haven’t nearly two months later.

Groaning, I push up from the table, snatching up my plate and making my way over to deposit the uneaten food into the trash. I’ve lost so much weight since being here I’m starting to grow concerned at my ability to still hold my own in a fight. I just can’t bring myself to shovel down the disgusting stuff Billie likes to call food, my nerves making me constantly nauseous aren’t helping matters either.

So much of my time here reminds me of the various foster homes I was forced into before Linda and Henry adopted me. The disgusting food, the strict rules, and the horrible companions I find myself trapped behind these walls with.

“If it isn’t the psycho bitch.” A snide voice calls out behind me.

My back stiffens at the sound of Zandra's voice. One such person who I'd love to let out some of my pent up frustration on, but knowing I can't without jeopardizing my place here.

Zandra, or Alexandra Cassidy, has made my life a living hell since I arrived.

Sure, I might not have helped matters when I busted her lip on my second day here. But she was a cunt, so what did she expect?

"Fresh meat." Zandra snickers, puffing her chest out and placing her hands on her hips. Her green eyes drag down my body, setting my teeth on edge at the lust shining in them.

There is only one set of green eyes I want looking at me like that.

"What team do you play for?" She hums, licking her lips.

My lip curls back. "Not yours."

Zandra chuckles, clucking her tongue. "Huh, coulda sworn you were giving off vag vibes." She takes a step closer to me, her chest nearly brushing against mine. "Don't worry though, freshie. You'll learn to love it."

I lean away as I bark a laugh. "Oh, you misunderstood me." Dragging my gaze down her body and back up, I sneer, "I'm strictly a tacos gal. I'm just not interested in eating yours."

She reels back, her eyes widening in shock for a split second before narrowing to slits. "The fuck did you just say?" She hisses.

I quirk an eyebrow, pretending to flick hair over my shoulder as I turn my back to

her. “You heard me.”

Before I can take a step, I’m tackled to the ground. Flipping me on my back, Zandra straddles my hips, wrapping her hands around my neck as she leans forward to spit out, “You’re going to pay for that.”

A laugh bubbles up from my chest at her threat, because, who the fuck is she?

“What’s so funny?” She demands, tightening her fingers to accentuate her question, but not enough that I can’t still speak.

I laugh again. “Love the ferocity,” My humor dies off as I drop my tone low. “But you shouldn’t make threats you can’t follow through on.”

Before she can respond, I roll us over so she’s flat on her back and I’m now straddling her. “See, you don’t know me,” I bend over, hovering my face over hers, my teeth bared. “But you’re going to now, puta .” My fist flies forward, connecting with her mouth, the impact busting her lip open.

Leaping to my feet, I walk away from the pathetic woman as she sobs like I’ve broken her jaw instead of split her lip. Her voice carries after me, making my heart clench. “Psycho bitch!”

“Don’t call me that.” I snarl, slamming my plate down and turning to face Zandra and her stupid fucking clique.

Seriously, are we in high school? Because these girls follow her around like she’s the queen bee or something, and I’m sick of it.

“What’s the matter, puta ?” Zandra sneers, making her squad chuckle. “I looked that up, by the way. I also looked something else up and I gotta say, bitch doesn’t do you

justice, perra psicópata .” Her eyes sparkle as she catches my teeth grinding.

Her pronunciation is shit as she says the words how they’re spelled, per-raw sy-co-pat-uh, but I can tell what she’s trying to say, and the repeated insult sends me into a near blind rage.

“Congratulations,” I clap my hands. “You learned how to use a dictionary.” Zandra’s eyes narrow at me, but I don’t stop. “ Quizás la próxima vez puedas aprender a usar un espejo. Tu perra fea .”

I laugh as she lunges for me, dancing out of her reach. “ ?Qué pasa, hija? ” I chuckle, thoroughly enjoying the rise I can get out of her. “Your dictionary didn’t teach you that one?”

She stands upright, balling her fists and glaring at me. “I don’t know what the fuck you just said to me, but you’re going to take it back.”

My eyes dart between her and her posse as they stalk toward me. “Now, now ladies.” I say, holding my hands up as I back away. “No need to get your panties in a bunch. Here, I’ll even help you for next time. Want to really insult someone? Tu madre debería haberte tragado . Just ask yours.” Spinning on my heel, I take off, laughing wildly as I run down the hallway and up the stairs.

Billie shouts after me to slow down, but I don’t care. Fuck this place and fuck all of them.

I glare out the window, my heart aching as I long to hear the sound of my baby’s voice. To see her eyes light up as she tells me about her latest story or an idea she has but is too nervous to put down on paper.

The longer I spend behind these walls, the more I feel like a caged animal. The fact I

couldn't bring my phone with me and that Billie has strict rules regarding the house phone usage makes matters even worse as I can't even call home to hear Fallon's voice.

We're each only given limited access and can only call our approved contact, in my case that contact being Andrew. I get the reasoning behind the rules, the fear someone might say the wrong thing to the wrong person and bring her home crashing down. Even still, I've very nearly caved and dialed Fallon's number instead on numerous occasions.

Fuck .

I groan as I run a hand down my face, aching to get away from this place. Needing to be back in the arms of the woman who is my entire world. My mind wanders, picturing my beautiful nymph and just what I'd do to her if she were here with me now.

Glancing over my shoulder, I find I have a rare moment of privacy. I leap to my feet and shut the bedroom door, needing to do something about the ache between my legs, to release some of the painful need that has only grown during our separation.

Climbing the bunk beds to lie on my hard mattress, I slip my hand beneath my waistband, biting my lip as I brush my fingers across my clit. Slowly pushing them inside of my aching pussy, I imagine it's her fingers. "Fallon." I moan quietly, my eyes squeezing shut. My fingers pump in and out beneath my pants, bringing me closer and closer to the edge as Fallon fills my mind.

Her gorgeous blonde locks cascading over her bare shoulders. Perky breasts, nipples pebbled. Goosebumps cover every inch of her exposed skin. Her mouth hanging open, head tipped back as ecstasy floods her system.

My mouth waters, needing to taste her, but it's only a memory.

I groan, forcing myself to focus on the image of her and not my current predicament.

Her body arches, hands roaming over her pale skin. "Please." She begs, her eyes on mine, pupils blown wide with desire. Her teeth sink into her bottom lip, drawing a moan from her chest as she slips her hands between her thighs and spreads her legs. Her fingers move to part her lips, laying her glistening pussy on display for me.

"Fuck." The word is a breathless whisper on my lips. My body convulses, the sensations heightened as the echoes of her pleasure sound in my mind.

I come down from the high of my orgasm, an ache in my chest as I blink my eyes open and find I'm alone.

Pulling my hand from my pants, I drape my arm over my eyes, trying to push back the now familiar melancholy. I don't know how much longer I'll survive living here, separated from the person who makes my life worth living.

As the pain rips my heart apart, one even more distressing thought fills my mind.

Is she okay without me?

Fallon

My head pounds as I groan into my mug.

“You look like shit, Cher.” Hudson laughs, pulling down a bowl.

I grumble back at him, but can’t focus enough to throw a decent insult as the small movement of my jaw sends spears of agony through my skull.

He glances at me again, gently setting the box of cereal in his hand onto the counter. “Hey.” I ignore him, staring miserably down at the dark liquid clutched in my hands. Sighing, he plops down across the small table from me. “Fal, look at me.”

I finally shift my eyes up, meeting his concerned gaze. “What?” I groan again, reaching up to massage my temples.

“Are you okay?” His voice is quiet and I hate the pity I can see shining in his pale eyes.

I’m here to help him, not the other way around.

“I’m fine.” I snap, cringing at my harsh tone.

I didn’t used to be like this. On edge and irritable. But the only times I find my constant anxiety isn’t setting all my nerve endings on fire is when...

“Why don’t I get you a refill?” Hudson offers, reaching forward and taking the mug

from my hands before I can protest. Pushing to his feet, he turns toward the kitchen when his feet freeze.

Lifting the drink to his nose, he sniffs, his eyes darting back to me. “Fallon.” His slow pronunciation of my name sets my teeth on edge. “It’s seven-thirty in the morning.”

“I know what time it is.” I grumble, gripping the table and slowly standing upright. The room spins a little as I do, but my hold on the wooden surface keeps me on my feet. “I gotta go.” Turning on my heel, I walk toward my room, trying to keep my gait even.

Hudson’s quiet voice rings out behind me. “I’m worried about you.”

I don’t say anything, simply disappearing down the hall and away from his soon-to-be mini intervention.

I don’t have a problem.

I stumble into class twenty minutes late, earning glares from the other students.

The professor doesn’t miss a beat as he continues his lesson. “In pop culture today, there is a much wider range of inclusivity than previously displayed.”

I suppress a groan as I slip into a chair at the back of the classroom.

Of course it’s this class.

When I originally saw the Sexuality Diversity Studies course being offered this semester, I was excited, hoping it would help me to understand a little more about myself. Something for me to cling to and maybe even grow as a person for when Arriana came back. Plus, it would check off one of the required category coursework

for my English major. So I signed up for it.

Stupid mistake.

All this class has done so far is remind me how people like me are viewed by those who long for the “good old days”. Like I needed more of a reminder of that.

“Jesus said we must avoid sin. That if we seek to join Him in Everlasting Paradise, we must cut off the parts of us that drive us to fulfill our worldly desires. Matthew eighteen versus eight and nine,” Pastor Ian flips open his bible. ““If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of Hell.”” He pauses, letting his words hang in the air. A few hushed agreements filter through the congregation, heads nodding along.

My heart beats wildly in my chest as I try to fight the urge to hide below the pew. I know he’s not talking at me, but it sure feels like the sermon is a pointed nod at my current situation.

“The Devil tempts us in ways he knows we are weakest.” Pastor Ian’s voice booms through the speakers. “When we come face to face with the desires of the flesh, we must remember that we are children of God and we can draw strength through Christ who saved us.” He runs his gaze over the congregation.

I gulp when his piercing eyes land on me, the same feeling I’ve had a thousand times while sitting in this very seat suffocates me. The feeling that he can see inside of my soul and knows all the hidden desires. Along with it the fear that somehow who I am is wrong and sinful, despite my decision to choose love over this...this...hate.

He narrows his eyes before dragging his intense gaze over the other half of the room.
“Let us pray.”

All around me, heads bow and arms raise. I dip my head, careful to keep up appearances so as not to further upset my parents.

“Amen.” All across the room the word is echoed by church members.

The sermon is over, and I release a small breath of relief as people funnel out into the foyer. My throat tightens and I fight against the panic welling up inside as I try to blend into the crowd, keeping my head dipped and eyes averted in an attempt to avoid conversation.

“Oh heavens, is that you, Fallon?” A voice calls out, and I cringe.

Turning as slowly as possible, I plaster on a fake smile. “Hi, Pastor Lyla.”

She smiles back at me, stretching her arms wide for a hug. I lift mine, the motion an automatic response after years of conditioning. “I’m so glad to see you back, dear.” She enthuses.

“Yes, it’s good to see you back in the Lord’s house.” A deep voice rumbles behind her. She smiles back at her husband, releasing me to tuck into his side.

I try to hide the fear that wells up at his voice.

Why did I come here?

“What a wonderful sermon, Pastor Ian.” My mom praises, startling me by her sudden appearance.

Pastor Ian lingers his gaze on me for another moment before turning to my mom with a blinding smile. “Thank you, Penelope. Now if you’ll both excuse us.” He ushers away his wife with a hand on the small of her back.

I watch the two smile and mingle with their congregation, the nauseating feeling growing inside of me at each fake interaction. “Excuse me.” I mumble, rushing to the bathroom.

Once inside, I lock myself in one of the stalls and bury my face in my hands. My body shakes as quiet cries escape.

I don’t know how I ever thought this place was one I could call home. There isn’t love behind the walls of this church. I’m not sure they even know what it really means.

Because love isn’t so full of hate. Love isn’t telling someone they are destined to burn for something they can’t control.

If there is a god, if somehow all of this is true and I am broken. He’s the one who made me. Why would a loving god create flawed people and then punish us, cast us into eternal torment, for something he did?

That doesn’t sound like love, not the love I’ve come to know.

“Don’t forget the test next week.” The professor calls out as all around me everyone gathers their things to leave.

Fuck.

I was so lost in my head, I didn’t even hear the rest of his lecture.

I'm going to fail this class.

My stomach churns at the thought. I've never failed a class before, never gotten below a B, and even that was gym, so I'm not counting that one.

I gather up my things and trudge out of the classroom, the weight on my chest growing heavier. Glancing around the hall, I dart into an empty classroom and fumble with my bag. My fingers close over the metal and I release a sigh.

Pulling out the flask, I twist the cap and tilt my head back, taking long pulls of the liquor inside. My senses begin to dull and with it the anxiety lessens. After one more drink, I slip the canister back into my bag and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

I sneak back into the hall and stumble toward my next class, relishing in the warmth spreading through my body as the alcohol takes effect. By the time I slip into my seat, I have a smile on my face and it almost feels genuine.

Fallon

“You know you don’t have to go, right?” Hudson asks, watching me carefully as I gather my things and slip on my shoes.

Sighing heavily, I fidget with my glasses and glance around to make sure I’ve gotten everything. “It’s not that simple and you know it.” He flinches at my harsh tone, adding guilt to my already overwhelming sea of emotions. Sighing again, I give him an apologetic smile as my phone dings, indicating our parents have arrived. “Look, I’m sorry. I just have to...” I gesture behind me, backing toward the door.

He nods, returning my smile with a sad one of his own. “Yeah, I get it. Just...” I almost don’t hear his words as I exit, a part of me wishing I hadn’t. “Don’t let them change who you are, Cher.”

My heart aches as I fly out of the small apartment and climb into my parents’ car waiting outside.

“Hi, sweetheart.” My mom greets, turning in her seat to smile at me. Her grin strains as she runs her gaze over my outfit.

I fidget under her judgemental gaze, curling into myself in an attempt to hide. Tsking lightly, she shifts in her seat with a shake of her head. I glance down, trying to find what she is so disapproving of, and come up empty.

I’m wearing a floral print, mid-length, spring style dress, the neckline a halter strap that dips between my breasts but more than covers my body. I had bought the dress

just for today, knowing that my parents and their church always make a big deal about Easter Sunday.

Can't do anything right.

I chew on my bottom lip as my dad indicates he's pulling into traffic. The drive to church is full of mindless chatter, mostly provided by my mom while my dad and I offer the obligatory "hmm"s, "wow"s, and "really?"s. Honestly, I think she just likes the sound of her own voice, but I can't tell her that.

My eyes meet my dad's in the rearview mirror and he offers me a small smile that I try to return, but find my lips shake too much to make it a genuine one.

We pull into the crowded parking lot full of Sunday church goers. "Oh look, it's Olivia!" My mom cries, bouncing in her seat and nearly leaping from the car as soon as it's in park. Peeking her head back inside, she shoots me a hard look. "I'm sure that means Logan is here, maybe you should apologize for your behavior." I gulp in response, nodding my head robotically. Her smile in return is blinding as she shuts the door and walks toward her friend, waving her arm high above her head.

"She just wants what's best for you." My dad says from the driver's seat, his eyes on his wife as she excitedly greets her friends.

I swallow what I really want to say, mumbling instead, "Yeah, I know."

He looks at me again in the rearview mirror, reaching his hand back to lightly pat my knee. "We both love you very much, Fallon. And we're so proud of you for returning to where you belong." Without another word, he exits the vehicle, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Tears prick at my eyes as I replay their words in my mind, feeling the weight of the

pressure to be their idea of a perfect daughter . Fumbling with my bag, I discreetly pull out the flask and untwist the cap, taking a couple swigs before stashing it away once more.

Full of liquid courage, I push open my door and climb out of the car, adjusting my clothes and hair as I mentally prepare myself for another few hours of hell.

Why do I keep doing this to myself?

Even as I ask the question, I know the answer. With Arriana gone, I'm too dependent on my parents. Not that I'd ever ask her to pay my way, but without her, my options are severely limited. Luckily for me, Hudson wanted to keep me around, so when Arriana's condo was evicted I was able to move her things in with me and didn't have to return to my parents' home. But outside of that small freedom, they have almost total control of every other aspect of my life.

So I plaster on a fake smile and pretend my soul isn't dying with each step toward the one place I don't want to be.

"Hey, stranger." A deep voice sounds behind me, startling me enough I jump. I clutch my chest in an attempt to calm down my racing heartbeat.

Turning around, I find Logan standing a few feet away, his easy going smile on his face helps ease some of the anxiety still churning inside me despite the alcohol dulling most of it. "Oh, um, hi." I mumble, my cheeks reddening as I remember our last interaction.

His grin widens as he shoves his hands in his pockets. "My mom said you started coming again, but I didn't really believe it until I saw you here." His gaze travels down my body and the heat that blooms in his eyes has me wishing I had covered up more.

Suddenly the dress I'm wearing feels like I'm showing too much, despite my earlier feelings.

Shifting uncomfortably under his gaze, I shrug. "Yeah, I guess. I mean, it's important to my parents, so here I am." It's not a lie, just an omission of certain details.

He studies me for another moment before returning his dark eyes to mine, something in them that I hadn't noticed on our first date. I shiver and it has nothing to do with the light breeze.

"Well, I, uh, I better go find my mom and dad." I say lamely, excusing myself from the uncomfortable situation. As I walk away, I can still feel his eyes on me and I know deep down I made the right decision to steer clear from him.

"There you are!" My mom calls, beckoning me over as I step inside the foyer. She proceeds to spend several minutes bragging about me and my accomplishments. Which mostly consist of doing well in school and how proud she is that I've "found the way" again.

I stand awkwardly, being the trophy child she always wanted. Glancing up, I spot Scarlett watching from across the room, a scowl on her face.

Trust me, I wish this was you instead of me too.

That's the thing about love with conditions, you can't ever measure up. So when you don't meet the arbitrary expectations set, you quickly become replaced by someone else who somehow is meeting them. No matter how ridiculous it sounds.

A part of me actually feels bad for my sister the longer I've been forced back into this world. I had forgotten how painful and chilly it was on the outskirts of our parents' adoration in comparison to the warm glow of their love when they're happy with our

decisions.

I try to offer Scarlett a small smile, a peace offering, but she turns on her heel and stomps away, her husband following obediently behind her. Sighing quietly, I turn back to my mom and her chatter as I count the minutes till this whole ordeal is over and I can go home once more to drown my misery away.

The announcement that service is about to start echoes in the crowded hall and we all funnel into the chapel. I slide into the pew beside my mom and dad, fidgeting with the hem of my dress as it rides up my thighs.

We aren't seated for long as the worship band makes their way onto the stage. Song after song plays, singing the praises and worshipful love for a god I'm convinced doesn't care. I peek out of the corner of my eye to find my mom's hands raised high, tears streaming down her face as she tilts her head back, eyes closed.

"My soul cries for you, my soul yearns for you." The crowd sings, belting the lyrics with their whole hearts. "Jesus, lover of my soul, in you I am made whole."

I gulp, my chest constricting as the melody elicits a nearly violent need to get out of here. Mumbling an excuse I know won't be heard over the speakers, I snatch up my purse and stumble out of the chapel.

"Need a break too, huh?" A familiar voice sounds to my left as the door swings closed behind me.

I glance over and find Logan leaning against the wall, jerking his head toward the closed doors. Smiling awkwardly and shrugging my shoulders, I lie, "The loud music hurts my ears sometimes."

He looks at me intensely, his eyes darkening further as he contemplates his next

words. “You know,” He murmurs, pushing off the wall and coming to stand directly in front of me. “I have some smokes if you want to come join me?” He whispers the question, a playful grin on his face that reminds me so much of how he was on our date.

I glance behind me, chewing on my lip as I debate my options. Finally, I look back at him and smile with a nod. “Okay, sure.”

Anything has to be better than spending another moment listening to close minded, hateful people singing about unconditional love when they don’t know what it even means to really love and be loved without conditions.

Following behind Logan, we sneak out of the church, laughing as we sprint across the parking lot to a secluded section tucked away in the far corner.

I don’t know what I was so worried about, he’s obviously just a good guy. Probably forced to be here just as much as I am.

I smile at him when he offers me a cigarette, placing the white stick between my lips and leaning forward as he flicks on his lighter. Inhaling a heavy drag, I immediately start to cough, waving in front of my face as I lean away.

Logan laughs, lighting up his own cigarette and drawing in a lungful of smoke and releasing it like a seasoned pro. “You really don’t smoke often, huh?” He chuckles.

I shake my head, attempting another pull with the same results. “N-no.” I cough, glaring at the tiny rolled up nicotine. “Not really my thing.” Sighing, I give up on it, offering him the cigarette and opting instead to dig my own personal vice out of my bag.

His eyebrow raises as he watches me knock back a mouthful of liquor. “Hidden flask.

Aren't you rebellious." He snickers, holding his hand out. "Can I?"

I shrug, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand and handing it over. My eyes watch his lips as he swallows down the alcohol, his throat working draws my focus. When I shift my gaze back to his, I find him watching me closely, the same heat in his eyes as I had seen earlier.

He hands over my flask and I take another quick drink before putting it away. "We probably should get back." I mumble, regretting my decision to come out here alone with him.

After what I went through, I should have known better than to trust a man alone in the dark.

"Oh, come on." He replies, reaching out and gripping my wrist when I turn away from him.

I glare at his hand on me. "Let me go." I demand, tugging against his grip.

"You still owe me." He tightens his hold, something in his tone has my pounding heartbeat speeding up.

Pulling harder, I grow desperate in my need to get away. "I don't know what you're talking about." I snap, gulping around the fear crawling up my throat.

"Yes, you do. You led me on, acting all interested and then ghosting me. After giving me a serious case of blue balls." His earlier levity has disappeared, gone is the friendly, easy going guy I thought he was, replaced by the monster lurking beneath the surface.

He's just like the rest of them.

Tears prick at my eyes as I continue to struggle against his hold. My attempts only serve to anger him. Twisting my wrist behind my back, he forces me to turn around, his free hand shoving up my skirt. "This could have been enjoyable for both of us." He growls, shoving my underwear down my thighs.

I whimper, trying and failing to escape his touch. "D-don't." I sob, tensing at the feel of his fingers gliding over my exposed pussy.

"Fallon, what are you doin-" The question is cut off suddenly, a horrified gasp sounding instead.

Logan immediately straightens, backing away from me. "Sh-she made me. She seduced me." He stammers, trying to save face.

I shakily reach down and pull up my underwear, my face wet with the tears that continue to fall. I can't voice an argument, I can't stand up for myself. Because, even though the asshole is lying, I also can't help but feel I'm responsible. Like I should have known better.

"Get out of here, Logan." Scarlett sighs, waving him off. He pauses for another moment, looking between us with a terrified expression before turning on his heel and rushing back to the church.

I straighten my posture, wiping away the tears with my fingers. "Thanks." I whisper brokenly, turning to head back into the place that somehow feels even more unsafe than before, a fact I didn't think would be possible.

"Wait." Scarlett calls, reaching for me but dropping her arm to her side. I glance over my shoulder at her, bracing myself for whatever insult she's about to throw my way. "Are you okay?" Her quiet question startles me.

I blink at her, wondering if I imagined it. Studying her closely, I find a concern etched into her face I never thought I'd see directed my way. After several moments, I shake my head with a sigh, "No. But it doesn't matter anyway."

Turning back toward my own personal hell, I cross the parking lot and enter the church once more, spending the next hour and a half pretending nothing happened. Because that's what is expected.

Shut up. Do what they say. Be the perfect little follower.

My mom smiles at me and I try to return it, I really do. But I can't. As I sit in the pew and listen to Pastor Ian talk about the love of Christ and the redemption of sinners, I know that I won't be returning. I also know what that means for me, and while I'm terrified of what that means for my future, I know that today was a close call.

This time I'm not going to ignore the little voice inside, I'm going to listen. If I lose everything, at least I won't have lost that . Not again.

"Boss man won't be back for a while."

The sound of a deep chuckle filters into the dark room from outside. My heartbeat speeds up at the sinister edge to the laughter.

I need to get out of here.

"You're such a fucking idiot, Daniel." Another voice replies.

The original voice, Daniel, scoffs, "Come on, man, I'm so bored." He whines.

"And you're gonna be dead if you do anything stupid. You heard Charles, no one touches her." A little of my fear retreats at his words, the hope that I'm at least a little

protected in this hellscape.

Daniel groans, a loud thump sounding. “Bullshit.”

There’s a long moment of silence before his voice reaches my ears again. “Just imagine it though. She’s gotta have such a tight pussy, man. I bet she’s never even had a cock up there, if what I heard was true.”

I whimper, curling into myself.

Please no.

The other man is quiet for a beat. “Never?” He finally responds, and the small hope I had leaves at the hunger in his voice.

“That’s what I’m telling you, man. Girl’s a box muncher, you can’t tell me it’s not a dream of yours to fuck what is basically her virgin pussy.” Daniel’s laughter echoes loudly in the dark. “I knew it, hell, you let me in there I’ll even let you have the first go.”

Fuckfuckfuck.

I whip my head around, my breaths coming in heavy pants as I try to think of a way out of this, to find some way to protect myself from what is about to happen.

The door creaks open and the light spilling in momentarily blinds me. Blinking my eyes, I press back further against the wall.

Two men walk inside, the large forms blocking most of the light and giving my eyes a little easier time adjusting. Before I can say or do anything, one of them roughly grabs my hair, yanking my head back. I whimper from the sharp pain on my scalp,

jerking against his hold.

“What are you doing?” The other man snaps.

“I said you could fuck her first,” The man with his hand in my hair replies, his voice letting me know he must be Daniel. “But this mouth is mine.”

“No.” I gasp, clamping my jaw shut tight.

Daniel chuckles, his free hand undoing his belt and pushing down his pants enough to free his cock. My eyes fixate on the hard length now inches from my face. I try to pull myself free again, my stomach dropping and a wave of nausea hitting me as I find I’m unable to move so much as an inch. “You’re going to take it, beautiful.” He growls, fisting his cock and rubbing the head across my lips.

Tears stream down my face as I clench my jaw, refusing to let him push into my mouth.

The hold in my hair disappears and I’m momentarily grateful until I feel fingers grip my chin. “Open up.” I violently shake my head, but am no match for his brute strength as he forces my lips apart.

A choked sob leaves me as he shoves his dick in my open mouth. The salty taste and hard ridges sliding inside make me gag, pulling a groan from my assailant.

“Fuck.” He groans again. “Dude, this mouth is, fuck.” His hips pull back before he thrusts forward, the head of his dick bumping against the back of my throat, and I can’t stop the bile rising.

I choke, trying to swallow down the vomit to avoid suffocating on it as snot and tears stream down my face.

Daniel's heavy breathing fills the room and something flips in me when he lets out a strangled curse. "That's it, baby. Take my cock."

Only one person calls me baby. And it's not this disgusting asshole.

Before I fully register what I'm about to do, my jaw locks and my teeth sink into his flesh.

The man's groans turn to shrieks as I bite as hard as I can, the metallic taste of blood filling my mouth. He rips away from me, howling and clutching his injured dick. "You-" He gasps around the pain. "You fucking bitch." His fist flies forward, landing a harsh blow on my face and the world goes dark.

I gasp, shooting upright and looking around the room. Awareness slowly filters into my mind and I try to calm my breathing.

Just a dream.

No matter how many times I repeat the thought to myself, my dark surroundings send my overworking heart into an even more erratic rhythm.

The nightmares have gotten worse since what happened with Logan. Every night filled with the endless terror of my memories. Sometimes they feature Daniel, sometimes Logan, and sometimes a horrible blend of the two.

Arriana used to be able to help calm me down when the old memories would surface, her gentle touch and soft voice would chase away the demons. But I'm alone now.

Climbing out of bed, I stumble toward the door and rip it open, letting out a relieved breath as light pours into the space.

Looks like I'm not the only one up.

I trudge into the shared living space and find Hudson sprawled across the sofa, his eyes glued to the TV. "Hey." I mumble, pivoting toward the kitchen.

He grunts in response, not giving me much mind as I pop open a beer and move to sink into the armchair beside the couch. We sit in silence, the only sound the quiet voices filtering through the speakers.

My mind can't focus on whatever is on the screen, images of my dream haunting me instead. I tilt my head back, downing the contents of my drink and pushing up to my feet again.

Hudson shifts his eyes to me, but he doesn't say anything as I grab another drink.

With the feel of his gaze boring into my back, I sigh heavily. "What?" My stomach churns as I debate grabbing another bottle so I don't have to get up again.

"I think you have a problem, sis." His quiet words feel like a stab to my heart.

I'm not stupid. I know what I'm doing isn't healthy, but I don't have a choice. I can't live with this, not alone.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I grumble, snatching a couple more drinks out and returning to my seat.

Hudson quirks an eyebrow at the beer bottles. "No? You have no idea?"

I glare at him, twisting the cap off and taking another swig of alcohol, chasing the numbing effect I know will come.

At my silence, he sighs and pushes upright. Grabbing the remote, he pauses the show and turns his body toward me. “Look, Fallon. I love you so I’m just going to say it.” Hudson’s intense gaze has me gulping in response. I avert my eyes, unable to accept the worry I see in his. “You need help. What you’re doing...it’s not healthy.”

I open my mouth to argue again, but he cuts me off.

“No, don’t deny it. I know, Fal. I know how it feels.” His voice breaks and the sound pulls at something deep inside of me. “Please, let me help you. I can’t...” He trails off, his tone laced with agony. “I can’t watch you go through this, Cher. I can’t lose you.”

Tears prick at my eyes and I shake my head. Meeting his gaze, I slowly lift the bottle and gulp down another drink of the cool liquid.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I can feel my soul dying inside as I refuse to accept his help. But there’s just no helping me.

“If you want us to continue paying for your schooling, you will come with us.” My mom snaps.

I look to my dad, pleading with him wordlessly. He averts his gaze, deferring to my mom, like always. “I can’t.” I whisper, my heart breaking.

I knew this was coming, but it still hurts worse than I could have imagined.

“Your grades are slipping and you’re drowning yourself in this new habit of yours.” My mom explains, as if her solution will help.

She can’t accept the fact that her “solution” is exactly what is doing this to me. I can’t separate the words from my own thoughts anymore. The weekly sermons reminding

me just how screwed up I am. And after what happened...

“Mom, please. Please, I can’t keep going. It’s...” My words trail off at the sharp look she gives me.

Shaking her head, she clasps her hands in her lap. “No, Fallon. I’m sorry to have to set an ultimatum, but you’ve given me no choice. And quite frankly, it breaks my heart that I have to force you to come. Can’t you see that your life is falling apart without God’s guiding hand?”

My heart shatters at her words. Because this is it, the last piece of me is being ripped away.

“I’m going back to bed.” I mumble, pushing up to my feet and stumbling across the room.

Hudson’s heavy sigh follows me as I close my bedroom door.

Arriana

I'm still stuck here.

I glare at the back of the house, picking at the blades of grass beside me as I fume at the fact that I still haven't been able to go home.

"Hey, psycho!" Zandra calls out, drawing my attention. "What are you thinking so hard about, hmm?" She comes to a stop before me, placing her hands on her hips. "You've got this like crazy brain face happening right now." She snickers, glancing over her shoulder for the support of her group. Only there's no one there. Realizing she's come to antagonize me on her own, a flash of fear crosses her features before she quickly schools her expression.

I lean back on my hands, running my gaze down her body and back up, taking a mental note of her physical strength in comparison to my own withered state.

I could still take her.

My lips tick up at the thought. "What, your posse leave you high and dry today?" I quip, raising an eyebrow. "Just you and me, huh?"

Zandra glances around the empty yard, her distress growing.

While I haven't let out the more vicious parts of myself during my stay here in the spirit of playing nice, I've made it clear enough that I'm not one to fuck with. At least, not if you're going to do so alone. Zandra isn't the only one to have gotten a

little bloodied and bruised by my hand.

“Don’t need ‘em.” She retorts, crossing her arms and trying to appear imposing.

“Hmm. That so.” I slowly push to my feet, brushing the dirt off my hands and ass. Taking a step forward, I attempt to slip past her and head back inside but she side-steps, effectively blocking my way. “Move.” I growl, glaring at her.

Zandra shakes her head, standing her ground as she declares, “No. It’s time you learned not to mess with me.”

I bark a laugh, shoving my hands into my back pockets and leaning back. “Oh?” I chuckle, arching an eyebrow. “And how do you plan to do that?”

Bitch still hasn’t learned.

I can feel the excitement growing at the promise of letting out some of the pent up need for violence, something I haven’t been able to do since my arrest. Not really.

Taking a step closer, she invades my space. “I’m going to show you the little bitch you really are, puta .”

Her and that fucking word.

I roll my eyes. “I’m going to tell you once. Back the fuck off.”

“Or what?” Zandra sneers, leaning in closer.

My teeth grind as the smell of musty laundry and a hint of unscented bath soap hits my nose.

I stare her down, my mind splitting between the horrific woman before me and one equally as terrible from my past. A moment of clarity hits me, and I feel the first pang of excitement I've felt since this whole ordeal started.

Without another word, I snap my hand out, gripping her hair at the back of her neck and pulling. She lets out a pained cry, clawing at my hand in a useless attempt to free herself.

Tightening my hold, I kick out my leg, knocking hers out from under her. She crumples to the ground, continuing her ear piercing cries as I pull harder against her scalp. "I warned you." I hum, spinning out of the way when she tries to throw a punch at my midsection. Tsking, I slip behind her, adjusting my grip in her hair and placing my boot on the middle of her back.

With my full weight behind it, I push her chest to the ground, kneeling beside her head to whisper, "Should have listened."

"Ple-please." She whimpers, but the sound just further fuels my bloodlust.

Rolling her onto her back, I move to straddle her body. When my fist connects with her face, a relieved breath escapes my lungs.

Finally.

As my fists fly forward, I feel myself releasing all the pain and anger I've held inside for so long. I unleash all the rage I've felt over Zandra and Suzie and all the other bullies I've had to endure throughout my life. All the backhanded insults, all the hollow threats that carried more weight than they should, all the emotional agony inflicted by these women .

Punch after punch land on her broken and bloodied face, and before long her

whimpered cries quiet. My chest heaves as I pummel her with my fists, letting out all the pain, anger, and heartbreak.

When I come to my senses, I look down in a horrified glee to find Zandra's lifeless eyes staring up into the sky.

Fuck.

I can't help the excitement I feel at finally letting go, but I also know I can't stay here.

Looking at my split knuckles covered in her blood, I try to formulate a plan.

First things first, gotta hide the body.

Glancing over my shoulder, I confirm with a breath of relief that no one had come out to inspect the commotion. Leaping to my feet, I grab her limp arms and drag her into the corner of the yard, hunting around for something to cover her body.

It doesn't have to be perfect, just enough to buy me some time.

My eyes land on a discarded plywood board across the lawn.

That'll work.

Sprinting across the grass, I drag the large board over and angle it to cover Zandra's body, bending to quickly wipe the blood on my hands onto her shirt before sliding the covering in place.

Okay, quick shower, change of clothes, then a phone call.

I can do this.

My heart thrums with the adrenaline from the kill.

I needed that.

Peeking my head inside, I make sure there's no one around before darting toward the bathroom. A quick shower and clothing change later, I waltz toward Billie's office. Finding her there, working on something behind her desk, I knock on the open door.

"Hey, Billie." I smile at her when she glances up at me. "Can I make a call?"

Sighing, Billie inclines her head. "Yeah, but make it quick." She waves toward the house phone hanging on the wall.

"Of course." My grin widens as I grab the cordless phone and dial Andrew's number.

The line rings twice before he answers, "Hello?"

"Drewbie!" I cry, startling Billie. I shoot her an apologetic look and gesture toward the hall. She nods her head, giving me the permission I was angling for to have a more private conversation.

"Arriana?" Andrew asks, his voice both confused and worried. "What's wrong?"

Ouch .

Sure, I haven't called him much since getting here, but to just assume something's wrong, even if he's right...

"Who says something has to be wrong for me to want to call you?" I retort, hunting

for a private space for this conversation.

“Ree...”

“Okay, fine. I might have...” Glancing around, I make sure no one is in earshot before whispering, “Look, I need to get out of here. Now.”

“Arriana, what did you do?” Andrew groans.

I smirk, my eyes moving toward the backyard. “Took care of a problem.” I hum. “Now, you gonna come to my rescue?”

There’s a moment of silence before Andrew chuckles, “And you say you’re not a damsel in distress anymore. On my way, princess.” Before I can reply to his offensive remark, his tone becomes serious. “You’re going to have to tell me what happened.”

“I will.” I promise. “Just get me out of here first.”

Taking a deep breath, I slowly release it. “I need to come home.”

It’s been hours since our phone call and still no word. I’m starting to get agitated and restless, the need to get back to Fallon and away from this place nearly suffocating me.

I’m lucky no one has discovered Zandra’s body.

I return to Billie’s office, hanging the phone back up. “Thanks.” I mutter, turning on my heel to gather up what little things I brought with me.

“Arriana.” Billie calls, stopping me in my tracks.

“Yes?” I reply without turning around.

“If you see Zandra, can you send her my way? I need to talk to her.” Gulping, I nod.

“Great, thank you, dear.”

Without another word, I slip out of her office and up the stairs, careful to avoid anyone else on my way.

“Where are you, Andrew?” I mutter, picking up a small handful of rocks and chucking them across the street from my perch on the sidewalk. I didn’t tell Zandra to go meet Billie, not that it would have done any good to tell her corpse.

I chuckle at the thought, letting out a pained groan. My muscles ache from my months of malnutrition and sleeping on a hard bed. I find my desire for a decent meal and a good night’s sleep almost rival my need for her . Almost.

The sound of a car coming to a stop pulls me from my thoughts. Whipping my head in the direction of the approaching vehicle, my eyes narrow as I recognize the car, but it’s not the one I was expecting. Hopping to my feet, I groan loudly as I stretch out my tired muscles.

Killian climbs out of his car and looks around, lifting the sunglasses covering his eyes to squint in my direction. “You coming or what?” He calls, obviously irritated for having to be my ride.

I can’t help the smirk that covers my face. Sashaying over, I blow him a kiss. “My very own knight in shining armor coming to rescue me.” My laughter grows as he scowls at me in response.

“Get in the fucking car.” He grumbles, climbing back behind the wheel.

Ready to be home, I clamber inside despite the desire to fuck with him more. We're silent as he plugs in the address and throws the car in reverse. After several minutes of tense silence, I can't keep back my curiosity any longer. "So, not that I'm not grateful, grandpa." My lips twitch at his frustrated noise. "But why isn't Andrew picking me up?"

Killian doesn't respond, his focus on the road. Rolling my eyes, I resist the urge to prod him more, deciding I'll just ask Andrew when I see him. To my surprise, Killian releases a sigh and rubs the back of his neck. "Andrew is a little busy." My eyes narrow at his words.

Too busy to come pick up his best friend?

Crossing my arms, I huff and glare out the window. "I see how it is, I go to prison one time and now I'm not good enough anymore."

Killian scoffs. "Petulant child." He grumbles, shaking his head.

Huffing again, I ignore his snide comment and let my mind wander.

Seriously, what could be so important Andrew wouldn't come himself? It's not like I've been away at day camp.

Unable to think of a single logical reason, I push off the annoyance and decide a distraction would be great right about now. Reaching over, I turn on the stereo.

The cab immediately fills with the last song on Killian's playlist and I bark a laugh. He shoots me a glare in response, moving to turn off the music.

"Nu uh." I singsong, snapping my hand out to guard the power button. "I never knew you were a Halflives fan." He scowls at me, slapping his palm back onto the steering

wheel. “Old man’s got good taste.” I hum, leaning back in the seat and closing my eyes, letting the song ease the remaining tension in my body.

“It’s Avamarie’s playlist.” Killian mutters, but I don’t miss the way his fingers tap along to the beat.

I smile to myself and don’t call him on it, focusing instead on our destination. Even though it’s only been months, it feels like an eternity since I’ve had my baby in my arms, and as the distance between us lessens, I can feel the emptiness inside of me lessening as well. Ready to be whole once again. To have my missing other half.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

Bestie *double pink heart emoji*

You still coming?

I stare at the text, unsure how to respond.

In the weeks since my parents pulled their financial support, I've been in a bit of a freefall. The nights and days blending together as I find I'm aimless for the first time in my life.

I never had a total endgame in mind, I just knew whatever I was going to do, it would involve writing. My lifeline. Now, without the promise of words to keep me going, I don't know what comes next.

Just another college dropout getting a job as a barista or something.

I blink back the tears in my eyes and glance up at the stack of books resting on my dresser.

I haven't so much as cracked open one of my books in months. The thought of reading someone else's love story while mine seems to be falling apart was too much.

Pushing to my feet, I cross the room and gently pick up one of the novels. I run my finger down the worn spine, carefully opening to one of the many marked sections.

No matter what we may face out there , in here? In here it's just the two of us. Us against the world.

I don't know when he became my person, when our lives became so intertwined that I don't see a me without him .

Glancing over at his sleeping form, my lips pull up into a soft smile and I trail my fingers through his soft curls. My soul flies as I realize I'm not alone. I'll never be alone again.

I lose the fight with the tears as they slip down my face.

I'm all alone.

My chest aches as I stifle a sob.

A soft knock sounds at my door, making me squeak and drop the book back onto the dresser. Wiping my face with my sleeve, I pull open the door, finding Hudson on the other side with his hands shoved into his pockets.

"Hey." He mumbles, staring at the floor.

My brows furrow as I take in his stance. His shoulders are hunched, a sheen on his forehead. The clothes he's wearing look to be a couple days old from the creases lining the fabric, and his hair is a chaotic mess.

A pang of guilt hits me at my selfishness. I'm supposed to be here helping him and instead I've been wallowing in my own self-pity.

"Oh, Hudson." I murmur, reaching forward and pulling him into my arms. "Are you okay?"

He shakes his head, clinging to me. “N-no.” His quiet admission shatters my heart. “I, um, I know you’ve got a lot-”

“Shh.” I cut him off, leaning back to study his face. “I’m sorry I haven’t been here for you. What is it?” I dip my head, trying to catch his gaze. He turns his head, hiding his eyes and a pit forms in my stomach. “Hudson?” Gripping his chin, I nudge him to look at me.

With a heavy sigh, he finally gives in and shifts his eyes to mine. A little of the tightness in my chest loosens as I inspect his eyes and notice the pupils appear normal. “What’s going on?” I try again, relieved he hasn’t relapsed, but his behavior still has me on edge.

Without a word, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small baggie. My eyes narrow as I glance at the pills inside. “Please tell me that’s not what I think it is.” Hudson flinches, but doesn’t deny my suspicion. “Hudson, why?” I gasp, snatching the baggie from his outstretched hand.

Running a hand down his face, Hudson shrugs, pulling out of my hold. “I just, I needed it all to quiet. Fal,” His voice breaks as he wraps his arms around his thin frame. “I can’t get it to stop. I’m trying so fucking hard, but...what if they’re right? What if I’m,” His eyes flick to mine and away. “What if I am broken? Because I think they might be right. I feel pretty fucking broken right now.” Shoulders slumped, Hudson curls into himself.

My heart aches at his whispered words. “Hey.” I nudge his chin, waiting for his pale eyes to meet mine before continuing. “There is nothing wrong with you.” Something tugs at me at my words, but I beat it back, focusing on my brother and his pain. “They’re the assholes, Hudson. You? You’re amazing.” His expression shutters in response and a fury fills me, an anger that surprises me.

“Don’t let them have even another moment of your peace. What they said? That was born from hate and fear. They hate what they don’t understand, and it scares them that they can’t control us. But, Hud,” My voice rises with each sentence and I find every ounce of agony I have felt over my life funnels into the words. “You are incredible . You are so full of love and life. Please, please don’t let them take your joy. Don’t let them turn you into this .” I shake the baggie in front of his face.

A heavy silence falls on the room, the only sound my rapid breathing as I try to calm myself.

“Okay.” The whispered word hangs in the air between us.

Reaching forward, I pull him back into my embrace. “Okay.” I echo, my throat tightening. Leaning back, I offer him a small smile. “I want you to meet someone.” His brows furrow, but he doesn’t argue. Shaking my head, I huff a laugh and turn to pluck my phone off the mattress.

Me

Change of plans

I cling to Hudson’s back as he swerves between traffic. My stomach is in my throat, and I’ve never been so terrified, yet so free. The wind whipping in my face as we race down the highway has me smiling so wide my cheeks hurt.

I get why he likes this.

Flicking on his indicator, Hudson pulls off the highway and heads down the familiar streets leading to my old home. A familiar heaviness settles on my chest as we grow closer. Memories of my person fill my mind, bringing with them an aching sorrow.

I miss you, Arriana.

I'm itching for a drink, something to dampen the pain her absence brings. Usually by this point, I would have been several drinks in and numb to the world, but Hudson needs me.

We pull to a stop along the curb in front of the large condominium. Shutting off the engine, Hudson hops off his bike before turning to help me down. I push down my sorrow as I pull off my helmet, a smile on my face as I tease, "You're an adrenaline junkie."

Tucking his helmet under his arm, he winks at me. "What can I say, I like the high." His expression falls as he registers what he said, shifting uncomfortably.

My smile straining, I hold my hand out for his keys. I step around him and then over to the valet before turning and gesturing toward the entrance. "Come on." Hudson follows me inside, not saying anything else the entire way up to the penthouse.

Pounding on the elevator door, I mentally kick myself for not texting her that we were here. At least this time she knows I'm coming.

The doors slide open and my mouth falls open. "Not a word." Ava snaps, moving to let us inside.

Biting back my laugh, I gesture to Hudson. "Ava, this is my brother Hudson. Hudson, this is my," A giggle breaks past my defenses, earning me a sharp look. Holding my hands up in surrender, I try again. "This is my friend, Ava."

"Hi, Hudson, it's great to meet you." Ava smiles, as if nothing is out of the ordinary.

"You, uh, you too." He mutters in response, glancing between my friend, me, and the

kitchen.

I follow his gaze and officially lose the battle with my laughter. Doubling over, I clutch my sides, laughing so hard I can barely stay upright.

“Stop it.” Ava cries. “It’s not funny!”

I push off my knees, walking across the room and coming to a stop to inspect the disaster before me. “Ava, what were you doing?” I giggle, running my gaze over the mess.

Scattered across the floor and countertops are dozens of eggshells, flour covering nearly every surface inch. Shifting my eyes, I notice large splatters of wet gloop clinging to the walls and ceiling.

“I was trying to make a cake.” Ava mumbles, her shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Why in the world would you try to bake a cake? Babe, I’ve never once known you to bake.” My gaze travels over her as I try so hard to hold back my laughter.

I don’t want to make the situation worse by my reaction, but as I look at the large clumps of batter in her hair, smudged flour covering her face, neck, and majority of her body, I know it’s a losing battle.

“It’s a surprise.” She mumbles miserably. “I just wanted something nice for...” She stops herself, shifting her eyes to me and away. “For the surprise.”

“I can help.” Hudson’s quiet voice cuts in.

I turn to him, my eyebrows raised. “You can?”

He shrugs, a half smile lifting up his lips. “I like to bake.” His cheeks stain red as he glances away.

“What? Since when?” I take a step closer, crossing my arms and waiting for him to look at me before demanding, “And why have we not had a multitude of goodies this whole time?”

He mirrors my stance, replying with another shrug of his shoulders. “You never asked.”

“Oh, you little shit.” I gasp, feigning indignation.

“Wait, you actually can bake a cake? Like, for real?” Ava chimes in. “And you want to help?”

Hudson turns to her, dropping his arms and grinning. “Sure can.” His gaze moves over the mayhem of the kitchen. “But, uh, we’re going to need to clean this up first.”

“Babe, I love him.” Ava calls to me, spinning on her heels and beginning the arduous task of cleanup.

I chuckle, sidestepping her and pulling down a bottle of wine and a glass. “Me too.” I smile at my brother as I pour my drink, choosing to ignore the concern in his eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

“Where are we going?” I ask, peering out the windshield and trying to familiarize myself with the area.

“Need to make a quick stop first.” Killian rumbles, indicating his signal to make a turn.

My eyes narrow, but I don’t say anything else. Slowly but surely, our surroundings begin to look familiar. “Wait, I thought you said Andrew was busy?”

Muttering under his breath, Killian doesn’t respond to my question.

“Okay, fine, keep your secrets, old man.” I quip, leaning back in the seat.

About twenty minutes later, we pull up outside of Andrew’s home.

It’s a simple single-level home, nothing super fancy. At least not on the outside.

Killian pulls up to a stop and I leap out of the car. I’m excited to get back to Fallon, but can see the importance of debriefing with Andrew and Killian first, especially considering the mess I left behind in Spokane.

Knocking on the front door, I wait impatiently for Andrew to open the door. When he does, I can’t help but do a double take. “Shit, Drewbie, you look like, well, shit .” I chuckle.

My eyes run down his body, noticing he's lost a considerable amount of weight himself. His once bulging muscles and stocky frame now an emaciated version. The thin layer of stubble-like hair now covering his normally bald head, bags under his eyes, and disheveled clothing all point to a general lack of upkeep.

"Yeah, great to see you too, princess." He mutters, gesturing us inside.

We step into the house and the surprises continue.

His home is filled with the usual high tech gadgetry, things I'd never even consider needing. A fancy TV hangs above an electric fireplace, dimmable lights are dotted along the ceiling. The entire floor is fancy hardwood that has its own adjustable heating settings, speakers placed strategically throughout the space.

It's everything I've come to expect when entering his home.

What I don't expect is all the additional touches peppered throughout. Throw pillows now rest on the large sectional, candles and flower vases placed on various end tables. The coffee table has a beautiful copper centerpiece, a ballerina perched on one pointed foot, her other leg raised high above her head.

My eyes land on a photo hung on the wall, and then another one beside it. Several lining the once bare walls.

Taking a step closer, I inspect the first photograph, my mind a confusing mess of excitement and hurt. "Andrew?" I glance over my shoulder, finding him with his hands shoved in his pockets, his gaze averted. "Who the fuck is this?" I demand, gesturing toward the photo before me.

"That, um," Andrew looks up, a blush forming on his face and neck. "That's my girlfriend." My lungs stop working.

Girlfriend? Why didn't he tell me?

"Well," He mutters, his expression filling with sadness. " Was my girlfriend."

I turn toward the photo once more, inspecting it closely with this newfound information.

A gorgeous woman stands beside Andrew, her arms wrapped around his neck as she stretches her neck to place a kiss on his cheek. Her black hair cascades down her back, curled in perfect waves. Andrew has a goofy smile on his face, a twinkle in his blue eyes. His arm is wrapped around her waist as he holds her close.

"She's beautiful." I murmur, tracing the image with my finger. Turning back toward Andrew, my heart breaks at the look on his face, one I'm all too familiar with. "What happened? You look so happy in the photo."

Andrew sighs, running a hand down the back of his neck. "I was, we were, I just...I fucked it all up, what can I say." Shrugging, he crosses the room and takes the picture from the wall, peering down at the woman.

I move to rest a hand on his arm. "I'm sure you'll figure it out." Offering him a small smile, I wait for him to meet my gaze. "You're pretty great, any girl would be lucky to have you." I wink at him, earning a soft chuckle.

"Yeah, well, I don't know about that." He mutters, glancing over me and stiffening, as if he remembered something. "But that's not important right now. We need to talk about you."

Sighing heavily, I move to flop down on one of his couches. "Right." I startle when Killian moves to sit on the opposite sofa. "Fuck, I forgot you were here, grandpa." I chuckle, earning myself a sharp glare.

“Wish I didn’t have to be.” He grumbles.

Andrew sits down beside me, picking up a small stack of papers I hadn’t noticed resting on the coffee table. Handing them over, he indicates for me to look.

Perusing through the documents, my eyebrows raise. “Wait, how is this possible?” I glance up, swallowing as I realize how badly I fucked up.

Andrew beams at me, looking proud of himself, and rightfully so. “Because I’m fucking awesome.”

Snorting, I look back down, rereading the words. “You got all the charges dropped?” I whisper.

“Yup. You are a free bird now. I was planning to come surprise you, but then you called and here we are.” I swallow again around the lump in my throat, looking up to meet Andrew’s excited expression and Killian’s suspicious one. When he meets my gaze, the excitement on Andrew’s face fades. “What? What’s wrong?” Snatching the papers from my hands, he scans over them.

“I, um, I’ve got some bad news.”

Fallon

“Oh my god, it’s perfect!” Ava exclaims, grinning from ear to ear. “Hudson, you are a genius .”

Shuffling on his feet, Hudson ducks his head to hide the smile spreading across his face. “It’s okay, I guess.” He mumbles, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“ It’s okay. ” Ava mocks, shaking her head. “Here I thought I was crazy.” Turning her attention to me, she gestures at the cake. “You can’t tell me this isn’t the most beautiful form of edible art you’ve ever seen?” She enthuses.

I giggle, hiccupping and nodding my head. “It’s gorgeous. Sorry, bro, no humble pie for you, this shit is amazing.”

He glances up at me and the small smile on his lips spreads, lighting up his whole face. “Yeah? You really think so?”

I beam at him, pushing to my feet a little too quickly. Another giggle escapes my lips as I cling to the counter. “Cross my heart and hope to,” hiccup , “die.” The room spins as I take a step forward. “That’s, that’s weird.” I mutter, shaking my head to clear my vision.

Blinking my eyes, I focus on Ava and Hudson. “What?” I ask, glancing between their worried expressions. They share a look and for some reason, it makes me angry. “What?” I snap, the question coming out much harsher this time as I feel the frustrating anxiety creep its way up my spine.

This shit is supposed to stop these feelings.

“Babe.” Ava’s voice draws my attention away from the buzzing just beneath my skin, the undercurrent of nerves I can’t seem to escape. “How much have you had to drink?” I cock my head at the question.

She’s never asked me that before.

Glancing over my shoulder at my nearly empty wine glass, I try to think of an answer, having lost track by the time the cake was placed in the oven. “I...I dunno.” I finally respond with a shrug of my shoulders.

Ava’s forehead creases. “Let me get you some water.” I try to protest, but am met with a sharp look that has me holding my hands up in surrender.

She’s acting weird.

Turning my attention back to my brother, I offer him a wide smile. “Hud, this really is so good.” He returns my smile, his appearing almost strained. Brushing off the fact, I glance back at his masterpiece.

It’s three-tiered, perfectly carved and stacked. The white icing has been smoothed over and a black liquid glaze was poured down the center, trailing down the sides and creating a beautifully contrasting visual piece of art.

It almost hurts to think about cutting into it later.

“Here.” I’m pulled from my inspection as Ava shoves a cool glass into my hands.

Closing my fingers around the cup, I glance down and find she did, in fact, get me water. “I’m okay, thanks, babe.” I move to set the drink down, but she blocks my

path.

“No, you need to drink that, Fallon.” She insists, crossing her arms.

Sighing dramatically, I tilt my head back and down the cool liquid. “There, happy?” I mutter, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

Ava studies my face for a moment before inclining her head and moving to finish cleaning up the kitchen. “Your surprise should be here soon.” She calls over her shoulder.

Slipping back onto the stool I’ve been perched at the whole evening, I reach forward and take my wine glass once more. “You’re killing me, not even a little hint?” I whine, looking around for the bottle to refill my glass.

My eyes land on Hudson as he slips from the room, most likely off to use the restroom.

“Nope.” Ava hums.

I roll my eyes at her back. “Okay, fine.” I grumble, my mood souring at her refusal. Running a hand through my hair, I blink as my vision doubles.

How much did I drink?

It couldn’t have been that much because I can still feel.

“You’re making the wrong choice, Fallon.”

I blink again, shaking my head to clear the voice.

“If you walk out of this house, that’s it.”

Now is not the time to wallow in memories, in things I can’t change. Sliding off the stool once more, I stumble toward the fridge, opening the door and hunting for something, anything to help.

I can vaguely hear Ava talking behind me, but the sound of her voice is drowned out by the flood of memories bursting through.

“I did it for you, to save you, sis.”

“The sins of the flesh separate us from God’s love. We must repent and seek Him.”

“I’m disappointed in you, Fallon.”

My throat tightens as I cling to the door handle, the oxygen in the room getting thinner with each memory.

“I love you, mi vida .”

Arriana’s voice breaks through the multitude of others, and somehow it makes it all worse.

“I just, I needed it all to be quiet.”

Hudson’s broken words filter through, and I find I understand them now. Closing the door, I turn around on numb legs.

“Where you goin’?” Ava calls as I stagger out of the kitchen.

“Bathroom.” I mumble in response. I catch sight of Hudson and cock my head at him.

He pushes past me, sinking into my empty seat. Shrugging, I continue down the hall.

“This could have been enjoyable for both of us.”

I cringe, trying to focus on anything but the sound of Logan’s voice in my head.

“I’m worried about you.”

I can’t tell whose voice it was, all of them blending together and overlapping. A steady stream of noise that’s nearly enough to drive me mad.

Closing the bathroom door behind me, I reach a shaky hand into my pocket and pull out the small baggie I confiscated from Hudson. “Just to make them quiet.” I whisper, pulling out one of the pills.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

“Seriously?” Andrew cries. “What the actual fuck, Arriana? Do you know how hard it was to get those murder charges dropped, and you just...” Breathing heavily, he pinches the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes in an effort to calm himself.

“If it makes it any better, I’m really sorry.” I mumble, feeling like a small child being scolded by my parents.

“Told you it was a bad idea bringing her in.” Killian gripes, crossing his arms.

I shoot him a venomous look. “That is so not fair.” I complain.

“No. No, he’s right, Ree.” Andrew sighs. My stomach drops at his words.

Shit, I really fucked up this time.

“I can’t just make this go away. Not again. And when Billie finds out...Fuck!” Andrew slaps his palm against the coffee table.

My heart thunders in my chest as I look between my two business partners and realize they’re right. I shouldn’t be doing this, I’m too reckless, too much of a loose cannon. A liability if you will.

“Well, if it makes you feel better, I was already planning on leaving once I got Fallon back.” I mumble, picking at the skin around my fingernails.

Andrew shakes his head, sighing again. "It's not that sim...you know what, we'll just deal with this later. We've got somewhere to be."

I perk up. "Oh?"

Glancing at Killian, Andrew gestures toward me. "Mind taking her with you? I've got to pick up a couple things." His voice is monotone, making the uneasiness grow inside of me.

Killian grunts his agreement, pushing to his feet and walking toward the door.

I stand up, turning to follow him, but hesitate. "I really am sorry, Andrew." I whisper.

"I know." He murmurs, gripping my shoulder and squeezing. "I wish that changed anything." Without another word, he slips something into my hand and returns to his seat on the couch.

Dropping my head, I look at the cell phone in my palm, the heavy reality of what I've done hitting me once more. Tucking my phone away, I give Andrew a curt nod before turning to follow Killian outside.

He's right.

Apologies don't get you anywhere, not really.

My leg bounces as we pull up the familiar street.

Soon. So fucking soon.

Despite the nerves from our conversation, I find my excitement growing again with each second that brings me closer to my girl. I resist the urge to whip out my phone

and call her, knowing the reunion will be so much sweeter face-to-face.

The car pulls to a stop and I leap from my seat, nearly toppling over the poor doorman as he opens the door for me. I jam my finger against the button for the elevator, muttering under my breath for it to hurry up. I'm painfully aware that I'm drawing unwanted attention, but can't muster up enough fucks to do anything about it.

Killian comes to stand beside me. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he unlocks it and reads silently for a few moments before speaking. "Fallon is at our place right now."

I nod again, unable to form words. My skin feels like it's on fire at the prospect of getting to see her again. We climb inside the elevator, the ride feeling like an eternity as the distance closes.

The elevator finally stops and I suck in several deep breaths to calm myself as Killian unlocks the doors. I brush past him the moment they slide open, my head whipping around the space, searching for Fallon.

Finding she's nowhere in sight, I trudge up to the kitchen, sinking into an open stool. A vaguely familiar boy sits beside me, fiddling with a nearly empty wine glass. "I know you." I blurt out, crinkling my forehead as I try to place him.

He glances up, his pale blue eyes meeting mine are full of some emotion that makes my stomach sink. Lifting the corner of his lips in a half smile, he extends his hand toward me. "Hudson."

I eye his extended hand, playing the name in my head on a loop.

Hudson. Hudson. I know that name...

“Aha!” I exclaim, jutting my hand into his. “You’re Fallon’s brother! Last time I saw you, well, you looked like shit.” I laugh, shaking his hand vigorously. “I’m Arriana, your sister’s...” My voice trails off because I’m not sure how to end that sentence.

Hudson’s grin widens and a little of the distress shining in his eyes lessens. “Oh fuck, you’re Arriana?”

I puff out my chest, beaming, “In the flesh. I take it you’ve heard of me.” Winking at him, I glance around the room again. “She is here, isn’t she?” My stomach flips at the thought that I somehow missed her.

She wouldn’t have left without me, right?

We were in a much better place when I left, but what if...

Ava and Hudson share a look and the pit in my stomach drops further. “What? What are you not telling me?” My fingers itch to snatch up the knife I can see lying on the counter.

I need answers and still no one is talking.

“Don’t make me ask again.” My voice has dropped all emotion, the switch flipping in me once more as my concern grows. Before I can act on the urge to force them to answer, a quiet scuffle sounds behind me.

I turn in slow motion, my heart stopping when my eyes land on the most gorgeous creature I have had the good fortune to witness. “Mi vida .” I breathe, leaping to my feet and darting across the room.

My arms wrap around her thin frame, pulling her against my body. Inhaling, I groan at the scent of rose filling my nose. “Fuck, I missed you.” Turning my head, I trail my

lips down her cheek, nuzzling her neck.

“Ar-Arriana?” Her voice is barely a whisper.

Humming, I run my nose up her throat, nipping her earlobe. “Yes, baby. It’s me.” I whisper in her ear, relishing in the shiver that runs through her body.

Her arms move, encircling me in an embrace nearly as tight as my own. “How?” She whispers back.

Pulling away just far enough to rest my forehead on hers, I murmur, “I told you I was coming back, baby. I’ll always come back for you.” A quiet, hiccupped sob escapes her at my words.

I crush my lips to hers, needing to swallow her pain, to take it for her. Her fingernails dig into my back. Moaning into my mouth, she presses her body against mine, as if she’s trying to crawl inside of me. And I can understand, because the desire to never part from her isn’t just a desire, it’s a tangible need. I can’t bear to be apart again.

Breaking the kiss, I pepper several across her face, smiling against her skin at the giggles she lets out. “I missed you.” I lean back, cupping her face in my hand.

Blinking her eyes, she shifts her gaze to meet mine and the sinking feeling swallows me whole.

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Fallon

“Baby?” Arriana murmurs, stroking her thumb across my cheek.

I blink at her.

My eyelids feel so heavy I can barely lift them as they close, but I force the lids apart.

“Mmhmm?”

I’m not sure if she hears me as she doesn’t respond.

I try to move and find I can’t keep my arms up any longer. They drop to my sides, dragging me down with them.

I can hear Arriana say something else, but it’s so far away.

Collapsing in her embrace, I hum, grateful to have her here.

I try to part my lips, to voice my joy at her return, but they’re sealed shut.

My next blink is even harder, and I find I want to rest in the oblivion. To let everything go and enjoy the quiet.

Quiet.

It’s so quiet.

Finally.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

“Fallon?” I shake her gently, my heart racing. Cradling her limp body in my arms, I move to the couch and lay her down.

The image of her glassy eyes, pupils so small I could hardly make out the black dot amidst the sea of green, won’t leave my mind. She looked so...

“Baby?” I whisper, running my hands down her hair. Crouching beside her, I try to swallow past the lump in my throat. “I need you to wake up. Vamos, mi vida. Por favor despierta. Please.” I beg, my voice breaking.

My pleas go unanswered, the only response a small flutter of her eyelids and a soft moan.

Lifting my head, I glare at the three bystanders who let this happen. “What did she take?” I growl. The earlier need to carve the answers out of them increasing with each second of silence that passes.

“I—what do you mean?” Ava croaks, her eyes glued on Fallon. “She...she drank a bit, but she didn’t...” Shifting her gaze to Hudson, her expression falls. “She didn’t, did she?”

Hudson runs his fingers through his hair, shaking his head. “I don’t know. She’s been so unlike herself lately, but I’ve never known her to...I mean how would she even...” He trails off, his eyes widening.

Leaping to my feet, I stalk across the room, backing him up against the island. “What. Did. She. Take?” I seethe.

My heart is in my throat. Memories threaten to blind me to the reality of what’s happening, and I can’t. I can’t relive it. I can’t get distracted. I just can’t.

“Ox-oxy. It was oxy.” He stammers, his eyes wide with panic.

Nodding my head, I spin on my heel and dart across the room, pulling my phone from my pocket. My hands shake as I try to unlock the screen.

Please no. No otra vez . Please.

I finally manage to open my phone, but as I punch in the numbers a loud pounding sounds. My head whips up in the direction of the elevator, the reality of our situation sinking in.

I’m a fugitive. I can’t be here.

Glancing over my shoulder, I meet Killian’s gaze and find the same realization in his eyes. “If she dies, I’m going to kill all of you.” I warn, my voice emotionless. It’s not a threat, it’s not even a warning. It’s a promise.

Killian inclines his head, striding toward the elevator.

With one last forlorn look at my sleeping beauty, I bend and press my lips to her forehead and dart out of the room.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

Waves crash against the shoreline, the smell of sea salt fills my nose.

I inhale deeply, enjoying the serenity of this moment.

“This seat taken?”

My head whips up, eyes widening at the woman beside me. I shake my head wordlessly, watching as she slowly sinks into the sand.

A peaceful silence surrounds us. We don’t say anything, both staring out into the endless ocean.

I can’t remember the last time I felt this...calm. Like all my worries, all the anxieties that plague me are just...gone.

A bird chirps as it flies overhead. Wind blows softly, lifting the tips of my hair. And the waves continue to build and crash. An endless cycle.

“Where am I?” The question slips from my lips without the conscious decision to ask.

The woman hums, scooping a handful of sand into her hand. “Nowhere. Everywhere.” I shift my gaze to her, tilting my head. She chuckles at my confused expression, letting the grains slip between her fingers. “It’s not important. The real question is, what do you want, Fallon?”

My breath catches at the sound of my name on her lips. “How-”

She chuckles again, her melodic laughter echoing around us. “I know more than just your name, sweetheart.”

My brow furrows at her response, but even her confusing answers don’t break the calm inside.

Smiling at me, she shifts her body to cross her legs, propping her elbows on her thighs and leaning on her hands. “What do you want?” She asks again.

I close my eyes, letting my mind wander.

What do I want?

“Love. And to be happy. And...” My voice trails off, a lump forming in my throat.

“And?” She prods.

Blinking mine open, I meet her green eyes and whisper, “To be accepted, for me.”

Arriana

“Yo! Where’s my baby sis at?”

It can’t be.

Silently opening the door, I slip down the hall, careful to remain hidden. Peeking into the living area, a broken cry erupts from my chest before I can stop it. “Coop?”

At the sound of his name, Cooper whips his head in my direction, his honey eyes meeting mine. “Arri!” He cries, throwing his arms out.

And suddenly it’s like I’m that young girl again, seeking comfort in the presence of the only other person who cared enough about me to be there when I needed him.

I nearly sprint across the room and throw my arms around his waist, swallowing around the emotions I’ve been beating down. My attempts to fight against them are useless as a tear leaks out and slips down my cheek when he wraps his arms around me.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” His deep voice rumbles after a few moments of tense silence.

Gulping down the fear, I pull out of his embrace. My eyes shift toward the couch and I quickly wipe away the frustrating liquid leaking from my eyes.

He follows my gaze, cursing under his breath. Shrugging out of his jacket, he strides

across the room and kneels beside Fallon. I watch as he presses his fingers against her throat, then her wrist, and her ankle. “How long has she been like this?” His earlier excitement is gone, replaced by an intense concentration.

“A-a few minutes.” I manage to stammer out in response, nearly leaping out of my skin when arms encircle my body from behind. Glancing up and over my shoulder, I find Andrew peering down at me.

“Hey, princess.” He murmurs, tightening his hold. His earlier frustration set aside to comfort me. “She’s going to be okay.”

My heartbeat thunders in my ears, but I nod my head despite the fear coursing through me. “She better be.” I mutter, turning my attention back toward Cooper. “What can I do?” I beg. Needing to do something, anything .

He shakes his head, continuing his examination. My gaze travels over Fallon’s body, noting the shallow rise and fall of her chest, much slower than it was just a few moments before.

“She’s getting worse.” I whisper, clutching at Andrew’s arms. “I-I can’t...” Cooper raises his eyes to meet mine, a similar concern reflecting back at me in his. “ No sobrevivré, hermano. ”

He runs his hand through his hair, releasing a slow breath. “ Lo sé .” And somehow his understanding makes it all that much worse. Because he does know. He knows what I’ve lost.

“? Mamá ?” My call is met with silence. Closing the front door behind me, I walk into the darkened hall. “? Papá ?” Still more silence.

Shouldering my school bag, I sigh heavily and make my way into the kitchen. My

stomach growls loudly as I drop the bag on the table. Pulling open the fridge, I hunt for something to eat. My shoulders slump at the empty shelves.

It's been a few days since my last decent meal and I was hoping there might be some food today. If I've got the dates right, today's the day we get money from the state. Usually that means food.

Shutting the door, I continue my search, checking empty cupboard after empty cupboard. My eyes land on a small box of crackers on the top shelf, a small triumphant cry escaping my lips. Moving across the room, I grab the edge of one of the chairs lining the table and pull as hard as I can. The legs scrape loudly across the floor, making so much noise I'm nervous I'll get in trouble.

I finally manage to drag it against the counter, pausing to suck in a breath, my arms aching from the effort it took. Clambering onto the chair, I climb up on the countertop and stretch my arm as far as it will reach. "Come on, just a little more." I mumble, pushing up on my tiptoes. My fingers brush the box, and I stifle my excited cry as I grab it.

Hopping down, I open the box and shove one of the stale crackers into my mouth, my stomach growling loudly at the promise of food. I smile, humming softly as I snatch up my bag again and make my way toward the back of the house.

"? Mamá, Papá ?" I call again, dry bits of cracker flying out of my mouth. "? Dónde estás ?"

They should be here. Today is supposed to be a good day. Money day.

I turn the corner and glance toward their bedroom.

Maybe they're sleeping?

Slipping into my room, I toss my bag onto my bed. I glance down at the now empty box in my hands, pouting at the realization the crackers are gone. The small snack has done nothing to stop the ache in my stomach.

Tossing the empty box down beside my bag, I turn around and walk across the hall. My palms sweat as I stare at the closed door. They don't like it when I bother them, but...

Knocking on the door, I wait. And I wait.

“? Holaaa ?” I call out, knocking again.

Silence.

Sighing, I reach for the doorknob, freezing with my hand hovering over the faded handle. I don't want to get in trouble, but I'm so hungry. Gripping the doorknob, I twist and slowly push the door open.

My eyes squint, trying to adjust to the darkness. I can make out a large shape on the floor, but that can't be right. Why would they be sleeping on the floor?

I creep inside, stumbling in the dark. Reaching my hand out to try to steady myself, I trip and fall, landing beside the figure. I blink several times, straining to see. “? Mamá ?” I whisper, pushing to my knees and crawling closer.

She's lying on her back, staring at the ceiling, but she won't respond. Why won't she respond?

“? Mamá ?” I shake her shoulder, my eyes stinging as tears form. “? Qué está sucediendo ?” She just keeps staring. “ Por favor no me ignores . Me estás asustando .” My cries grow louder as I'm met with silence.

I blink back the memory, trying to focus on what's happening now. There's nothing I can do to change what happened, no way I can save my mom from her habit, but I can help Fallon. I have to be able to.

"What did she take?" I hear Coop's voice and try to reply but can't get the words past the lump in my throat.

Ava's voice filters through the haze of emotions as she answers. Cooper nods, gently lifting Fallon's eyelids to check her eyes. Pushing up to his feet, he grabs his jacket once more and digs in the pockets. His eyes shoot to mine as he pulls out a small kit.

I suck in a breath, recognizing the emblem on the case. "Wh-why do you have that?" I manage to force out.

He smiles sadly. "One of the perks of the job. You know, when someone calls, 'is there a doctor here' and I have to respond, 'yeah'? Well, I like to be prepared." Shrugging, he unzips the black bag and pulls out a syringe and a small vial of clear liquid.

"What did she take?"

"I-I don't know, she..." Papá runs his hands through his hair, darting his eyes around the room. "May-maybe, um..." He trails off, shifting from side to side.

The man kneeling beside Mamá looks at Papá. "Sir, it's very important we know what she took so we can help." His eyes shift to me, some of the hardness in his expression softening. "Hi, sweetheart, why don't you go wait outside while I talk to your dad?" I nod my head, scrambling backward.

I can hear their muffled voices as I wait in the hall, the image of Mamá lying so still won't leave my mind. Peeking back into the room, I watch the man pull out a small

bag. He unzips it and pulls out a syringe and a small glass bottle. I watch with wide eyes as he stabs the needle into the bottle and then into Mamá's arm.

Closing my eyes, I scoot away from the door and sink to the floor, cupping my face in my hands.

Tears slip down my cheeks as I watch Cooper inject the naloxone into Fallon's arm, the same overwhelming helplessness filling me as it did when I was a seven-year-old girl watching the paramedic try to save my mom's life.

I suck in breath after breath, hoping this time it will work.

Fallon

“To be accepted, for me.”

I release a heavy breath, a weight I didn't know I was carrying lifting off my chest at the admission.

The woman smiles at me, reaching over to pat my arm. Closing her fingers around my wrist, she lifts my hand, palm up. She runs her finger from the edge up my palm up to my elbow, tracing the veins.

I tilt my head, watching the movement. A strange sensation emanates from her skin on mine, something I can't decipher.

The woman gently places my arm back in my lap, shifting her gaze over the ocean as she speaks, a somber tone to her voice. “I'm going to tell you some pretty harsh truths, Fallon.” She pauses, lifting her hand to adjust a pair of glasses I didn't notice before. “There's always going to be people out there who want to make you smaller. People who are so insecure in who they are that they need to make you feel like you aren't enough so that they can feel better.” Her words hang in the air, swirling around us and echoing in my mind. She smiles at me, her golden hair blowing in the wind.

Did she always have blonde hair?

“But you want to know the beautiful thing in it all?” I blink at her, nodding my head. “When you love yourself,” She reaches forward, taking both my hands in hers.

I glance down, confusion clouding my thoughts. Turning our clasped hands, I can't tell whose hands are whose, nearly identical length, markings, even the chipped nail polish matches. Lifting my gaze, I gasp.

The woman, no, me? I smile at myself. "When you love yourself, no one else can take that from you. That is how you find true happiness. That is how we find love and acceptance. Not through them, not through anyone else, not even through her. It has to come from us."

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can get out a word, the woman disappears. Looking around the empty beach, I try to find her, me, but I'm all alone. I glance down, tears welling in my eyes when I find my hands clasped around a thick, leather journal.

"Mmmm." I groan, shifting uncontrollably.

Everything hurts.

I groan again, trying to blink open my eyes, but even that small movement sends a wave of agony throughout my head.

"Shhh. Take it easy, baby." Arriana's voice fills me with equal parts excitement and shame. "She's waking up!" I hear her call.

A shuffle of fabric sounds moments before large hands press against my skin. Fingers push against my pressure point and a warm hand lies flat on my forehead. "Her pulse is better and temperature feels more normal." A deep voice reports following the brief examination. "I really think we need to take her to the hospital, Arri."

"No." Arriana snaps. "No hospitals, Coop." My heart aches at the pain in her voice.

I'm so sorry.

It's a silent cry as I ache to comfort her, but find I can't move or speak.

There's a long silence before the man sighs. "Okay." He agrees, grunting as he must push to his feet. "But I'm keeping a close eye on her."

"You and me both, hermano ."

My mind grows fuzzy again as I try to focus on their conversation. Exhaustion overtaking me, I cling on as hard as I can, not wanting to leave Arriana again. Not when I just got her back.

A whimper escapes my throat.

Familiar hands brush back my hair, soft lips I would recognize anywhere pressing against my forehead. "It's okay, mi vida . I'm here. I'm not going anywhere." Arriana soothes.

"Mmm." The small noise is all I can manage to respond with before the darkness pulls me under again.

I'm drowning.

My lungs fill with water, but that can't be right.

Spluttering, I try to cough out the liquid threatening to suffocate me. I scramble upright, bending over and heaving, but nothing comes out.

No, no I can't die. Not like this.

Clasping my hands together, I shove them up into my sternum, trying desperately to push the water from my lungs.

One.

Two.

Three.

I count as I slam my hands into my body over and over, growing more and more desperate with each attempt.

Please.

I don't know who I'm begging to, but I cry out anyway. Because I'm not ready, I'm not ready, I'm. Not. Ready.

With one last forceful push, I expel the liquid, only it's not water that flows from my mouth.

Blinking, I watch as words pour out, a vomit of syllables spewing from my lips. And with each word that escapes, the heaviness in my lungs lessens.

I take a deep breath, inhaling the much needed oxygen and watching as the letters swirl beneath me, moving and rearranging. With wide, disbelieving eyes, I watch them come together, a story forming from the very thing that was sucking the life from my body.

And as the story unfolds, I feel my soul cry out, begging for more.

Arriana

My leg bounces as I watch Fallon. She hasn't woken again since her brief moment of consciousness and it's sending me into a bit of a tailspin. My fingers itch to do something, to make someone pay, but there's nothing I can do.

"So much for a party." The grumbled words reach me, pulling my attention away from my sleeping nymph.

Glaring at the three men huddled in the corner of the room, I growl, "Sorry we couldn't live up to your high party lifestyle, Spencer."

He throws his hands in the air, palms out. "Didn't mean to offend, sis. I just figured when Romeo over here," He jerks his head in Andrew's direction. "Called and said we were celebrating your return home there would be more...celebrating and less, I don't know, this." Spencer sweeps his arm around the room.

Pushing to my feet, I slowly stride across the room, humming, "Oh, you poor thing. You want to party?" I come to a halt in front of him, his tall frame towering over me. Smiling sweetly, I beat back the rage burning inside. "Then let's party." Spencer studies my expression briefly before opening his mouth to say something, but I don't give him chance as I cut him off. "What do you say, Coop? Time to turn this into a rager?"

Cooper clears his throat, running his hand through his hair. "Sure, I guess. If that's what you want, sis." I incline my head, never taking my eyes off my other brother.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Andrew interjects, drawing my attention to him.

Turning my head, I let my smile widen. “If Spencer wants to party, we can’t leave him hanging, can we? I mean, he came all this way after all.” I can hear a shuffle of fabric as Spencer shifts uncomfortably in front of me.

“Look, Arriana. I didn’t mean-”

Throwing my hand up, I cut off his weak attempt to deny what we all know. Spencer has always thought he was the most important person in any given room, and his disarmingly good looks combined with his confidence has given him an advantage over most everyone else, only feeding into his self-centered tendencies.

It’s becoming abundantly clear in the time we’ve been apart, none of that has changed.

After the naloxone started to take effect and Fallon’s state got better, I finally looked up to find not only Cooper had come to celebrate my return, but Andrew had managed to rope in Spencer. How he did, I have no clue.

Despite the fact that he lives and works within a few hours of my home, I haven’t seen or heard from Spencer in years. Hell, I wouldn’t even know he was still here if it wasn’t for his constant appearances on televised programs.

Mister big time actor had gotten too popular for us mere mortals.

But in the time since the initial excitement at seeing his appearance, it’s become clear that he must have been coerced into attending. Normally I would give him a piece of my mind, show him that I’m not someone to be pitied or fucked with, but right now I’m a bit off my game. So instead, I’ll party. We’ll have a fucking rager, and hopefully my baby will wake up and join in.

Spinning on my heel, I march toward the kitchen on the hunt for some booze. My eyes land on a nearly empty wine glass, a wave of nausea rolling through me at the reminder of what Fallon had done. Averting my gaze, I spot an open shelf lined with liquor. “Aha!” I exclaim, pivoting toward the shelf.

I stretch my arm up, finding I’m too short to reach. The motion calls up a memory, another moment I had struggled to reach inside a tall cupboard flashes through my mind, quickly followed by the aftermath of that day. Memories I can no longer hold back no matter how hard I try.

Dried tears stain my cheeks as I stare blankly ahead. Quiet voices sound from down the hall, drowned out by the other sounds of the hospital.

“Arriana?” I blink at my name, trying to focus on the lady kneeling in front of me. “Honey, my name is Elecia. Would you mind if I joined you?” She nods to the seat beside me.

I continue to stare forward, unable to respond.

“?Mamá?”

My broken cry replays in my head, the sight of Mamá lying on the floor flashing over and over.

Elecia sighs softly, pushing off her knees and moving to sit in the chair next to me. “I work with Child Services. Do you know what that means?” When I don’t answer, she keeps talking. “It’s my job to help keep you safe. Sweetheart, I’m going to need you to come stay with a nice family for a little while.”

I blink again, turning to look at her. “No. Mi Mamá me necesita .” I mumble, shaking my head and looking back at the wall.

She sighs again before her hand rests on my shoulder. “The best thing you can do for your Mamá is to get some rest. Come on, honey, just for the night.” Pushing to her feet, she holds her hand out toward me.

I shake my head again, pulling up my knees and wrapping my arms around them. “No. No, she needs me.”

Shaking my head to clear the memory, I glance around to find something to aid in my mission.

“Let me.” Killian’s voice rumbles behind me.

I step out of the way, allowing him access to the shelf. He silently pulls down several bottles, lining them up on the counter. Without a word, he turns and gathers some glasses, setting the cups beside the alcohol.

I cock my head at him, surprised he’s being so helpful. Not that I’m complaining, it’s about time the old man got on board, but... “Don’t pity me.” I snap, keeping my voice low so only he can hear me.

Killian glances behind us, his eyes fixed on Fallon’s sleeping form before shifting to Ava as she remains a permanent fixture beside my girl and Hudson. “It’s not pity.” He finally sighs, looking back at me with a brokenness in his expression I’ve never witnessed from him. “I just know what it’s like to almost...” He trails off.

Clearing his throat, he returns his attention to the counter, filling a glass with whiskey. “I get it. And I’m sorry.” He murmurs, knocking his glass back before refilling it with the amber liquid and turning to walk away.

I watch after him, incredulous at what just happened.

Did that just happen? Did we have a bonding moment?

Despite the circumstances, my lips twitch as a smile threatens to break across my face.

Turning my attention back to my brothers, I call them over. “Yo, you wanted to party, so get over here and party already.” I look over the selection, snatching a bottle of tequila. Gripping the neck of the bottle, I tip my head back and gulp down the clear liquid.

A warmth spreads through my body as the liquor works its way through my system, both dulling my senses and heightening my frustration. Gulping down another few mouthfuls, I watch as the boys file into the kitchen, filling their glasses and exchanging wary glances.

Sick of watching them, I glance around the room. “We need music.” I proclaim, taking a step toward where Killian and Ava are huddled together.

They continue their whispered conversation, ignoring my demand. “Hey, lovebirds.” I call, sucking another drink from the bottle clasped in my hand. They finally look up, Ava’s expression worried and Killian’s back to his usual grumpy fixture.

I bark a laugh, spinning in a circle with my arms out and swaying my hips. “Can’t have a party without some tunes. Whatcha got?”

Ava glances at Killian before clearing her throat. “I’ll, uh, I’ll put something on.” Her eyes shift to Fallon and I force mine to avoid looking at my sleeping beauty.

A few moments later, music pumps from the speakers placed around the space. I close my eyes, swaying to the beat while nursing the bottle.

“I want to go home!”

I try to focus on the music, desperately pushing back the memories.

“Where’s Mamá? Where’s Papá?” I sob.

The strangers I’ve been forced to stay with look at each other, but don’t answer.

“Where are they?” I cry. “I...I wanna go home. Just let me go home.”

Tears prick at my eyes, the present and past blending together in a confusingly painful existence.

“She’s dead.” I hear the lady whisper to the man when they think I’m asleep. “What are we supposed to tell her?”

I bury my face in the pillow, hating that it doesn’t smell like me. Hating that this isn’t my home. Hating that I’ve been here for a lot longer than one night.

The familiar hatred seeps into my bones and along with it comes a horrifying realization.

I don’t just hate my parents for abandoning me. Nestled into my heart along with the overwhelming love, I feel a poisonous thorn stabbed right in there with my feelings for Fallon.

How could she?

“I think you’ve had enough.” Andrew declares, snatching the bottle from my hand.

“Hey!” I protest, attempting to retrieve my stolen drink.

I've polished off nearly a quarter of the bottle and it's done nothing to aid in my newfound revelations. Since the moment I realized how angry I am with Fallon, I haven't been able to focus on anything else, my mind a constant loop of all the things I want to say to her.

Only I can't.

Because she's still asleep .

"I think I'm gonna take off." Spencer mumbles, setting down his cup and pulling out his phone.

I huff a laugh, rolling my eyes. "Of course, just leave. That's what you're good at." I sniffle and it only fuels my anger.

I'm not this bitch. I'm not the kind of girl to cry about my feelings. I'm a badass, and I don't let anyone or anything get to me.

"Arri-" He tries, but is cut off by a loud pounding on the elevator.

I look to Andrew, raising my eyebrows. "Expecting anyone else?"

He shakes his head, his forehead creased as he looks between the elevator, Fallon, and me. "No." He murmurs. "I think we should get you both out of sight." I can see the worry emanating from him, my own escalating with each thud sounding on the other side of the large metal doors.

Shifting my gaze to Fallon, my heart cracks open at the sight of her. So helpless, so broken.

Oh baby.

“What’s going on?” Cooper demands, drawing my attention away from my sleeping nymph.

I exchange a look with Andrew before turning to my brothers. “There’s a...situation.”

“What kind of situation?” Spencer cuts in, his anxious gaze bouncing around the room. Before I can explain, he blurts out, “Fuck, it can’t be good. I mean, look at what’s happening.” He indicates Fallon with his head, setting my teeth on edge. Noticing my reaction, he throws his hands in the air. “Look, I just mean, I can’t afford this kind of publicity. I’ve got a big movie deal lined up and they’ll pull the plug if they think I had anything to do with this.” He gestures to Fallon once more, gulping and running his hand through his hair.

“Yeah, cause it’s all about you, like always.” I grumble.

Spencer shoots me a sharp look, opening his mouth, but his reply is cut off. “Enough.” Killian barks, drawing all of our attention. Sighing irritably, he jerks his head at Andrew. “Go, hide the girl and take Arriana with you.” I bristle at being told what to do, but Killian levels me with a scathing look. “This is most likely due to your mistake.” He admonishes.

I gulp, looking at Fallon and nodding my head. “Okay.” Before I can make a move, Andrew scoops her up in his arms, inclining his head toward the hall as he makes his way out of the room.

I scramble behind him, my heart thundering in my ears. The effects of the alcohol marring my ability to think clearly.

What are we going to do if they found out? I thought we’d have more time.

My eyes zero in on Fallon’s legs as they bounce with each of Andrew’s hurried steps.

Her head is cradled against his chest so I can only see the blonde locks trailing down her back and along his side.

The nearly overwhelming need to protect her hits me. Because, even though I'm furious. Even though my chest feels like it's been ripped apart and my heart shredded. Despite all of that, I still love her. I love her and I need her. More than life, more than the violence, more than anything .

So I'll protect her. By any means necessary.

We slip into the spare bedroom. Quickly crossing the room, Andrew tucks Fallon into the bed, pulling the covers up to cover her body. Turning toward me, he tries to hide the worry behind a small smile. "It could be nothing. Totally unrelated." He offers, even though we both know how unlikely that is.

Lifting the corner of my lips in a half smile, I agree, "Sure, probably nothing."

Andrew opens and closes his mouth with a slight shake of his head. Glancing over his shoulder, he sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. "I better..." He trails off, jerking his thumb toward the doorway.

Shooing him off, I turn my attention to Fallon's sleeping form. The door clicks shut behind Andrew, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Ones too loud. Too familiar.

Please don't leave me.

"Oh, mi vida. " I whisper, trailing the back of my fingers down her cheek. "Come back to me, baby." And just like all those years before, in a situation so similar and yet worlds apart, I get no response but the labored breathing of the center of my world.

Choking back the panicked emotions, I continue my gentle strokes. “Come back to me.”

“Arriana?” Andrew’s voice rings out, startling me awake.

Sitting upright, I jerk my head to the side, making sure Fallon didn’t slip away in my sleep.

Fuck, I must be exhausted to have dozed off...

Yawning, I try to blink away the remaining tendrils of sleep, glancing toward the door as it creaks open. Andrew peeks his head inside before slipping into the room and shutting the door behind him.

I search his face, the earlier tension returning in full force at the worry I can see in his expression. “What happened?” I demand, scooting to the edge of the bed.

Andrew runs a hand over his head, cupping the back of his neck. “It was Billie.” Releasing a heavy sigh, he drops his arm, moving to sit beside me. “They found the body and had no choice but to report it.”

Blowing out an exasperated breath, I try to remain still, my mind racing as I try to think of a way out of this situation.

My original plan to take Fallon and run a little more complicated with her current state.

“She said if you had come to her she might have been able to do something, but the girls that found her...Well, they’re demanding blood.” Andrew continues, reaching forward to place his hand on my leg.

I roll my eyes. Of course her stupid little posse would be upset. “ Malditos co?os estúpidos. ” I grumble under my breath.

Squeezing my thigh, Andrew draws my attention back to him. “The police have issued a manhunt. Billie was pretty positive she was able to divert their focus for a while by telling them you had family in Idaho so they’re under the assumption you’re going to try going there first. But...” His voice trails off, his eyes shifting between Fallon and me. “It’s only a matter of time before they come here looking for you. We need to get you out of here.”

I glance down at Fallon, brushing my hand across her head, my fingers trailing through her hair. “I’m not leaving her, Andrew.” I whisper, the thought of doing so sucking the breath from my lungs.

“I know.” He sighs, pushing up to his feet. Without another word, Andrew pivots and leaves the room.

Bending over, I place a soft kiss on Fallon's forehead. “You and me forever, baby.” I promise, continuing my soft caress. Sighing heavily, I press my lips to her once more before climbing to my feet and exiting the room.

“She’s a fucking fugitive? Are you fucking kidding me?” Spencer’s raised voice reaches me as I walk down the hall. “You told me she was released, asshole.”

“Well, she was released.” Andrew barks back. “It was more an issue of what she did after.”

“Seriously, dude?” Spencer snaps.

There is a moment of silence before Andrew warns, “Be careful how you speak to me, Spencer. I might not be borderline psychotic like your sister, but that doesn’t

mean I won't take matters into my own hands if you piss me off." An uncomfortable hush follows his threat.

Taking a calming breath, I turn the corner to find everyone in varied degrees of panic. Spencer is hovering next to the elevator, visibly shaking as he runs his hand repeatedly through his hair. Cooper stands beside him, staring blankly at the corner of the room, lost in thought.

Andrew and Killian are now in the midst of their own whispered conversation. Ava and Hudson perched on the couch, their postures rigid.

Slipping on my carefree mask, I walk into the room, chuckling, "So, the 5-0, huh?" My question draws everyone's attention toward me, with verifying degrees of frustration on each person's face.

Tough crowd.

My forced smile feels a little more genuine at the thought, a soft laugh bubbling up from my chest.

"Un-fucking-believable." Spencer mutters, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket.

Before I can react, Killian storms across the room, snatching the phone from his hands.

"What the fuck?" Spencer cries, reaching for his stolen property.

Killian levels him with a look that has him cowering. "No one is going to do anything reckless." Killian barks, glowering at Spencer for another few moments before moving his gaze over the rest of us. "Got it?"

Everyone nods, a few gulps and shifting of feet can be heard in response to his intensity.

“Good.” Turning his attention to me, Killian opens his mouth to say something, but stops, his eyes shifting over my shoulder.

Following his gaze, I glance behind me, my breath catching as a quiet voice asks, “What’s going on?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

Groaning, I blink open my eyes. My throbbing head worsens as loud shouts echo in my skull. “Quiet, please.” I whisper.

My whispered plea is ignored, the raised voices growing louder.

Groaning again, I push upright, glancing around the room to find I’m alone. I expel a heavy breath, running my hands through my hair. “What happened?” I mumble, my mind trying to piece together the jumbled pieces of my memory.

I have a vague recollection of coming to Ava’s with Hudson, watching as the two moved effortlessly together in the kitchen. Downing glass after glass of wine, I tried to push aside the forlorn thoughts that have become my constant companion.

The next thing I can remember is stumbling into the bathroom and...

My breath hitches, my hand flying to cover my mouth.

I didn’t, did I?

Pushing up from the bed, I take a few shaky steps. I stop to peek out into the hall before slipping out of the room and quickly sneaking into the bathroom. Closing the door behind me, I suck in several breaths to calm the anxiety bubbling up into my throat.

No, it was just a bad dream. I wouldn’t have, I mean, I’m not like that. I would never

use drugs.

Some of the suffocating pressure relieves at my mental reassurance.

Rolling my shoulders, I push off the door and cross the tiled floor, coming to a stop before the bathroom mirror. I stare at the reflection, not recognizing the woman before me.

Her hair is a mess, skin blotchy, makeup smeared. A sheen on her skin from the sweat beading. The most startling feature is her eyes. The pupils are so constricted the green iris appears almost unnatural. Red lines surround the eery focal point of her eyes.

I blink, watching as she does the same.

I know it's me in the reflection, but my mind refuses to connect the logic with my emotional side. Because if she is me, that means I did do it. That means I succumbed to the same demons that I've watched plague my brother. The same ones I refused to even entertain.

The earlier pressure pushes its way up my chest, curling around my throat like fingers squeezing the air from my lungs. I suck in useless breath after useless breath. My chest heaves as I desperately try to get the oxygen I need, but I can't.

With a trembling hand, I reach into my pocket, pulling out the small baggie. One glance down shows the truth. There's no denying it.

I drop the empty plastic bag, watching as it floats to the ground. My knees buckle as the realization of what it means hits me. Sinking to the ground, I curl my legs against my chest, squeezing my knees as tightly as I can.

What have I done?

I lay there for what may be seconds or hours, willing my gasping breaths to even out. Still curled in a ball on the cool tile, I press my cheek against the smooth surface. The chilly temperature a stark contrast to my overheated skin. I focus on the sensation, something about it enough to distract me from my crippling panic.

As I lay on the bathroom floor, my mind replays the last few months, a depressing reel of my self-destruction.

Lonely nights bleeding into a waking nightmare as I watch everything I worked so hard for slip through my fingers. I watch as I drink and numb myself to the reality of what's happening, of what happened. Until it was too late.

Echoes of a dream filter through my mind.

“When you love yourself, no one else can take that from you. That is how you find true happiness. That is how we find love and acceptance.”

How can I love myself when I'm the one who ruined everything?

The heaviness creeps its way back up at the thought, pushing the little breath I had managed to inhale out of my body. As the weight on my chest increases, a pit in my stomach forms, a hollowness so deep I feel lost in it.

Refusing to let myself wallow in the emotional turmoil any longer, I swallow down the painful ache, forcing myself up onto my knees, then my feet. I peer at my reflection briefly before removing my glasses and bending to splash cold water onto my face.

The cold liquid hitting my skin jolts the remaining anxiety back enough I feel a

semblance of control. Needing to gain back as much control of my emotions as I can, I splash more cool water onto my face.

Gasping, I fumble around blindly for the hand towel, dabbing it against my damp skin. I stand upright, smoothing my hair down, licking my thumbs and running them along my eyebrows to smooth out the wayward hairs. Running the towel under my eyes and around my mouth, I try to clean up my appearance.

Once I've done the best I can without a full shower, I slip on my glasses to inspect my reflection.

Not perfect, but better.

I try to smile, but it falls flat, the corners of my lips twitching as I strain to keep them turned upward.

Unable to look at myself a moment longer, I spin on my heel and rush out of the bathroom, freezing as the sound of voices filters down the hall.

A familiar voice reaches me and my heart stops. A flash of a hazy memory tries to push its way through, Arriana's worried face bleeding into my mind.

I thought it was a dream.

Creeping toward the sound, my halted heartbeat kickstarts, thundering so hard I'm afraid it might burst from my chest.

I step into the main living area, my eyes traveling over the tense scene before me. Gulping, I push down the feeling that I'm the reason behind the heightened emotional state. My gaze lands on the source of the voice I heard, the same person who I've envisioned every moment of every day since she was taken.

I blink several times, willing this to be real and not some weird drug side effect. When she doesn't disappear, I begin to let myself believe that this is real. That she's really here.

"No one is going to do anything reckless. Got it?" Killian demands, drawing a visible reaction from everyone in the room. "Good." He shifts his gaze toward the other half of my heart before his eyes move to mine.

Arriana slowly turns toward me, and even though I have a million other things I'd rather know, my pounding heartbeat and the uneasiness in the atmosphere draws the question I don't really know if I want to ask. Because there's a high chance I'm the answer.

"What's going on?" I swallow the desire to hide as everyone's attention shifts to me at the quiet question. No one says anything for several agonizing moments only serving to further my need to retreat.

Shifting on my feet, I fiddle with my glasses before clasping my hands, twisting my fingers together to release some of the nerves.

Ava is the first to break the silence. "Fallon, oh thank god." Flying across the room, she crashes into me, wrapping her arms around my rigid body. "I was so worried." Ava whisper cries, tightening her embrace.

I murmur useless comforts to her, nothing I can say will make up for what I've done and we both know it. Glancing over her shoulder, my eyes lock onto Arriana's and I find myself trapped in the small pools of darkness. I shudder at the depth of desire, anger, love, and fear I find reflecting back at me.

"What were you thinking?" Ava pulls my attention back to her, freeing me from the trap of Arriana's intense gaze. Ava releases her hold, her hands moving to my

shoulders as she peers into my eyes, clearly demanding an answer to her question.

Releasing a heavy breath, I shake my head and mumble, “I don’t know.”

Before either of us can say anything else, a throat clears. “Look, I’m glad she’s okay,” I turn to look at the man speaking, my forehead creasing at his clear distress. Even in his emotional upset, he’s very handsome. Shoulder length, sandy brown hair hangs around his clean shaven face. His sharp cheekbones and jawline accentuate his plump lips and dark green eyes. His tanned skin complimented nicely by his stylish clothing.

If I didn’t know any better, I could swear I’ve seen him somewhere. He definitely is giving model energy, that’s for sure.

He glances at me before looking pointedly at Arriana, rubbing the back of his neck. “I really am, sis.”

Sis?

I don’t have time to get caught up on the newfound revelation that Arriana has a brother before he continues speaking. “But, how could you be so fucking selfish?” Another uncomfortable hush falls over the room at his exclamation.

Arriana’s eyes narrow as she slowly turns toward him. “Selfish.” She repeats, her voice hollow. “ ¿Crees que soy egoísta? ” Her brother swallows, squaring his shoulders in an attempt to hide the fear at Arriana’s emotionless tone.

“You want to talk about selfish, Spencer?” She quirks her head to the side, as if debating her next words.

Straightening her posture, Arriana slips one hand into her back pocket. “How about

you leaving us the first chance you got?” Waving her other hand between herself and another unfamiliar man standing beside her brother, she continues, “Or maybe how you disappeared from our lives like you moved across the world when you live in the same fucking city, hmm?”

Taking a step toward him, Arriana smirks at his flinch. “Better yet, how you have always had a knack of making my life and my worries all about you .” Her brief moment of levity leaves, her expression falling and shoulders slumping. “ Egoísta mi culo. Maldito familia. ” Sighing, she runs a hand through her hair, muttering, “ ¿Porqué me importa? ”

Before either of them can say anything else, the other man steps up to Arriana, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Arri.” He murmurs, waiting for her to look at him. “I hate to admit the little prick has a point, but it was kinda selfish to invite us here without at least giving us a heads up.”

Something about his voice pulls at me and a flash of a hazy memory sparks in my mind, the same deep cadence as I’d heard at some point during my battle for consciousness.

I study him, finding he also has an attractive look, maybe not the same level as the man beside him, but still enough to warrant a second glance. His dark brown, nearly black hair is trimmed short. Features much softer than the male model, but he still sports a nice jawline under the carefully styled beard lining his jaw. There’s a familiarity between the three, but not a clear familial connection as the features vary drastically, along with the fact that his skin tone is several shades lighter than both Arriana and the other man.

Arriana glares at his hand, brushing it off her shoulder. “I didn’t invite you, Coop.” He opens his mouth to reply, but she cuts him off. “ ¿Honestamente? Ojalá te hubieras mantenido alejado, hermano. ”

My focus fades as he replies in Spanish, their conversation becoming agitated with each back and forth. I try to decipher what they might be saying as they grow more animated, but my sluggish brain can't keep up.

Ava nudges me, leaning over to whisper in my ear, "Babe, it's like a real life telenovela." I roll my eyes at her, shaking my head to hide the smile trying to break its way through. "Oh come on, you can't seriously pretend it's not just as dramatic as some of the storylines Britt was explaining last season on Love Island. I mean, estranged family, alcoholic girlfriend," I shoot her a glare, but she waves me off, continuing her explanation without acknowledging my offense. "A fugitive, and then the co--"

"Excuse me, a what?" I cut her off with my whispered shout.

Ava's face pales. "Oh, shit. Um, so here's the thing..." My eyes drift to Arriana, my own agitation growing to match my furious other half as Ava briefly explains the situation.

"Crazy, right?" Ava lets out a nervous laugh, looking almost apologetic if it weren't for the excitement she can't quite hide shining in her eyes. She's never been a huge fan of my choice in companion and adding in the drama of it all...it's apparent the friend side of her and the drama obsessed side are at war.

Nodding my head, I step around her, crossing the room to stand behind Arriana. "Excuse me." I mumble, shifting nervously on my feet. Three sets of frustrated eyes move to me. Adjusting my glasses, I try to ignore the incessant need for a drink to settle the anxiety buzzing beneath my skin.

"What is it, mi vida?"

My breath catches in my throat at Arriana's nickname for me, the one I didn't know

if I'd ever hear again. Pushing aside the desire to dive into her arms and bury my concerns in her, I shift my eyes between her and the two men. "You're on the run?" My quiet question makes her flinch, the motion is almost imperceptible, but I catch it anyway. "And you came here ? Why would you do something so stupid?" I'm shocked that the words slip through, but it would appear I still don't have full control of myself.

The male model snorts, crossing his arms with a look of triumph. "Yeah, sis. Answer the lady."

Arriana shoots him a vicious glare before looking back at me, her expression a warring minefield of hurt, anger, love, and confusion. "I told you I'd come back, baby." Taking a step to close the remaining distance, she trails the back of her hand down my face.

I close my eyes, losing myself in the sensation of her skin on mine. Some of the constant buzzing inside of me settles at her touch. Instead, the current sparking at our connection lights my nerve endings on fire for an entirely different reason.

"Mi vida. " I blink open my eyes, getting lost in the liquid chocolate of hers. "Why would you?" I chew on the inside of my cheek, knowing what she's asking and not wanting to acknowledge her question.

"Why would you drug yourself?"

That's the question she wants to ask, but not able to voice it out loud.

She studies me for several moments before shifting her hand to cup the back of my neck, drawing my face to hers to press her lips against my ear. " Never do that again, do you understand?" I gulp, fisting the fabric of my shirt in my fingers.

Leaning back just far enough to peer into my eyes, she cups my cheeks in her hands, her eyes searching mine with a desperation I've only seen on her one other time.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

I sniffle, wiping away the tears and snot from my face with the back of my sleeve, my bruised eye throbbing at the touch. "I-I don't know."

It's the truth, I'm not sure if I'm okay, not sure if I'll ever be okay again.

Arriana studies me intensely, her eyes desperate as she tries to find something in mine that I don't know if she'll find. Her expression hardens, her eyes shifting to the large parking garage beside us and back to me. "I'm going to kill him." She vows, turning toward the entrance.

My throat closes at the thought of her leaving me. Before I've made the conscious decision to do so, my hand snaps out, wrapping around her wrist. "Please don't leave me." I beg, my voice barely above a whisper.

At my broken plea, Arriana turns back to me, pulling me into her embrace. "Never, baby. I'm never leaving you,"

"You left." The words slip out as the memory fades, causing Arriana's worried expression to grow more distraught.

She opens her mouth to say something, but is cut off. "I don't want to interrupt, but we really need to get you out of here." I turn toward the voice, releasing a heavy breath as I realize he's right, we can't stay here.

"Yeah, you're right, Drewbie." Arriana sighs, running a hand through her short hair. She looks back at me, the question burning in her eyes.

“Will you come with me?”

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

I'm drowning.

Lost in the sea of her emerald eyes as Fallon stares at me.

The question burns my tongue, needing to be released. But I'm terrified to ask.

"You left me."

It was a broken acknowledgment to the agony we've both faced over our separation.

All the things I could say, all the answers I could give, but none of them would be enough.

You left me first.

I didn't have a choice.

I came back.

I'll never leave you again.

The thoughts crash through my mind, a tumultuous storm of things I want to say but can't bring myself to voice.

Because they won't matter if her answer to the one question I need to ask is what I'm

terrified it might be.

Forcing down the terror at the thought of her deciding I'm too much, that she can't live with all that comes with my life, I roll my shoulders back and stick out my hand.

An invitation. A wordless plea. A desperate hope.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

I stare at Arriana as she wars with herself, waiting for her to ask the question.

I don't need to think about it, I don't need to question how I feel. Not anymore.

She reaches her hand out toward me, the extended limb a wordless offering.

I allow a small smile to lift the corners of my lips as I take her hand in mine.

Her responding grin is blinding as she yanks me into her arms, pressing her lips to mine. I melt against her, the rest of the world fading away as I lose myself in her intoxicating presence.

A throat clears and my face flames. Arriana chuckles, placing a soft kiss to my forehead before turning toward the rest of the group. "Well, what are we waiting for?" She smirks, gesturing toward the elevator.

I don't know what I just signed up for, but I have a feeling there are going to be some sacrifices that have to be made. The weight of Arriana's hand in mine helps calm some of the stress at the thought of leaving. Because, while I can't imagine my life if it's not here, I know I won't survive without her.

And now I won't have to.

Andrew slips past us, pressing the button for the elevator. I'm suddenly yanked into a hug, stiffening slightly before I recognize Ava's embrace. "Be careful." She

whispers, her watery voice bringing moisture to my eyes.

Shifting around, I wrap my free arm around her. “You too.” I whisper back. “I love you, you know that, right?”

She takes a step back, smiling down at me with tears in her eyes. “And I love you.”

I gulp, trying to push down the emotions bubbling up, but it’s a futile hope. “I’m going to miss you.” My voice breaks, a tear slipping free to slide down my cheek.

“Hey, no, none of that.” Ava chastises, placing her hand on her hip. “This isn’t goodbye, babe. Just see ya later.” She winks at me, blowing a kiss.

Arriana stiffens beside me at the gesture and a watery giggle slips through my lips. “Okay. See ya later.” I chuckle, hugging Ava one last time.

When we pull apart, I catch sight of Hudson hovering in the corner of the room, fidgeting with the sleeves of his shirt. As if he senses my gaze, he looks up, his pale eyes full of hesitation. I smile at him, my heart breaking when he averts his gaze in response.

“Hey, we really gotta go.” Andrew’s voice pulls my attention away from my brother, a distraction from the impending agony that I had broken what we just repaired.

Arriana squeezes my hand and drags me behind her toward the open elevator. We step inside, Andrew following closely behind. Just as the doors begin to slide shut, a voice calls out, “Wait!”

Andrew sighs, shaking his head and sticking his hand out to stop the doors. “Should have just gone to Italy.” He mutters.

I glance at Arriana, finding her boring holes into the back of Andrew's head.

Realizing he said the words out loud, he clears his throat, straightening to his full height and avoiding both of our curious gazes. A few moments later, Ava rushes into the elevator, shoving a couple hoodies into our arms. "Just in case." She offers as an explanation.

I glance down at the oversized sweatshirt, a laugh breaking free from my chest. "You watch too much TV, Ava." I giggle, grinning like an idiot at her.

She looks offended, scoffing, "Okay, yeah, whatever. You can thank me later." Huffing, she spins on her heel and crosses the room to tuck into Killian's side.

I exchange a look with Arriana before extracting my hand from hers and pulling on the hoodie. Arriana rolls her eyes and does the same. My smile widens impossibly at the sight of her swimming in the oversized sweatshirt. She shifts uncomfortably, pushing the sleeves up her arms, the excessive fabric bunching up.

A quiet chuckle sounds beside us and Arriana snaps her head in Andrew's direction. "Not a word. I mean it." Andrew opens his mouth to say something in response, but she quickly talks over him. "Unless you want to tell me what was in Italy?" He snaps his mouth closed, his expression shutting down as the humor bleeds out from her offer. "That's what I thought." Arriana huffs, crossing her arms and glaring forward at nothing in particular.

The doors move to slide closed once more, stopping as a hand slips between the crack.

"For fuck's sake." Andrew grumbles, pulling out his phone and tapping furiously on the screen.

I ignore him as my eyes land on Hudson. “Can-” He takes a deep breath, shifting his eyes between us nervously. “Can I come with you?”

My expression softens, some of the weight on my chest easing at his request. Nodding my head, I gesture for him to join us. “Of course, Egg.” He offers me a small smile as he slips into the elevator.

“I’m coming too.” A deep voice declares, not waiting for an invitation before he hops inside.

Arriana chuckles, looking around at us all. “Looks like we’re having a party after all.” She laughs, her earlier frustration already a distant memory.

The doors finally close and the elevator begins its downward descent. A silence fills the space as we all get lost in our own thoughts.

The hush only lasts a few moments before the other man breaks the silence. “Hey, I’m Cooper.”

“Fallon.” I mumble, assuming the greeting was for me. When I look up, I find his eyes are locked onto someone else. Shifting my gaze, I catch Hudson trying to avoid Cooper’s attention, a blush forming on his neck and face. I cock my head to the side, looking between the two.

Before anyone can say anything else, Andrew curses loudly.

“What is it?” Arriana cranes her neck to try and get a look at his phone screen.

Muttering to himself, Andrew taps on the small screen, swiping up and pinching to zoom in. We all watch him, waiting for some explanation. After several moments, he glances up, studying each of us closely before ducking his head to peer at his phone

once more.

“You’re officially killing me, Andrew.” Arriana whines, stretching onto her tiptoes to tap the side of his face. “And that’s my job.”

He startles at her touch, looking at her with a blank expression before barking a laugh. Her grin widens at his laughter. Reaching over, he ruffles her hair with his hand. “What am I going to do without you, Ree?” A little hint of melancholy slips into his tone at the question.

Arriana waves him off. “Not like you’re gonna have to find out. You’re stuck with me.” Winking at him, she gestures to his phone. “Now, what’s got your panties in a bunch?”

Sighing, he looks over all of us before shifting his gaze back to Arriana. “We’ve got a bit of a problem.” He quirks his eyebrow at the large fabric draping over her frame. “Those might come in handy after all.”

Arriana

This is starting to get ridiculous.

I sigh and duck my head as Andrew motions for us to stay in the elevator. The oversized sweatshirt hangs awkwardly on my body, severely limiting my mobility. I'm buzzing with the need to fight back, my instincts never having been flight, but I push down the desire.

Andrew pivots toward the police officers standing watch off to the right, striking up a conversation as he goes. "Excuse me." He calls, drawing their attention to him. Once we're certain he has them aptly distracted, the four of us stride out of the elevator, careful to appear natural and the least bit suspicious.

Fallon fidgets beside me, her eyes darting toward the uniformed officers and back to the entrance door. I slip my hand in hers, giving her a reassuring smile with a slight squeeze of my fingers. "It's okay, baby. Just a little further." She gulps and nods her head, wobbling just the slightest bit from the alcohol and drugs still working their way out of her system.

The reminder has my teeth setting on edge, with it the reality that I could lose her, that I could lose everything.

Nope. Not going to happen. I'm not leaving my baby again, they'll have to kill me first.

My eyes shift to the two cops currently threatening my future with Fallon.

I'd like to see them try.

My lips curl up at the thought. The buzzing grows more insistent with each step, my mind running through all the possible scenarios.

I inhale calming breath after breath to center my focus. "Almost there." I whisper, squeezing Fallon's hand once more. She jerks her head in agreement, worrying her bottom lip. My eyes zero in on the motion, the desire to suck on the abused flesh nearly distracting enough to forget where we are.

The blast of cold air shocks me out of my hyperfixation, returning my attention to the task at hand. I smile widely up at the doorman as we pass by. "Miss Beckett. Miss Huxley." He greets, inclining his head.

Fallon's grip tightens on my hand at the sound of her name, her already ashen complexion paling further. We slip outside, pausing momentarily to make sure we're in the clear.

"Let's go." A gruff voice sounds behind us moments before Andrew stomps toward the valet.

I exchange a look with Cooper before gently nudging Fallon along. My heart races as each step brings us closer to freedom. Fallon's hand in mine only further fueling my excitement.

The valet pulls up to the curb with Andrew's truck, climbing out and offering him the keys. "Thanks, man." Andrew slips him a few bills before taking his keys and gesturing for us to get in.

I peer over after Fallon, gently squeezing her hand. "You ready, baby?"

A pair of iridescent eyes shift to mine, a hint of a smile ghosting her lips. “Ready for what?” She whispers.

Humming, I run my free hand down her cheek, moving to cup the back of her neck to draw her closer to me. Placing my lips next to her ear, I breathe, “The rest of our lives.”

The drive to Fallon’s brother's home was uneventful, Fallon and I had joined Andrew in the cab while our brothers rode in the truck bed. I caught Fallon repeatedly glancing back at the two, an unreadable look on her face. I didn’t press her on it, allowing the silence to envelope us and give room for our thoughts.

I had a trip to plan after all.

Now we find ourselves loading up the few things she can’t live without, most of which happen to be books.

“Baby.” I sigh, looking over the multitude of boxes lining the bed of the truck. “Is all this really necessary?”

She levels me with a glare that has me holding up my hands. “I’m not leaving behind my special editions and signed copies. It’s not happening.” Crossing her arms, she angles herself protectively between her prized possessions and me.

I let out a small laugh, reaching forward and tugging her against me. “Okay, okay.” I concede, brushing her hair behind her shoulder. Dipping my head, I pepper kisses up her neck, moving to nip her ear. “You know I’d give you the world if you asked.” I whisper, relishing in the chill that runs through her.

She slowly unfolds her arms, moving to grip mine in her shaky hands. “I know.” Her response is barely a breath, but it’s enough to send my soul aflight.

Sliding my hand up the back of her head, I grab a fistful of hair at the base of her skull, jerking her head to the side to give myself better access. She lets out a soft gasp that turns into a moan as I suck on the pulse point in her neck, running my tongue over her sensitive flesh. “Fuck, I missed you.” I groan against her skin.

“M-me too.” She shifts her eyes to mine, unshed tears threatening to spill over. “I’m...I’m so sorry.” The first tear breaks free, sliding down her flushed cheek.

I watch the progression. Moving my gaze to hers, I lean forward and capture the tear on my tongue, licking away the evidence of her pain. “I know, baby.” I murmur, pressing my lips to hers.

This kiss is different than the fevered one we shared before. The connection of our lips like a reunification of ourselves.

She’s mine.

Sliding my hands slowly down her body, I worship every inch of her, swallowing her gasps and soft moans. My fingers dig into her skin, needing to further our connection. Gripping her hips, I lift her body, grinning against her lips when she instinctively wraps her legs around my waist.

I break the kiss, trailing my lips down her neck as I press her body against the truck. “I love you, mi vida .” I whisper reverently before taking her pebbled nipple between my teeth. My lips turn up in a smirk at her quiet gasp, her nails digging into my back as I bite down through the fabric of her shirt.

“I-I love you too.” She whimpers, rolling her hips against me. “Please.” Her begging ignites the fire already burning inside of me until I’m no longer capable of thought, only desire.

“This what you need, baby?” I hum, unbuttoning her jeans and slipping my hand beneath the waistband to cup her pussy. She moans, her hands clawing at me, wordlessly begging in the most beautiful of ways. “Of course it is. Don’t worry, I’ve got you.”

I watch her closely as I shift my hand to slide my fingers under her panties and slowly circle her clit. Her head falls back, back arching and putting her perfect tits in my face. I groan, wishing I could tear the clothes off of her body and ravage her the way she deserves.

My finger slides through her wet slit, slowly pushing inside her needy cunt. I bite my lip at her quiet whimper, her pussy gripping me so tight I can barely move the digit. “So fucking perfect. Mi reina perfecta. ” The praise is a reverent declaration on my lips. I’m in awe of having this beautiful goddess back in my arms. “ Yo nunca te dejaré ir. Never again.” I vow, adding a second finger.

“I...” Fallon gasps, clutching my shirt in her hands as she grinds against me. “I wish I knew what you were saying.” Her quiet admittance has me pausing, the slight melancholy in her tone too much to ignore.

“Do you want to learn?” I study her intently, holding my breath as I wait for her reply.

I’d never thought to ask. Never imagined she might want to learn something to understand better, to understand me better.

Blinking open her eyes, Fallon smiles softly, moving her hands to cup my face. “Yes.” She breathes, pressing her lips to mine.

I gulp back the emotions, tightening my fingers still resting on her hip in an attempt to regain some of the control I’m losing.

Pulling back, she strokes her thumbs along my cheeks as she whispers, “I want to know everything about you, my love. All the good, all the bad. I want to know you.” My overworking heart stops and I find myself frozen in time and space. Fallon studies my expression carefully before arching her neck to place a soft kiss to my forehead. “You are mine and I am yours, Arriana. I never should have let you go. I never should have let anyone else’s opinions or words poison the way I felt about you.”

Resting her forehead to mine, she releases a heavy breath. “I never want to be apart again. I want to grow old with you. I want to go on adventures and talk all night. I want to learn the story behind every scar, I want to hear the story of you. Every good, bad, and ugly moment. Everything you’re ashamed of and everything you find pride in.”

She pauses, letting a quiet moment pass before leaning back to peer in my eyes once more. “I’m going to spend the rest of my life making it up to you. If you’ll have me.”

I close my eyes, trying to calm my racing thoughts. The only sound our heavy breathing and my thundering heartbeat.

She loves me. She wants me.

Blinking open my eyes, I get lost in the depths of hers, finding for the first time in my life, I’m at a loss for words. Gulping, I slowly nod my head.

Her anxious gaze softens, a grin breaking out on her face. Moving to wrap her arms around my neck, she asks, “Is that a yes?”

I flex my fingers still nestled inside her, smirking at her shocked gasp. “Was that ever in question, baby?” She flinches, averting her gaze and chewing on her lip. Gripping her chin, I gently move her head, forcing her eyes back on me. “Yes.” The one word

holds more weight than a thousand of her stories, an entire lifetime held within the single worded promise.

Pulling my hand out of her pants, I slide my fingers into my mouth, groaning at the flavor of her. Her face falls, a pout forming on her lips at the loss. Chuckling, I lean forward and brush my lips against her ear. “Later. I’m going to make up for every moment we’ve been apart.” Setting her down, I turn to walk back into the apartment complex to finish loading up her things, but not before glancing over my shoulder and throwing her a wink. “Enjoy walking while you can, baby.”

Her face flushes, her thighs shifting as she hurriedly buttons her jeans once more. Rushing to join me, she loops her arm in mine. “I would expect no less from my psycho lover.” Her loving tone at the nickname settles the last of the uneasiness inside of me.

This woman has been to hell and back. She’s seen the good, the bad, and the terrifying, and yet she still has chosen me. This otherworldly, beautiful, broken yet perfect girl holds my heart in her small hands.

And, for not the first and I’m certain not the last time, I wonder what I could have done to deserve her.

Fallon

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?” I’m anxious to get on the road to wherever Arriana is taking us, but I can’t help the guilt at leaving Hudson behind.

He smiles, pulling me into a tight hug. I’m startled by the sudden embrace, stiffening before relaxing into his arms and wrapping my own around him. “I’ll be fine. Thank you.” His hold tightens, squeezing the air from my lungs. But I find I don’t care, it feels so good to be able to hug him like this again. “You...you helped save my life, Fal.” He whispers.

My heart cracks, moisture pricking at the back of my eyes. “I didn’t do anything.” I admit, my mind replaying all the ways I failed him over the last few months.

Pulling back, he moves to grip my shoulders, shaking his head. “No. You did. More than you’ll ever know. I-” He gulps, glancing around to make sure there’s no one in earshot.

I follow his gaze, finding the apartment around us empty. Turning to him once more, I wait for him to finish his thought.

Releasing me, he runs a hand through his hair. “I was trying to end it that night.” He admits, shocking me into a stunned silence.

I had thought he might have, but to hear it out loud...it’s so much worse.

Avoiding my gaze, he lets out a heavy breath. “I was so alone. I-I couldn’t keep

doing it. Not being able to accept who I was, having to try to pretend that none of it mattered.” Running another shaky hand through his hair, he shifts his eyes to mine. “But then you showed up. And you kept showing up. Even when your own world was falling apart.” The tears welling up in mine are mirrored in his eyes, a small smile forming on his face. “I can’t ever thank you enough, Cher. All I can say is thank you and I love you.”

I feel the wet trails sliding down my cheeks as the dam of emotion breaks. Launching forward, I pull him back into my arms. “I love you so fucking much, Hudson. I’m always here for you. No matter where I am, I’m just a phone call away.” He buries his face in my neck, nodding his head.

“Fallon!” Arriana calls. “Time to go, baby.”

I reluctantly pull away, pausing momentarily to hold Hudson’s gaze as I repeat. “Seriously, if you ever need me. Call.”

He smiles, holding up one hand with his small finger outstretched toward me. “Pinky promise.” I can’t hold back the grin as I curl my pinky finger around his. Moving our connected hands in a sharp handshake, he pulls back and shoos me out the door. “Now go, live your happily ever after, sis.”

Giggling, I spin toward the door, excited to begin the adventure. As I turn, my eyes pass over the kitchen, giving me pause. I clear my throat, gesturing toward the door. “You go ahead, I’ll be there in a moment.” Hudson looks at me curiously before bending to pick up the last box and heading out the door.

I watch after his retreating form momentarily until I’m certain he’s out of sight. Moving quickly, I snatch up my bag and rush into the kitchen. I crouch down, pulling open the cupboard door and rummaging around the contents. My hand lands on the item I’m searching for, a lump forming in my stomach as I bring it out.

Just so Hudson doesn't find it.

I try to convince myself as I shove the half empty bottle of whiskey into my bag.

All the other alcohol in the apartment had been disposed of at the demand of Arriana. She has every right to be worried after what happened, but that was an accident. It's not like I have a problem.

No matter how much I try to convince myself of it, I still push the bottle to the bottom of the bag and hide it beneath the other items.

Pushing to my feet, I sling my bag over my shoulders and head out toward the rest of my life. My smile spread across my face a permanent fixture. With one last look over my shoulder, I pull the door closed and officially shut that chapter of my life.

Ready to ride off into the sunset with my love.

Being on the run officially sucks.

It's much more glamorous in my stories. In reality? It's exhausting.

Every time we see a cop, or drive through one of those traffic camera things, I can feel my heart climb into my throat at the thought they might know it's us.

And don't get me started on pit stops.

If I have to go inside another gas station and have a near heart attack as Arriana speaks effortlessly to the cashier like her life isn't on the line, I don't think I'll make it.

Exiting one such station, I climb into the car Andrew obtained for us. The mid-size

SUV sporting blacked out windows and looking like every vehicle I imagined a mafia member would own. “You know we look like drug dealers in this thing?” I gripe, slamming the door shut behind me.

Arriana chuckles, sliding into the driver’s seat and closing her door with much less force. “I’m a much cooler criminal than some drug dealer, baby.” She winks at me, throwing the car in drive and pulling out onto the road.

I roll my eyes, looking around me in search of the book I was reading. “This what you’re looking for?” Arriana hums, holding up the novel.

I reach for it, growling in frustration when she pulls it out of my reach. A sly grin spreads across her face. “Ask nicely.” She teases, only serving to further grate at my frayed nerves.

It’s been days with only the occasional sip of liquor tying me over to the next. The bottle now nearly empty and my irritability growing with each drink bringing me closer and closer to being completely without the only thing that keeps the already overwhelming anxiety at bay.

I can feel the familiar buzzing under my skin and I flex my fingers in an attempt to distract myself enough that I don’t lash out at my girlfriend for just trying to be playful.

At my silence, Arriana slowly lowers her arm, glancing over at me. Without a word, she indicates off the road and pulls into an empty parking lot. A heavy silence falls in the vehicle as we idle in place.

“You need to talk to me.”

I startle at the quiet demand. Turning to face her, I clench my jaw and slowly spit out

between my teeth, “Like you talk to me?”

Stop, just talk to her.

I ignore the small voice inside, opting to glower instead at my other half. She flinches, running a hand through her hair. I expect her to argue, to fight back, but am shocked when instead she murmurs, “You’re right.”

The agreement is enough to shock me out of my spiral. “I am?” I whisper.

I’ve always had to fight to have myself heard, and usually I just give in, deciding the argument isn’t worth it. Years of conditioning that what I think doesn’t matter at war within me with the realization that that’s not my life anymore. Not when the person I’m with cares about me, about what I want and what I need.

But right now, what I need, I can’t admit. Not to her. Not after everything.

Turning toward me, she nods, taking one of my hands in hers. “I’m scared.” She admits, shocking me further.

I gape at her wordlessly, unsure what to say.

Awkwardly chuckling at my silent disbelief, she shrugs. “Yeah, I’m not familiar with the emotion. I’ve only been truly afraid a handful of times in my life. But right now, I’m terrified.” Reaching a hand up, she tucks my hair behind my ear, cupping the side of my face. “I’m afraid I’m losing you. That you fell in love with the idea of me, but now that you’re having to see the reality that...that you regret your decision.”

I gulp, shifting my gaze away from her face. I still haven’t asked what really happened, but I’ve pieced together by the little road trip we’re on that it couldn’t have been good.

Would I regret it? If I found out the truth and it's worse than I think, would I want to run away?

Something settles inside me as I realize the answer. Some of the unnerving buzz fading into the background.

Covering her hand on my cheek with my own, I wait for her to meet my gaze before speaking. "There's nothing you could have done that would make me feel any less in love with you. Do I regret coming on this trip? Kinda." I shrug, but quickly continue when her face falls. "But do I regret coming on it with you ? Hell no."

She smiles softly, stroking her thumb along my cheek. "What is it then, baby? What's wrong? And please don't lie to me."

I gulp, shifting in my seat. "Well, besides the cramped car for thirteen hours a day, and the, you know, hiding from the law ? Oh, and the surviving off of chips, gross gas station corn dogs and sandwiches, and whatever other snacks we can get. Yeah, just peachy. I don't even know where we're going, Arriana." My rushed words flow out before I can stop them, my tone getting sharper with each sentence. "I'm not built for this life. I'm the 'stay inside and read a book with a nice cup of coffee' type girl. I live my adventures through fiction. I'm...I'm really tired." My shoulders slump, silence following my little outburst.

A quiet laugh has me whipping my head up.

Arriana holds up her hands in surrender, trying to hold back her laughter. "I know you're not made for this, mi vida . And that's part of why I love you." Grabbing the book from her lap, she holds it out as an offering. "I promise where we're going you'll be able to spend all day every day with your nose in a book. There won't be anymore looking over our shoulders, only endless days of relaxation and me worshiping you as you deserve."

I tentatively take the offered book, shifting in my seat to get comfortable, my cheeks flaming as I think of just what she means by worshipping me .

“Okay.” I mumble, letting the frustration go and opening to where I left off. “Where are we going anyway?” I mindlessly ask, not expecting an answer. I peek at Arriana out of the corner of my eye, finding her watching me with an unreadable expression before a small grin pulls up the corner of her lips.

“Mexico.”

I can’t help the laugh that bursts from my chest at the most obvious answer. “And here I thought you were original.” I chuckle, turning the page.

My face is jerked to the side by Arriana’s sudden grip on my chin. I gape at her, my thighs tightening in response as heat pools between them.

Her grin is unnerving, a gleam in her eyes that has a shiver running through my body. “Careful, baby. Or I’ll show you just how original I can be.” My eyes dart toward movement, watching her tongue slide along her lower lip. Releasing her hold on me, she turns back toward the road, shifting into gear. “Enjoy your book.” The humor in her tone a direct contrast to whatever I just witnessed.

Trying to ignore the desire to find out just what she meant, I return to the story, reading the words without reading them. My mind instead imaging all the creative ways she could show me her originality. And, for the first time in a while, I feel excitement again.

Mexico here we come.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

Fallon's soft snores from the passenger seat are a calming soundtrack to the chaotic stream of thoughts running through my mind.

I knew she was feeling unsettled and didn't want to pry, but the worse her mood got, the less I could ignore her little snippy responses and heavy sighs. I can tell there's still more that's bothering her, and I have a sinking feeling I know exactly what it is.

A sign for a well known motel chain illuminates on the side of the road, stating the exit is in two miles.

Glancing at my sleeping girl, I look at the clock on the dashboard, deciding it's time to rest for the evening.

We're getting close to the border now, and I'm more than ready to be out of Texas. It hasn't helped matters that the drive to Mexico has been extended by several hours in my abundance of caution. I couldn't chance authorities checking for me crossing the border anywhere close to the usual travel paths, so I opted to detour into Texas first. A decision that I've begun to regret as the long stretches of empty road have been nearly enough to drive me mad from boredom.

I shift my eyes to the rearview mirror, momentarily watching Sir Ichabod slumbering away in his sleep, his little legs twitching periodically. My heart warms at the sight, grateful to have both of my loves back.

The exit for the motel approaches and I take the turn off, pulling into the parking lot a

few moments later. “I’ll be back.” I whisper, even though they’re both asleep.

Carefully climbing out of the vehicle, I close the door as quietly as possible, clicking the lock button. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end, a prickling feeling that something isn’t right, but I push it aside. I’ll get the room key and settle in for the night, it’s probably just exhaustion from being on the road for so long.

Pushing open the door, I step inside the bright lobby. The clerk looks up from behind the desk, running his gaze down my body and back up with a look of disinterest. Crossing the room, I pull out some cash and my fake ID. “One room.”

He slides his gaze to my ID, studying it momentarily before letting out a heavy sigh and sitting upright to type on his computer. “It’s \$120 a night, and we’re pretty full up so we’ve only got the rooms directly off the parking lot available.” He looks at me expectantly, waiting for something I can’t quite figure out.

“Fine.” I sigh, counting out the bills and sliding them across the counter.

Several moments of silence pass as he inputs the information from my ID into the system. Finally, he grabs a keycard and holds it out for me. “Room 1F.”

Snatching the card, I give him a salute and head out of the lobby, ready to wash off the day and collapse into a bed. I quickly cross the parking lot and open the passenger door, gently shaking Fallon. “Hey, baby.” I say quietly.

She jerks awake, looking around with wild eyes before her gaze lands on me and she settles. “Hi.” She murmurs sleepily, rubbing her eyes. “Where are we?”

“A hotel. It was time to stop for the night, we both could use some rest.” I reach over and unhook her seat belt, helping her out of the car. “Will you grab Sir Ichabod? I’m going to get a few things out of the trunk.” She nods, yawning and opening the back

door.

I slip around the vehicle, opening the trunk and rummaging through our things the best I can without making everything topple out on me. Even after I swore to Fallon that I would have Andrew fly out all of her precious books once we were settled, I couldn't talk her out of bringing enough things that our SUV is jam packed.

My fingers finally land on what I've been looking for and I stifle the triumphant cry, not wanting to alert her to my plans. Grabbing out what we'll need for the night, I close the trunk and lock up the car, circling around to meet Fallon.

Holding out my elbow, I smile when she slips her hand into it, clutching to me as I lead the way. Once I find room 1F, I insert the keycard and wait for the beep before opening the door and half bowing. "After you."

Fallon giggles, curtsying on her way inside. "Why thank you." Her laughter is infectious, a beautiful melody that captivates me just as much today as the first time I heard it.

Following her inside, I close the door and ensure it's locked up properly before turning around and crossing the room. The earlier uneasiness still crawling just below the surface, but I'm distracted by the sight of Fallon as she slowly slides out of her clothes. "You're so beautiful, mi vida ." I murmur, dragging my eyes down her naked body.

She smiles at me, walking toward the bathroom and blowing a kiss my direction.

I watch after her as she disappears, the sound of the shower turning on reaches me a few moments later. Glancing over at Sir Ichabod still slumbering away, I gently lift his cage and move him over to the table nestled in the corner of the room. I make quick work of getting everything ready before stripping of my own clothes and

joining Fallon in the shower.

She hums when I slide through the curtain. “Took you long enough.” Tipping her head back, she closes her eyes and lets the water pour over her face, trailing down her pale skin. The heat bringing a reddish tint to the usual porcelain complexion.

Stepping up behind her, I wrap my arms around her waist, sliding one hand up while the other travels lower. Fallon shudders in my hold as I tease her lips, slipping my finger through her slit before retracting again. “So fucking perfect.” I murmur, dipping my head to place soft kisses along her shoulders. Moving my hands to her hips, I sink to my knees.

Pulling her back toward me, Fallon gasps when my tongue plunges into her pussy, her thighs tightening around my head. “F-fuck.” She moans, steadying herself on the shower wall.

I hum against her, circling my tongue before sliding it out and up to lick her clit, sucking on the sensitive bud. My fingers dig into her flesh, drawing out the noises she’s making, needing every one as desperately as the oxygen in my lungs.

Fallon’s legs begin to shake as her body tenses. “That’s it, baby.” I hum against her skin. “Come for me.” On the command, I plunge my tongue back inside of her, moving one hand to circle her clit in tight circles. Her thighs squeeze around my head, crushing me in the best possible way as her body tenses and she comes with a loud cry.

I groan at the taste of her pleasure, lapping up every bit she’ll give me before sliding out from under her. The tremors in her body start to subside, some of the tension that’s become a constant feature of hers loosens in the post-orgasmic bliss.

Even after our talk earlier today, I can’t shake the feeling that there’s more than she’s

telling me and it's eating me up. That there's something bothering her and she won't let me in, won't let me help take on the burden so she doesn't have to do it all alone.

Reaching forward, I grab the bar of hotel soap and gently begin to wash her body, starting with her delicate hands and moving along her arms before sliding down her chest. Her breath catches as I slowly circle the soap around her nipple. “ Te amo, mi vida. ” I whisper, speaking softly to her in Spanish. “ Tú puedes decirme cualquier cosa. Estoy aquí para siempre, cariño. No importa qué. Por favor, dime qué pasa. ” Begging her to tell me what's wrong, and promising I won't ever leave. Hoping she'll hear the plea, even if she doesn't understand. Because my attempts in her native language aren't proving successful, I can only hope the cry of my soul will be.

My hand slides lower, gently cleaning between her thighs and sliding around to her ass. “I don't understand.” Fallon breathes, leaning her head back to rest on my shoulder.

“I know.” I sigh, switching the bar of soap out for the small bottle of shampoo. I lather up my hands and begin massaging her scalp.

“What's it like?” Her quiet question surprises me, my fingers freezing. “Talking in a language someone else can't understand, I mean.” She lets out a soft chuckle, the sound melting the tension in my body enough I can resume my gentle massage.

I contemplate her question as I wash out the shampoo from her silky hair. “It can be frustrating at times. But the truth is, even if we speak the same language, it doesn't mean we understand each other.” The sentence hangs heavy in the air. I can feel her mulling over the meaning, can imagine the little scrunch of her nose as she thinks.

Not wanting to ruin the moment, I brush her hair over her shoulders, bending to kiss her neck. “Go dry off and get ready, I'll join you in a moment.” Standing upright, I step back to give her room to exit the shower. She glances over her shoulder, her

expression confused and curious. “Go on.” I pat her ass, smirking at her tiny squeal and glare.

Huffing, she climbs out of the shower and snatches one of the towels off the counter before exiting the bathroom.

The grin on my face fades as I wash away the day, massaging my aching muscles under the hot stream. “Just a little longer.” I mumble under my breath, fighting back the earlier unease threatening to creep up again.

I don’t want to think too hard on it. If I let myself fall into the worry, I don’t know if I’ll be able to get through to the other side with my hands clean. And I really can’t spill anymore blood, at least not until after we’re all settled and Fallon is safe once again.

Once I’m cleaned up, I shut off the water and quickly towel dry, my excitement growing at the promise of what will be waiting for me in the room. I drop the used towel in the corner of the bathroom before stepping into the room, my breath hitching at the sight before me.

Fallon has found the supplies I left out and obediently prepared herself. “Are you there?” She whispers, her voice shaky with anticipation.

I don’t say a word, crossing the room silently to stand beside her. Her body shifts on the bed under my gaze, sensing what her eyes can’t see behind the blindfold. I reach out my hand, lightly trailing my fingers up her naked skin, watching with rapt attention as tiny goosebumps form in the wake of my touch.

“Ar-Arriana?” Her voice breaks as my fingers slip between her quivering thighs. “Please.” She begs, lifting her hips in search of more.

I bite my lip to hold back the chuckle at how needy she is. My perfect sex crazed girl.

My fingers slip farther back, checking to see if she put in the other item I left out, a groan slipping from my lips as I find she did. I press down on the butt plug, crashing my lips to hers to swallow the gasp she releases at the sensation. "Good girl." I breathe against her lips, grinning at the shiver my words cause.

Moving onto the bed, I straddle her shoulders, hovering over her mouth. "You wanna eat, baby?" I watch her closely, waiting for her to understand the question. I can almost see the lightbulb switch as she jerks her head up and down, reaching up for me.

"Yes, please." She pleads, her hands gripping my thighs.

Carefully lowering myself down, I groan loudly when her mouth connects with my pussy. The sensation feels so good it almost hurts, a need to finally let go drives me as I ride her face. My breathing grows erratic as she laps at me, her tongue expertly fucking me until I'm a quivering mess.

"Fuck." I moan, a wave of pleasure crashing through me as I come.

Fallon continues her attention on me as I come down. The last of the spasms stop and I carefully lift my leg over her and move off the bed. I watch her closely as I prepare the strap on. Once it's all lubed up, I push one end inside of my pussy, groaning at the feeling.

Fallon turns her head in my direction, reaching her hand out toward me. "Where are you?" She asks, moving to take off the blindfold.

"No." My hand snaps out, gripping her wrist. "It stays on." Fallon shudders at the command, nodding her head wordlessly. "That's my good girl." I praise, bending to

kiss her, finding the taste of me on her lips only further heightens the need for her.

My hand fumbles beside the bed, searching for the small remote. Fallon gasps as I press the button, no doubt the vibrations now filling her ass an unexpected surprise. I plunge my tongue inside her mouth, my free hand gripping her hair at the nape of her neck.

Wrenching my mouth off hers, I pull her head back, trailing my lips down her neck. My teeth sink into her sensitive flesh, making her cry out. Her hands cling to my arms, nails digging into my skin as I leave love bites peppered along her gorgeous body.

Standing upright, I grip her hips and flip her onto her stomach, pulling her hips up so her ass is in the air, chest and face against the bed. She lets out a surprised breath, groaning as the new angle pushes the plug in deeper. “Tan perfecta.” I murmur, moving to kneel behind her. “You ready, baby?” She nods wildly, her fingers clinging to the bedsheet.

Gripping her hips, I line up the other end of the dildo with her entrance and slam forward at the same time I pull her back against me. She cries out, her back arching. Shifting one hand to the small of her back, I keep a firm hold on her as I pull back and thrust forward.

Her body shakes beneath me, the vibrations of the plug in her ass and dildo sliding in and out of her pussy bringing her closer to another release. “Beautiful.” I breathe, sliding my hand between her thighs to circle her clit. The sounds of her heavy breathing and whimpered cries fill the room. Just as her body tenses, her orgasm on the brink, I abruptly pull out.

Fallon cries out at the loss, whirling around to look at me. “What the fuck?” She demands, shifting on the bed to fully face me.

I smirk, pushing her down on her back. “Don’t worry, baby.” I huff a laugh, bending over her body. “I’ll let you come, but not before you tell me what’s really going on.”

Fallon gapes up at me. “You’re...you’re seriously using sex to get what? Information out of me?” She asks incredulously.

I hum, running my tongue along her clavicle, my hand slipping between her legs to circle her clit once more. She arches into my touch, chasing her release once more. I work her up to the edge just to back off again.

A whimper slips from her lips as she collapses back against the bed. “What do you want to know?” She demands, her breathy voice nearly enough to make me say forget it to this whole plan. Nearly.

“Tell me what’s wrong.” I reply, running my nose up her throat and nipping at her jaw.

Her face scrunches up. “What’s wrong? Maybe my girlfriend denying my orgasms for no reason.”

I chuckle, plunging two of my fingers inside her needy cunt, my thumb circling her sensitive bundle of nerves. Curling my fingers, I brush against the spot inside of her that has her toes curling. “Wrong answer.” Pulling my hand away, I move my fingers to her mouth, slowly pushing them inside.

She groans, licking my fingers clean without my needing to tell her to do so. I remove them from her mouth, moving to grip her chin. “Try again.”

“I-I really don’t know what you’re talking about, Arriana. Please. Please just let me come.” Her pleas tug at me, and before I can stop myself, I remove the blindfold, needing to see her. Her watery eyes stare up at mine, begging for an answer.

I search her gaze, stroking my thumb along her jaw. “I asked you earlier today and you gave me a half-answer. Baby...if we’re going to make this work, I need you to be honest with me. I can’t-” My voice breaks and I avert my eyes, gulping down the emotions.

Fallon reaches a hand up, gently brushing my hair back. “You can’t what?” She whispers.

I look back at her, finding the same desperate need for answers I have reflecting back at me. “I can’t come home one day and find you with your bags packed. I can’t go through losing you again. And the only way I can think to avoid that, to never lose each other again, is if we’re honest with one another.”

Her breath hitches, a familiar sorrow filling her expression at the reminder of the pain she caused when she left. I hate myself for bringing it up, but I can’t deny the truth. I can feel her pulling away again and I’ll be damned if I let her go this time without a fight.

“It’s not you.” She finally answers, her eyes closing. After several moments of silence, she opens them once more, a pain shining in the green pools that shatters my heart. “I-I think I might have a problem.” She admits, her voice breaking.

Moving my hand to cup her neck, I stroke my thumb on her pressure point, feeling her erratic heartbeat under my fingertip. “What is it? You can tell me anything.” She shakes her head, worrying her lower lip. I stretch my hand to pull her lip free, pressing my mouth to hers in a soft kiss. “Yes.” I breathe. “ Anything . I’m not going anywhere, baby. No matter what it is, I’ll be here. Just-just let me help you.” I can’t hide the broken plea in my voice, and I don’t know if it’s that or the gentle reassurances or the orgasm denial, but whatever it is, she finally opens up.

“I...I think I might be an alcoholic.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

“I...I think I might be an alcoholic.”

I regret the words the second they slip from my lips. Pushing against her, I’m surprised when Arriana moves away with no struggle.

Great, she’s going to leave me now. I’m too much, this is too much. Why would I just blurt it out like that ?

My anxious thoughts run non-stop in my head as I climb off the bed. Glancing over my shoulder, I find Arriana watching me wordlessly, the look on her face enough to send me spiraling if I wasn’t already.

The vibrations still buzzing consistently in my ass along with the multiple orgasm denials send a confusing mix of signals to my brain, making it hard to think clearly.

Reaching behind me, I pull out the plug, tossing it on the bed before turning to look around the room. I find a pair of sweats and a tank top resting on the small dresser across the room. Tugging on the sweatpants, I let out a nervous laugh. “It’s fine, I’m fine. I...I don’t know why I said that.” I pull the tank top over my head and slip my feet into my sandals. “I just need—I’m going to, um...” I let the half excuses hang in the air, not sure what to say. All I know is I can’t stay in here and have her looking at me like that .

“Fallon-” She calls, but it’s too late, I’m already out the door and stumbling in the dark as far away as I can.

Sucking in breath after breath, I try to beat down the tsunami of emotions building inside of me.

Just a broken mess.

I just let everyone down.

I run my hands through my damp hair, not realizing how cold it is outside until my fingers touch the icy strands. A shiver runs through my body and I suddenly wish I had grabbed a jacket in my hurry out the door.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I duck my head and walk toward the far end of the motel, the chilly air enough to shock my system. Some of the overwhelming emotions held back by sheer force of will.

I find myself missing how things used to be, before the endless nightmare our lives have become.

Before I gave into all the poisonous thoughts of my upbringing, before Arriana punched Scarlett and wound up in jail, before I found the temporary peace that lies at the bottom of a bottle, before we had to give up everything and flee to fucking Mexico .

Shaking my head, I huff a laugh at the ridiculousness of our lives now. My humor quickly dying off at the sound of boots scuffling against the ground. I freeze, my heart beating heavily in my chest.

It's probably just Arriana coming to check on you.

I try to reassure myself, but deep down I know it's not true. The footsteps are much too heavy, and the energy making its way toward me much too dark to be my love.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see the imposing figure of a man approaching me. My erratic heart jumps into overdrive, a lump forming in my throat as he grows closer. I try to pivot, to circle around him back toward our room, but he blocks my path.

“Where’d you think you’re going, pretty lass?” The man drawls, the stale smell of whiskey wafting into my face even from the short distance between us.

My body shakes, but not from the cold. I wrap my arms tighter around myself, trying to hide the evidence the cold has on my body, no doubt it would only make matters worse. I try to sidestep him, but he once again moves in my way.

Snapping his hand out, his large fingers circle my bicep, gripping so tightly I cry out from the sharp pain. “It’s not polite to ignore someone.” He tightens his hold, my arm throbbing in response to the lack of blood flow. “Think it’s time to teach you a lesson.” He slurs, barring his teeth at me in a wolf-like grin.

I try to pull my arm free, snapping, “Let me go.” But it only serves to further anger him.

“What are you doing, Bruce?” A voice sounds behind me and I send up a silent thank you that I’ve been saved from whatever this man had planned.

Bruce looks over my shoulder, his grin growing. My heart sinks at the sight. “Hey, Park. Just teaching this sweet young thing some manners.” I shudder, trying again to pull my arm free. “She’s a bit squirrely though, wanna help?”

My stomach drops, there’s no way I can escape two men. My mind flashes back to the dark room, to Daniel forcing himself on me. The memory of Logan doing the same pushes its way forward as it often does, only this time both memories are a warning, a reminder of what the depravity of man can and does look like.

I cry out, tugging harder against him.

I can't go through this again. I can't.

"Let me go !" I scream, clawing at his arm with my free hand.

"Careful, darlin'." The other man warns, gripping my wrist and tearing it away from his friend's arm. "Don't want to make this worse for ya, now do you?"

I shiver against the cold, the thin fabric little protection against the elements or the men currently leering at my breasts through the tank top. "Just-just let me go, please." I beg, shrinking away from their gazes.

Bruce barks a laugh, growing more bold with his companion now here. "Not a chance, sweetheart." Before I can react, he reaches his hand up and grips the neck of my top, ripping it down to free my breasts. "God damn those are some perfect tits." He groans, palming one of them aggressively in his large palm.

I whimper, trying to get away, but there's nowhere I can go, not with my arms trapped in their hold.

"You think the carpet matches the drapes?" Park hums, gripping the hem of my sweats.

"N-no." I plead, shaking violently.

Park laughs, pulling the pants down past my ass. He moves his hand up my thigh, causing a wave of nausea to roll my stomach. "You beg so beautifully, darlin'. Let me hear some more." He shoves his fingers inside of me and I cry out, shrieking for help into the darkness around us.

The two men laugh, continuing their assault on my body.

“She really does cry so b-” Park’s words cut off abruptly, his mouth moving soundlessly.

My eyes widen as I see the sharp tip of something sticking out of his throat shortly before it’s ripped away, a trail of blood seeping from the hole left behind. The man crumples to the ground, his lifeless hand slipping from between my thighs. I can’t stop the sobs wracking my body, the frightened cries growing louder as I stare down at his body.

“Park?” Bruce turns his gaze toward his friend.

It’s then that I hear a familiar voice. “Let her go.” A shiver runs through me for an entirely different reason at the murderous intention behind her warning.

The man quickly releases me, stumbling back in terror. “Lo-look, we were just having some fun. Right, sweetheart?” He calls to me.

I move my gaze to him, my eyes wide at the audacity he would ask me to vouch for him.

“Doesn’t look like she was having fun. Were you, baby?” Arriana asks, her tone hollow. I shake my head, pulling my pants up and trying to hide as much of my chest behind the shredded top as I can. Her eyes narrow at the marks on my arm before she turns her attention once more toward my assailant.

Stepping over the dead man, she twirls the knife in her hand. “You messed with the wrong girl.” Bruce holds up his hands in defense, still trying to reason with her. “Shut up !” She finally cries, slicing out and cutting into the flesh of the hand that had held me captive. “You touched my girl. You put your hands on her.”

A smile spreads across her face, the gleam in her eyes bordering on psychotic as she corners him further. “Lucky for me, very unlucky for you, I already had some pent up aggression I needed to let out. Now, this is going to hurt.” Without another word, she grips his hand and swings her arm down, the long blade slicing effortlessly through his wrist.

Bruce howls, clutching at the stub left behind, staring at her in horror as she inspects his severed hand.

Sighing dramatically, Arriana places the knife against his throat. “I said, shut up .” She hisses, pressing the blade into his skin, a thin line of blood forming around the edges. He quickly snaps his mouth shut, trying to keep back the whimpers as blood continues to seep out of his wound. “There we go.” Arriana hums, patting his cheek with his own hand. “Now open up.”

Bruce’s eyes widen as he wildly shakes his head in protest. Arriana sighs again, digging the blade further until he finally snaps open his mouth. The moment his lips part, she shoves the detached hand into his throat.

“Finally, some goddamn quiet.” She hums, kicking out her leg to knock him from under him. Moving to straddle his body with hers, Arriana lifts the knife up in both hands before driving it down into his chest. She rips the blade out before stabbing into him once more.

I watch as she stabs into him over and over, long after the life has left his body, she continues to jam the blade into his chest. Finally, Arriana stops, breathing heavily as she leans forward, bracing herself against his bloodied torso.

“Are you okay?” I blink at the question, trying to remember how to form words. Arriana slowly pushes upright, holding her hands up as she takes slow steps in my direction.

I flinch back, my eyes taking in the bloodied mess before me. My mind can't connect the vision I'm seeing with the woman I know. "Don-don't touch me." I manage to choke out, my voice shaking nearly as badly as my body.

"Baby..." Arriana whispers, her expression falling at my demand. I shake my head, taking a half step back. "Can...can we at least go get you cleaned up?" I shiver, wanting to say no, but I don't have anywhere else to go. "Please?"

Averting my eyes, I nod my head and begin walking toward the room. The sound of Arriana following behind me fills me with both fear and a sense of safety that makes no sense after the carnage I just witnessed.

Once outside the room, she inserts the keycard, pushing open the door and urging me inside. I take a hesitant step into the room, a little afraid to be in the small space with her now. "Come on." She nudges me toward the bathroom, closing the door behind us.

I stumble inside, the shaking in my body worsening as some of the adrenaline begins to wear off. I vaguely hear the sound of the shower turn on. Hands gently grip the hem of my sweats and I cry out, leaping away. Turning to face Arriana, I hug myself protectively.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry." She murmurs, backing away. "I'll-I'll let you clean up." Without another word, she exits the bathroom, the sound of the room door opening and closing follows shortly after.

After several moments, I'm able to push past the paralyzation and slowly undress. Turning toward the fogged mirror, I swipe my hand across the glass to study myself. My face is blotched, eyes wide. Trailing my gaze further down, I see the marks left behind by Bruce, another round of shivers spreading through my body at the sight.

Closing my eyes, I blow out a heavy breath.

I'm okay.

I try to convince myself of it, but I'm not so sure anymore.

Stumbling toward the shower, I move to stand under the hot water, willing it to warm the chill in my soul. Even as my body begins to thaw, the heat loosening the tight muscles, I can't relax. My mind replaying the sight of Arriana stabbing into the man with wild abandon. A grin on her face as she ended his life.

What have I done?

Arriana

Fuck. Fuck !

I stare down at the dead men, trying to figure out what to do.

I don't regret what I did, not for a second. These animals were touching my girl. The sound of her desperate pleas will haunt me.

I shouldn't have let her leave the room. I should have...

Maldita sea . What am I going to do?

Running a hand through my hair, I curse. I look around and am grateful to find there are no security cameras on this side of the hotel, no doubt why they opted to attack her here.

My teeth grind at the realization, wishing they were still alive so I could kill them all over again, only this time much slower and much more painful .

I spot a dumpster off the back of the building and let out a small breath of relief. Bending down, I grip the arm of one of the men, the one I had recognized as the hotel clerk. He had his hands on her, in her. His death was much too quick, but all I could think of was getting him away from her.

Grunting, I drag him toward the dumpster before returning and doing the same to the other man. I've definitely lost a lot of my strength and it's becoming apparent as I try

to pick up one of the bodies, finding I can't. "Fuck." I cry, kicking the dumpster and cursing again at the sharp pain from the impact.

I do my best to hide the bodies behind the metal box and just hope that trash day isn't for a while. Either way, we need to leave. Now.

Darting across the dark parking lot, I slip back into the room as Fallon switches off the shower. She emerges with a cloud of steam behind her, her thin frame wrapped in one of the hotel provided towels. Her eyes trail down my body, her expression shuddered. I try to take a step towards her, but she shakes her head and backs away. Ducking my head, I let her pass. "Don't go anywhere." I murmur, slipping into the bathroom and shutting the door behind me.

I make quick work of cleaning off the blood, moving as fast as I can. The fear that I'm going to walk out to an empty room fueling my hurried movements.

Drying off with one of the towels, I gather everything in my hands that we touched and chuck them into the waste bin, taking one of the clean towels to wipe down our fingerprints. Backing out with the bin in hand, I pull the door closed with the towel, wiping the handle clean.

I turn to find Fallon perched on one of the chairs, fully dressed and mindlessly stroking Sir Ichabod's fur. Releasing a breath of relief, I work quickly to strip the room, cleaning surfaces and gathering anything we've touched.

"What are you doing?" Fallon asks, startling me with her question. When I glance over my shoulder at her, I find her as surprised she's asked the question as I am.

Turning back to my work, I reply, "Cleaning up any evidence we were here. We can't risk this connecting back to us." I pause, my shoulders slumping. "To you." Pushing up to my feet, I pile everything up in the corner by the door before pulling on a clean

pair of pants and a hoodie.

When I look at Fallon, her expression is thoughtful, her fingers still trailing through Sir Ichabod's fur. "Baby." I say softly, holding my hands up as I kneel before her. "We have to go."

Fallon stares at me for several heartbeats before rising without a word.

I watch her exit the room and am on my feet running outside in the blink of an eye. My heart rate slows when I find her waiting just outside the room, her arms crossed as she stares at the place of her assault. I want to reach out, to offer some comfort, but she's made it clear that it's not welcome. So, instead, I trudge across the parking lot and start the car, moving it closer to begin loading everything inside.

Fallon watches me silently as I put the waste bin and used bedding inside the vehicle. I load up all of our personal effects, grabbing Sir Ichabod's cage and getting him set up securely in the back seat. Once everything is all secure, I do another pass of the room, wiping anything and everything that could trace back to us before closing the door and wiping the handle down.

"Come on, we gotta get going." I usher Fallon toward the vehicle, half expecting her to put up a fight. She surprises me by climbing inside without a word, clicking her seatbelt in and returning to staring blankly out the window. "Better than nothing, I guess." I mumble to myself, climbing behind the wheel and backing out.

This was certainly not how I wanted the night to go. Not by a long shot.

With one last glance in the rearview mirror, I put as much distance as I can between us and the motel.

Mexico can't get here soon enough.

We've finally reached the border and I'm growing anxious. Fallon still hasn't said anything in the several hours we've been on the road.

I don't think she'd give me up, but I'm starting to worry where her head is at.

"You have your passport?" Without a word, Fallon bends to pull it out from her bag, holding the small booklet out to me. "Thanks. And you remember your name?" She jerks her head in agreement.

Sighing heavily, I grab my own fake passport and plaster on a smile just as fake. "Howdy." I greet as I roll down my window.

"Miss." The border agent replies, shifting his gaze between Fallon and me. "Identification?" I hand over our passports, careful to keep the smile on my face as natural as I can. He glances up at me and back down, holding the booklet up to compare before doing the same with Fallon's.

Grunting, he hands them back, asking, "Business or pleasure?" His eyes narrow at Fallon, sending a warning thrill up my spine.

I chuckle, placing my hand on her knee. "Pleasure. We're here for a nice little getaway, right, baby?" My jaw clenches as I wait for her response.

After a moment of anxious silence that seems to last far too long, she finally mumbles, "Right."

"See?" I beam, squeezing my fingers. Turning back toward the agent, I gesture forward toward the land of our freedom. "So, we good to get this vacay started?"

He stares at us both for a few more moments before nodding. "Yes, have a good time ladies." Stepping back, he waves us through.

I tip an invisible hat to him, rolling up the window and accelerating. After I've put a little distance between us, I let out the breath I'd been holding, exclaiming, "We did it! We're free now, mi vida ." Fallon flinches at the nickname, shaking her head.

"Do we really deserve freedom?" She whispers, her voice barely loud enough to make out.

A flash of anger hits me and I jerk the wheel to pull off onto the side of the road. Fallon gulps, but keeps her gaze fixed forward as I turn my glare on her. "You want to talk about what people deserve?" I snap, unable to control the furious emotions bubbling up. " They deserved to die. They deserved a lot worse than what they got."

Fallon shrinks into her seat, still refusing to look at me.

"Those men touched you, Fallon. They-" I cut off, tightening my grip on the wheel. "I wanted to skin them alive for what they did to you. I wanted to hear their cries and pleas. Even then, it wouldn't be enough to drown out the sound of yours." My voice trails off, barely a whisper as I hear her cries echoing in my mind once more.

A stilted silence follows my rant, neither of us willing to break through it and voice our thoughts. The minutes tick by and finally Fallon sighs heavily. "I need a drink."

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Fallon

Happily ever after.

The hero and the heroine ride off into the sunset, staring lovingly into each other's eyes.

No more heartache, no more strife, only basking in the love they hold for the rest of time.

What a load of shit .

I knock back another shot of tequila. It's never been my drink of choice, but it's dirt cheap here, and the cheaper the better for the purpose it's serving me right now.

And that service is to make me forget, or at the very least, not care anymore.

"I think you've had enough."

I hold up my hand in Arriana's direction. I'll say when I've had enough, and it's not yet.

"Fallon." She sighs, sinking into the seat beside me. "We need to talk about this, baby."

I shake my head vigorously, pouring another shot from the bottle into my shot glass. "Nope, not gonna happen." I mutter, tossing the liquor down my throat. The warmth

that follows the burn a welcome contrast to the icy chill of my soul. I reach for the bottle once more only to have it snatched out of my reach. “Hey!” I shout, whirling in my seat to glare at Arriana.

She levels me with one of her own, not backing down. “No, you’re done.”

“ Fuck you .” I growl, reaching forward to snatch the tequila back.

Arriana’s jaw clenches, her eyes alight with something that should probably scare me, but I’m too far gone to care. Without a word, she turns and chucks the bottle against a nearby wall, watching as the broken shards of glass rain down with the wasted liquid.

I shriek, turning toward her and lashing out. “What is wrong with you?” I cry, trying to claw at her face. She traps my wrists in her hands, stopping the attack. I struggle against her, jerking wildly at her hold, my mind flashing back to the feeling of their hands on me. On my body. Inside of me.

I collapse in a heap, sobs breaking from my chest. Arriana loosens her grip, helping me down so I don’t hurt myself. Not that I’d care right now. Maybe the pain would help take some of this internal agony away.

“Talk to me, baby. Please.” She begs, releasing her hold and moving to kneel beside me.

I blink at her, my mind a confusing blend of the sweet, loving partner I’ve known for years and the cold-blooded, psychopath murderer I witnessed less than twenty-four hours ago. “I can still feel them.” I mumble, pulling my knees up against my chest.

I can vaguely hear the sounds of other patrons around us, probably wondering what’s the matter with the poor American girl. But I don’t know what they’re saying, so maybe it has nothing to do with me. Maybe they could care less about my mental

break.

They're probably used to tourists getting sloshed and losing their shit. Not like we have a great reputation of being a level-headed group of people.

I giggle at the thought, drawing more unwanted attention.

Arriana watches me quietly as I flow through the gambit of emotions. Once my fit of inappropriate laughter subsides, she reaches out, hesitating before touching me. I stare at her hand, wanting to feel the comfort I once felt at her touch.

Can I ever feel that again?

A wave of nausea rolls through me at the memory of her hands covered in the blood of my assailants. But with the liquor surging through my system, I find that the nausea isn't from the blood, it's from who the blood belonged to.

I blink, surprised at the realization. Shifting my gaze toward Arriana, I study her closely, looking for any hint she's different for having murdered two people. But, as I study her, I realize that she had to have done this before. "You're a murderer." I breathe.

Arriana's eyes dart around us, before she presses her finger to her lips. "Not here." She whispers, reaching a hand out to help me up.

I stare at her hand before slipping mine into hers, allowing her to pull me to my feet. We stumble back to our car. I'm grateful for her help as I try to walk on wobbly legs, finding the task nearly impossible.

Arriana helps me round the vehicle, opening the door and lifting me into my seat. My mind wars against itself once more, trying to marry the gentle touch with the

murderous violence I witnessed.

She closes the door and quickly crosses the SUV before climbing into her seat and turning to face me. Before I can say anything, she releases a heavy breath and blurts out, “Yes, I’m a murderer. The two men you saw me kill last night were not my first. Far from it.” She lets out a small chuckle, quickly schooling her features at the look on my face. “I know it’s a lot to take in, baby. But I’ve been doing this a long time. Long before we met.”

Before we met?

I can’t voice the question out loud, but she can read it on my face. “Yeah, before we met. The first man I killed was in a situation similar to what happened last night. Only Andrew was the one who came to my rescue, and he let me take my own revenge on the man.” My eyes widen at Andrew’s name.

Wait, if they’re both killers...

“From there, he introduced me to Charles .” I flinch at his name, remembering all I endured thanks to that man. My sluggish brain works to piece together the connections, to catch up to the story she is painting. “He brought me in on his business. Hitman. Or, I guess in my case, hitwoman.” She waits for me to process what she’s said before continuing. Taking another deep breath, she says, “That’s where I met Killian.”

“Wait.” I snap, shooting upright. “Killian? Like Ava’s Killian?” My heart thunders in my chest and I think I’m going to be sick. Arriana inclines her head and the bile threatening to escape makes its way up my throat. I barely get the door open in time before chunks spew from my mouth, my body shaking violently.

I need to warn Ava. I need to get her away. I need...

My mind replays the joy on her face when she walked down the aisle. The gentle care he's shown her the entire time I've known them with the exception of that one night. The growth and healing she's had since meeting him.

I can't ruin that for her.

Sitting upright, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, leaning back in my seat and breathing heavily.

"Are you okay?" Arriana asks, her tone full of worry.

I bark a laugh, rolling my head in her direction. "Am I alright?" I echo, snorting at the ridiculous concept. "Well, let's see. My girlfriend killed two men in front of me. Then, come to find out, she's always been this murderous psycho," Arriana flinches at the term and my heart aches, but I can't stop the word vomit anymore than I could stop the physical vomit moments ago.

"And not only is she a murderer, apparently all of her friends, or sorry, business partners are also killers. And what's worse? My best friend is married to one. With no clue. And she's a whole fucking country away from me. So, what am I going to do if her husband goes all ballistic one day and decides to off her? Nothing. I can't fucking do anything ." My chest heaves as I finish, my fingers clenched in tight fists.

Arriana studies me for a moment before asking, "Is that all?"

I roll my head toward her. " Is that all ?" I repeat, certain I must have heard her wrong. When she doesn't correct me, I laugh again, giggles bubbling up and uncontrollably breaking free. "Why? Is there something I'm missing?"

"You were assaulted, baby." Her words are a slap in the face. I immediately sober up, sitting up straighter. "All the other stuff, I understand and I can do my best to explain,

if you'll let me. But, I need to know you're alright."

I gulp, wrapping my arms around my chest. "I'm fine." I mumble, but even I can hear the lie.

"It's okay to not be okay. But you can't keep it bottled up. Talk to me. Let me take some of the pain for you." Arriana's pleading voice pulls at me, breaking down the flimsy walls I've built up between us.

"It...it wasn't the first time." I admit, shame filling me at the memories. "I should have known better, shouldn't have been stupid enough to have this happen to me again. I knew what could happen if I went out alone in the dark, and I did it anyway. I-I shouldn't—" My voice cracks, body shaking violently as my mind replays the assaults, all of them blending in a disturbing replay of my stupidity.

I jerk as a small hand rests on my arm. Blinking at the hand, I follow it up to the person beside me and find I can breathe a little easier when I see Arriana staring back at me. The haunting memories fading away as I get lost in her dark eyes.

"It wasn't your fault. None of it was your fault." I'm already shaking my head before she finishes. Her hand suddenly grips my chin, forcing my eyes on hers again. "Listen to me." She snaps, searching my gaze desperately. "You did nothing to deserve what those men did to you. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you. I'm so sorry." Her own broken tone has me reaching out.

"Hey." I murmur, brushing my fingers down her neck, feeling her gulp against my fingertips. "It wasn't your fault either." Something clicks in me at the reassurance I offer her.

None of this was on us. It's those men who cause so much pain. Those men who should pay.

My eyes search hers, and I find I understand why she did what she did.

She made them pay.

And, while I don't understand how anyone could be capable of something like that, I know she did it because she loves me. To protect me.

And somehow, I love her even more for it.

The hangover following my brief stint with tequila has me swearing off of it for good.

"Too loud." I grumble, blindly swatting around to turn down the radio.

Arriana chuckles beside me, twisting the knob on the radio to shut off the music. The car fills with a blessed silence. I release a thankful sigh, leaning back against the passenger seat.

"We're almost there, just a few more hours." Arriana says, keeping her voice soft so as not to exacerbate my pounding head.

I groan, wishing we were out of this damn car already. "Okay." I mumble, allowing myself to drift off to sleep once more.

My dreams are full of nightmarish men preying on myself and other innocent women before a ghost of the night swoops in to save us, to save me .

I reach out toward the masked hero, my fingers shaking as I grip the mask. "Can I?" I whisper. The hero nods their head, allowing me to remove the mask concealing their identity.

My hand covers my mouth as I find Arriana hidden beneath. "Are you really

surprised, baby?" She strokes my face softly. "I'll always protect you. No matter the cost."

I jerk awake, looking around the dark. "Arriana?" I whisper, my heart thundering in my chest when I get no answer. I strain my eyes to look out the windshield at the dark expanse before me, but can't make anything out.

The door opens and I scream, moving away as far as I can in the seat. "Shhh. It's just me." Arriana soothes. "We're here."

I suck in a breath, hold it for four, then slowly release it. Repeating the process until my heart doesn't feel like it's about to burst from my chest. "We're here?" I repeat when I'm able to form the question.

Arriana smiles at me, nodding her head and holding out her hand. "Come on, let me show you our new home, mi vida ." I stare at her outstretched hand, debating if I trust her enough to go with her.

Unbuckling the seatbelt, I gingerly place my hand in hers and allow her to help me out of the car. She guides me toward the back of a beautiful small building. It's hard to make out in the dark, but I can see molded ridges lining the rooftop. The closer we get, the more details appear as my eyes adjust to the darkness.

The home itself is different shades of the same sandy color, pops of reddish brown accentuating the design. There are several windows along the walls and off to the side of the front door, a small pathway leads to an open courtyard.

"Arriana," I breathe. "It's beautiful."

She beams at me, bending to scoop my body in her arms. I squeal despite myself, clinging to her neck. "Home sweet home, baby." Crossing the threshold, she presses a

kiss to my forehead. She moves to pull away but I stretch my neck out, capturing her lips with mine. Arriana lets out a surprised gasp before sinking deeper into the kiss.

I don't know what the future holds. I don't know how we'll get past what happened. But there's one thing I do know, that I'm going to try.

I love this woman more than logical reason. We've fought through the pain, through all the forces trying to keep us apart, and this is no different.

My life didn't turn out how I always imagined. But, if I'm honest with myself, I never wanted that life anyway.

I was always destined for a story meant for a book, one that would feel so incredible it could only be fictitious.

Smiling up at the woman who I never expected, I press my lips to hers once more.

My psycho lover.

Fallon

She's crazy. I'm crazy. This is crazy.

"Come on, baby. I believe in you." Arriana whispers in my ear, encouraging me to hit send.

I click the button on the mouse, screaming my excitement as I leap away from the computer. "I did it." I breathe, wringing my hands in front of my body.

It's been a few years since we settled down in Mexico, and it still feels like a dream. The transition was rough, one I don't like to think too hard about. Luckily for me, a lot of it was a hazy blur as I struggled to get sober.

It was during that time that I learned to trust Arriana again. The gentle care she showed as I vomited my soul out of my body on numerous occasions. The patience she had when I had intense meltdowns and would disappear in a panic. Only for her to find me and gently stroke my hair away from my face, dabbing away the sweat with a cool washcloth and murmuring soothing words in Spanish. It was in those moments I fell in love with her all over again.

Those moments that showed me that, despite the violence I witnessed, she's still the same woman I always knew. The same one who cared and continues to care for me through all the hard times. The only difference now is I know the darkness that lives just beneath the surface, and somehow I find it beautiful.

A sinful beauty, a dark love, but one I can't survive without. One I don't want to

survive without.

I stare at the computer screen, my emotions bubbling up to the surface, remembering when I first decided to make this dream a reality.

“How are you doing, babe?” Ava’s worried face peers at me from my phone screen.

“I’m fine.” I lie, tying my hair up in a messy bun to get it off of my sweaty neck. The call goes silent and I glance over at my phone, finding her watching me closely.

“What?” I sigh, propping my chin in my hands, elbows on the table.

Ava stares at me, chewing on her lip as she contemplates whatever she’s going to say.

“Oh for god’s sake, just spit it out.” I groan, another wave of nausea rolling through me.

She clears her throat, twirling a lock of her auburn hair on her finger. “I dunno, you just seem different.” She muses, her gaze piercing through me.

I laugh humorlessly. “Yeah, I get it, I’m a hot mess right now.” Rolling my eyes, I find I wish I hadn’t answered the call. It had just been several days since we had spoken and I could tell she was worried. And, if I’m honest with myself, I was also worried about her in light of the new information about her husband.

Ava tsks, shaking her head. “You know that’s not what I’m talking about. But I dunno, there’s something...mysterious about you now. Like you’ve got this big secret and carrying this air of mystery.”

I swallow down the panic at her words. She’s right, I do hold a secret now. One I won’t tell her, that I can’t tell her.

“It’s nothing, really.” I mutter. Shaking myself, I wink at her. “You’re just watching too much TV again. Gotta get back into the books.”

There’s a beat of silence before she chuckles. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Speaking of which...”

The rest of the call is spent chatting about all the new releases coming out and what we’re most excited about. Just as I think we’re about to say our goodbyes, she says something that rocks my world.

“So, you’ve got all this free time now.” I roll my eyes at her, because of course that’s how she’d see it. “Hey now, I’m serious. Have you thought of what you want to do with it? Besides the obvious: books, sex, beach.”

I chuckle at her summarization of all of my favorite things. But her question has me contemplating.

“I, um, I always wanted to write.” I murmur, my cheeks blooming at the quiet admission.

Ava squeals, shocking me out of my embarrassment by her enthusiasm. “Ohmygod, yes! My bestie is going to be the next smut queen.”

A laugh bursts free from my chest and it feels good. “Who said I was going to write smut?” I quip, leveling her with the most serious look I can muster. All she has to do is raise her eyebrow and my faux indignation breaks immediately. “Okay, okay, you’re totally right.” I snicker.

My mind wanders, imagining what it would be like to actually write out the stories that constantly play out in my head. To bring life to the characters and give them the love they wouldn’t otherwise have if I didn’t create them.

A smile spreads on my face as I find a renewed purpose I haven't felt since I was forced to drop out of college.

This is it, I just know it.

And it was it.

I found that in writing, I was able to process some of the emotions that I couldn't put a voice to. In creating worlds and having my characters go through traumatic events similar yet so different to my own, I found a healing I didn't expect.

The hardest moment was writing my first rape scene, I knew I needed to do it, that it was part of the story, but I sobbed as I put into words through the pain of my character what I felt and couldn't otherwise voice. And now here I am, having finished the story, given the heroine her happily ever after, and in doing so, I somehow managed to find my own once again.

I peer up at my love, a smile on my face as I bask in the afterglow of finally doing it. "I'm officially an author." I breathe, my chest cracking open and heart breaking in the most beautiful way. "I actually did it."

Arriana beams at me, pulling me into her arms. "Yes, you did, mi vida. Estoy tan jodidamente orgullosa de ti. "

I smile at her, pressing my lips to hers. " Gracias, mi amor. Estoy tan emocionada. " My Spanish is still not the greatest, but I'm learning. The immersive experience is definitely helping.

Since we had to steer clear of the more touristy areas to avoid possibly encountering a visiting official or someone who may connect Arriana with the trail of bodies she had left behind, it meant that next to no one spoke English. If it wasn't for Arriana, I

would have starved by now simply for lack of being able to order food.

“Muy bien. You’re learning very well, you’ll be fluent before you know it.” She kisses my forehead before releasing me and turning to walk into the kitchen. “I think it’s time we celebrate, what do you think?”

“Mmm, yes please.” I hum, perching on one of the stools to watch her prep.

I didn’t expect Arriana to be the homesteading type, but I’ve been surprised by her on more than one occasion. My heart is full as I watch her move about the kitchen. I don’t know how I got so lucky to have found someone who not only loves me for exactly who I am, but who encourages me to do the things that I want and that I love.

Sure, she has her faults, but don’t we all? And at the end of the day, I know she’ll always be there for me. What more could I ask for?

Arriana winks at me as she slides a large drink across the countertop. “Virgin piña colada for my very non-virgin girl.”

I giggle, sipping the coconut and pineapple drink. It’s still tempting to want to sneak some liquor in, but I’ve found that diving into the things I’m passionate about helps calm the constant buzzing much better than any alcohol ever could.

My phone buzzes, the screen lighting up with Ava’s face. My smile widens as I slide to answer the call, holding the phone up to my ear. “Sooooo?” She demands.

Chewing on my lip, I glance at Arriana, twirling the straw in my drink. “I did it.” I whisper conspiratorially, as if it’s some big secret.

Ava shrieks on the other end of the line. “No fucking way. I’m so proud of you, babe! Okay, that’s it, I’m coming down there to celebrate.” I laugh at the sound of her

rushing about her home. “Killian? Killian!” She shouts, huffing as she searches for her husband. “There you are, we’re going to Mexico.”

I giggle again at the sound of his grumbling, I can’t make out the words he says but can just imagine the look on his face at the idea of coming to visit us.

“Okay, it’s settled then.” Ava huffs, returning her attention to our conversation. “God, I’m so excited for you. We’ll be down this weekend. Okay?”

Sucking in a large gulp of my drink, I hum, “Sounds perfect.” Arms circle my chest, pulling me back into Arriana’s embrace. “Ava, I’m going to need to call you b-back.” I gasp out as Arriana nips at my neck, her hands sliding slowly down my body. I don’t hear what she says in response as I disconnect the call and drop my phone onto the counter.

“I love seeing you this happy, mi vida .” Arriana hums, her fingers bunching up the fabric of my sundress. “You know...” I shudder as she slowly scrapes her nails along my skin. “I had an idea of something we could do to celebrate. A very fun idea. One that came from this beautiful brain of yours.”

Suddenly my head is jerked back, my scalp stinging from the force of her grip. I blink up at her, my heart pounding in my chest as the anticipation grows.

Arriana grins down at me, a gleam in her eyes that sends a shiver down my spine. “Time to run, baby.”

It only takes a split second for my mind to catch up, but in that moment, I see a shift in her. Gone is the loving smile on her face just moments before, now replaced by a hunger. A burning desire for me .

“One.” She breathes, the corner of her lips lifting. Something in her expression has

me leaping to my feet and sprinting from the room.

Her breaths came in heavy pants as she ran into the woods, heart pounding so hard it felt like it would burst from her chest.

A smile spreads across my face as the words from my story play through my mind. I know exactly what Arriana has in mind, and where she got the idea from. My bare feet slide on the tiled floor, a giggle escaping my lips.

“Two.” Arriana’s voice rings out clearly, echoing behind me.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are.” He called, the sound of crunching twigs sounding under his heavy footfalls.

She clapped her hand over her mouth, trying to keep as quiet as possible. The anticipation of this moment having been built up, finally ready to spill over into reality.

“Three. Ready or not, here I come!”

I clap my hands over my mouth to contain my squeal. Glancing around feverishly, I opt to run toward the front door, bare feet be damned. The eerie silence following Arriana’s counting sends a chill down my spine, the only sound my heavy breathing as I sprint out the door.

Spotting a large oak tree, she pumped her legs, desperate to hide away before he could reach her. Before he could inflict his punishment . Whatever that meant.

The beautiful view before me is eclipsed by the tingle of terror pricking at my nerves. I look around the empty beach, desperately searching for somewhere to hide. Gripping the fabric of my dress in my hands, I dart out onto the sand, running as

quickly as the sinking ground will allow.

“Come on.” I huff, cursing as my attempts to flee are hindered by the grains sucking in my feet.

It was silent all around her as she hid, the sounds of wildlife dying out, as if the woodland creatures were also in hiding. Another twig snapped a few feet to her left, making her leap from her perch and dart out into the dark forest once more.

“Where are you, baby?” Arriana’s voice rings out, making me speed up my steps. The effort only serving to slow me down further as I trip and fall.

Stretching my arms out, I try to brace myself for the impact. “Ouch.” I grimace, my wrist twisting uncomfortably as my weight crashes down. Glancing over my shoulder, I spot Arriana emerging from our home, her eyes scanning along the beach. I scramble to my feet, ignoring the throbbing of my right arm, the adrenaline pumping through my veins dulling the sharp sting.

Once upright, I take off once more, running futilely down the desolate space, knowing it’s only a matter of time now.

A hand wrapped around her waist, yanking her back against his broad chest. “Caught you.” He breathed, his warm breath ghosting across her cheek. She shuddered against him, her body betraying her even as she willed herself to fight.

“Let me go .” She seethed, yanking against his hold.

He let out a soft chuckle. His other hand moved to grip her throat. Angling her head back, he pressed his lips against her neck, the feel of her fluttering heartbeat only serving to further his need for her. “There’s no escape now, angel.”

My mind whirls as I flee along the coastline, the sound of the ocean crashing against the shoreline echoing loudly around me. I can feel bits of sand hitting the backs of my legs as my hurried steps fling it upward.

A scream is ripped from my throat as I'm suddenly lifted into the air.

"I caught you." Arriana chuckles, spinning us toward the house. I struggle in her hold, kicking and wiggling against her. Stopping abruptly, Arriana sets me down.

A wave of disappointment rolls through me before I'm shoved to the ground, my face pressed against the sand. I squeeze my eyes and mouth shut tight, angling my head to breathe through my nose, grateful I decided to wear contacts instead of my glasses. My hips are yanked up, knees firmly placed on the sand. I whimper as the angle puts pressure on my injured wrist.

Leaning over my body, Arriana gently sweeps my hair away from my face, her touch soothing some of the ache. "Are you okay, baby?"

My heart soars that one sound of pain coming from me is enough to stop her in her tracks. After all I've witnessed, after seeing the viciousness she possesses, to know that one word from me can stop her? It's a high I never expected.

I nod my head, the rough grains of sand scraping against my skin. There's a moment of silence before the palm of Arriana's hand slaps against my ass. I cry out from the impact, my cheek stinging as she gently rubs at the sore spot.

"You shouldn't have run." He growled, throwing her up against the trunk of a large tree. Gripping her skirt, he yanked up the fabric, tucking the end into her waistband. His hand rubbed circles on her exposed cheek, a wave of nervous anticipation filled her at his touch.

“I’m s-sorry.” She gasped, but it was already too late. The damage had been done.

A cry erupted from her throat as the palm of his hand hit her ass. She arched against the tree, the bark scraping against her and leaving shallow cuts along her skin. She barely had a moment to catch her breath before another harsh smack landed on her cheek.

“Pl-please.” She begged, tears pricking at her eyes even as a warmth pooled low in her pelvis.

“Do you know why I’m doing this?” Arriana hums, her fingers digging into my skin momentarily before she pulls away to land another blow to my exposed flesh.

I shake my head as much as the angle will allow, tears pooling in my eyes.

Another laugh sounds behind me, her sinister chuckle carrying on the wind and mingling with the crash of waves. “You’re a filthy, filthy girl.” She growls, sliding her hands up my thighs. “And naughty girls are punished.”

The sound of his belt being ripped free echoed loudly around them. She shuddered, knowing what was about to happen next.

Crack.

Her mind registered the noise before the pain. A pained cry erupted from her chest as he landed blows along her ass and thighs.

One. Two. Three.

She lost track of how many times the leather connected with her skin. The only thing she could focus on was the sting of her skin and the shift of her legs as she tried to

deny just how affected she was by his brutal treatment.

“Ple-please.” She begged. “I’m s-sorry.”

His dark chuckle sounded around them. “You’re sorry?” He echoed, his voice dripping with sarcasm and desire.

“Yes.” She whimpered, trying to simultaneously move away from him and arch into his touch, her mind and body a confusing mess of contrasting desires.

The sound of ruffling fabric followed by the distinct clicks of his zipper sliding open filled her ears. She bit her lip as the head of his cock pressed against her needy cunt. “Let’s find out just how much.” He growled before thrusting forward.

Before I can react, her fingers grip my panties and rip them down my body, trapping my legs in place as she leaves them halfway down my thighs. I gasp when her fingers push inside of me. My thighs tremble as she slowly pumps in and out of my aching center. The combination of pleasure, pain, the chill from the wind blowing the cold temperatures from the sea, and the thrill of possibly being caught have me intoxicated more than any drink ever could.

The thought pushes me closer to the edge. Tears slide down my cheeks as I uselessly claw at the ground beneath me, the sand slipping through my fingers.

Arriana’s fingers disappear and my quiet cries only increase in response, worried I’ve ruined the moment. My fears are quickly assuaged when her tongue runs up my slit, slowly circling my clit before sliding to slip inside of me. “Oh god.” I gasp, my muscles tightening as she fucks me with her tongue, her fingers gripping my thighs so tightly I’m positive they’ll bruise.

“Ar-Arriana.” I pant, pressing back against her. She hums against me, working her

jaw faster and shifting her hand to slip between my legs. Her fingers slide along my skin, leaving goosebumps from her touch. I can feel my body tensing as I grow closer to my release.

Her body jerked from his brutal thrusts, her nails clawing at the bark, leaving splinters in her fingers, but she didn't notice. "Oh god!" She cried out, her vision darkening as her body tensed.

"There's no god here." He growled, his rough fingers sliding along her bare skin. Slipping his hand between her thighs, he circled her clit in tight circles, the added pleasure from his touch enough to send her over the edge.

Her euphoric cries echoed loudly around them as she let go. Giving him what he always wanted.

Her pain and her pleasure.

"Come for me, baby." Arriana's quiet command has me crying out. My mind a confusing mixture of fiction and reality as the orgasm overtakes me.

I never imagined I would have this. That I would find someone who would accept me for who I am, for my needs, my desires. Who not only loved the idea of who I could be, but the reality of who I am.

As I come back down, I'm pulled into her embrace, giggling as she peppers my face with loving kisses. "I love you, mi vida ." She whispers, her tone full of adoration.

Leaning back, I cup her face and peer into her warm eyes, " Te amo, mi amor. Por siempre y para siempre. "

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:05 pm

Arriana

I swallow the lump in my throat, unexpectedly nervous.

Fallon peeks up at me, tucking her hair behind her ear. “You alright, my love?” Her forehead creases as she studies my expression closely.

I force a smile on my face, willing the nerves to settle down. There’s no need to be worried, she loves me and I love her. What more is there?

Relaxing at the thought, I lift my drink to my lips, sipping on the water. The cool liquid further helping to settle some of the chaos buzzing inside of me. “Just a lot on my mind.” I finally answer her, my eyes darting to her phone and away again.

Fallon narrows her eyes at me, clearly not accepting my answer but not pushing me on it. With a shrug of her shoulders, she plucks up one of her empanadas, bringing the puff pastry to her lips and taking a small bite.

I watch her closely, my gaze shifting to her phone once more.

“Okay, what?” She demands, waving the pastry in the air. “Obviously something is up because you keep looking at my phone. So just tell me what it is.”

I sigh heavily, frustrated that this isn’t going to plan. It’s been months in the making, and a rather difficult ordeal to make a reality, and somehow I’ve managed to fuck it all up in a matter of moments.

“Have you checked your Insta yet today?” I ask lamely, kicking myself for being so obvious, but what else can I do? She wasn’t checking on her own and I’ll be damned if I miss the moment she does.

Fallon’s brow furrows, confusion clouding her expression. “Not where I thought you were going to go. But, no? Should I have?”

I shrug in response, sipping at my water once more.

Sighing heavily, she snatches up her phone, opening the app as she takes another bite of her empanada. I watch her closely as she reads the screen, her eyes widening. She shifts her gaze to mine and back to the phone quickly, eyes scanning the words I know she’s reading. The words I put there.

“How?” She breathes, setting down the uneaten portion of her dessert as she leans forward, clutching the small device in both hands.

Reaching into my pocket, I push to my feet, coming to kneel beside her on one knee. Fallon slowly turns to me, setting her phone down, her hand shakes as she covers her mouth. I smile up at her, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“I told you once that the next wedding we would be at would be ours. You might not have understood me at the time, but that didn’t make my promise any less true.” Fallon snuffles, a tear slipping down her cheek. Lifting my hand, I gently swipe it away, lingering my touch before moving to open the ring box in my hand. “ Cada día me enamoro más de ti. ” I whisper, closing my eyes and reciting the words I know she read on the screen. The ones I had managed to get her favorite author to post and tag her for me. “ Tu me completas, mi vida. Cada momento que he pasado contigo es un sueño. Quiero pasar el resto de la eternidad contigo. ¿Qué dices, cariño? ¿Serás mi para siempre? ” I hold my breath as I wait for her response, the seconds ticking by an eternity.

When I'm not sure if I can handle another moment, Fallon nods her head wildly, tears spilling down her cheeks. “ ?Sí! Yes!” She leaps up from her seat, launching herself into my arms.

I laugh, clinging to her, a feeling I haven't known settling deep in my core.

She said yes. She knows me, she knows everything , and she still said yes. She still wants me. Despite all my dark and twisted parts, she still chose me.

I slip the ring on her finger and crush my lips to hers, funneling all of my love into the connection.

How did I get so goddamn lucky?

Fallon

I'm on cloud nine.

I can't stop staring at the new ring on my left hand as I cling to Arriana on our walk back to our villa. The diamonds shine beautifully in the setting sun. Lining a beautiful rose-gold band, the different sized stones are offset to form a breathtaking collage of imperfect perfection.

Twisting my hand to watch the last of the sun's rays bounce off the diamonds, I allow myself to fully embrace this moment, one I didn't think I would ever have.

Since our relocation, I had given up the idea of marriage being in the cards for us, it's not like we can go back to the States and have a big ordeal. And that was okay with me, as long as I had her, it was enough.

But somehow Arriana made it happen, just like all my other hopes and dreams, this

woman continues to amaze me with the love and care she pours into my life.

“ Te amo, mi amor. ” I murmur, resting my head on her arm.

Arriana presses her lips to my head. “ Te amo, mi vida. ”

We walk up the pathway to our home, and I find I can’t wait to snuggle up with her. With my fiancée .

Arriana opens the door, ushering me inside. “I have one more surprise for you.” She whispers, extracting herself from my hold.

I look at her quizzically before shifting my gaze to the room, more tears filling my eyes as they land on the guests awaiting us. “Ava?” She smiles at me, leaping to her feet and sprinting across the room.

“Congratulations, Fallon.” She whispers, wrapping her arms around me in a tight embrace.

After the initial shock wears off, I return her hug, crying softly at how perfect this night has been. We pull apart and I can’t help but show her what Arriana did. “Look, I mean, I don’t even know how she convinced her to do this. Like it’s completely unheard of, but somehow...” I glance up at my other half, the love bursting within me almost too much to bear.

“Yes! Show me. Like yesterday.” Ava demands, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

I chuckle, pulling up my app once more and finding the post that Arriana had somehow roped my favorite author into posting.

The photo is a simple graphic with the words Tu me completas, mi vida written

across in a cursive font. Below the graphic, the caption reads:

This post is a little unconventional for me, but when I was approached with the story behind this request, I couldn't say no. So, Fallon, without further adieu, Arriana has something to ask you.

“Cada día me enamoro más de tí. Tu me completas, mi vida. Cada momento que he pasado contigo es un sueño. Quiero pasar el resto de la eternidad contigo. ¿Qué dices, cariño? ¿Serás mi para siempre?”

And for all of us who don't speak the beautiful Spanish language, I've been provided the translation *winking emoji*

“I fall more in love with you every day. You complete me, my life. Every moment I've gotten to spend with you is a dream. I want to spend the rest of eternity with you. What do you say, baby? Will you be my forever?”

So, Fallon, what do you say? I, for one, am dying to know. And am beyond honored to be a part of your beautiful love story.

Keep reading, keep writing, keep spreading love.

And make sure I get an invite to the wedding *wedding bell emoji*

“Oh. My. God. Did that actually happen?” Ava gasps, slapping her hands over her mouth.

“Right??” I cry, bouncing on the balls of my feet, the giddy excitement needing an outlet.

“So, you're totally inviting her to the wedding right?” She demands, gesturing to my

phone.

I shrug, chewing on my lip, “I mean, that doesn’t feel like a smart choice given, you know, everything .” Ava nods her understanding. It’s one thing to hide behind the anonymity of the screen, but with how high profile the whole thing would be if she did attend, there’s no way it would be safe. It’s a fun dream, though.

I peek over at Arriana as she chats with Killian, the same excitement on her face as I can feel bubbling up inside of me. No matter how this plays out, she asked and I said yes. I don’t need a big affair, I don’t need anything more than her. I don’t think I ever did.

Arriana

Standing on the beach beside Killian, I anxiously wait. It might not be the perfect wedding, but it’s ours, and that makes it perfect in my book.

Ava comes to stand on the other side of her husband, a giant grin on her face. Andrew on my other side. Hudson and Cooper join them soon after on respective sides.

I gulp, watching the makeshift walkway. A glimpse of white fabric comes into view and my heart stops.

Fallon peeks up at me sheepishly as she walks down the “aisle”, her long train dragging in the sand behind her. The satin dress clings to her body, showing off every delicious curve. A long slit runs up her right thigh, stopping just shy of her hip. An equally long line runs down her breasts, the neckline plunging to her navel. She has adorned jewelry to match the elegance of the dress, the gems sparkling in the bright sunlight.

Swallowing hard, I try to keep my emotions at bay as I watch her slowly make her

way toward me. She comes to a stop, handing her bouquet to Ava before turning to face me once more. “You are stunningly beautiful.” I whisper reverently.

A blush forms on her cheeks as she dips her head. “You look incredible too.” She whispers, her eyes glistening as she peeks up at me.

Unable to resist, I tug her into my arms, pressing my lips to hers. Fallon melts against me, digging her fingers into my back, fisting the fabric of my suit.

Killian clears his throat, reminding me of what we’re supposed to be doing. “Right, sorry, old man.” I chuckle, reluctantly pulling away from my baby. “Do your thing.”

He rolls his eyes, but can’t hide the happiness in his expression as he looks between us. “When Arriana asked me to officiate this wedding, my first instinct was to enthusiastically decline, but I was otherwise persuaded.” He looks at Ava, one of his rare smiles transforming his hard features. “All jokes aside, I can honestly say that I can’t think of a couple better suited for one another.”

I beam at Fallon, finding her smiling back at me, a look of joyful contentment adding to the beauty of her features.

“You two have vows you’ve written?” We both nod, moving to grasp each other's hands.

“Fallon.” I start, needing to get the words out first. “I didn’t think love was in the cards for me. I couldn’t imagine a life where someone would want me, would see all my broken bits and claim them as their own. But that’s what you’ve done, baby.”

I take a deep breath before continuing, my voice cracking as the emotions well up. “I call you mi vida . And it’s because that’s what you are. I merely existed in this world all the years before I met you. You brought me to life. And I will spend eternity

loving you for it. Eres mi para siempre, mi vida. ”

A quiet hush follows my words, the only sound the crash of the waves against the shoreline and quiet snuffles from my beautiful bride.

“Your turn, baby.” I whisper, earning a soft chuckle from her and our guests.

Sticking out her tongue, Fallon wipes under her eyes before fanning her face. “Just give me, like, one moment.” She laughs breathlessly, her voice hoarse with emotion.

“You have all the time in the world.” I murmur, stroking her cheek with my thumb. “No voy a ninguna parte. ”

Another hiccupped breath sounds at my words as she fights against her waterworks. After several moments, Fallon composes herself enough to take my hands once more.

Peering into my eyes, hers soften as she recites her vows. “My love. Mi amor . You gave me a romance I never thought I’d have. I’d call it a fairytale, but I’m not sure that does it justice.” Taking a deep breath, she pushes past her emotions, her voice wobbling as she does. “I didn’t think I was loveable. I thought I was broken, that I was destined for a miserable existence of never being accepted for who I am. But you proved me wrong in the best way possible. You helped me to fall in love with myself as I fell hopelessly in love with you.” Her voice breaks and she raises her fingers to cover her lips as she blinks back her tears.

“I love you more than words can convey, and I hate that both of our languages fail me in that, because I want, no, I need you to know that I will spend every day for the rest of time loving you as fiercely as you have loved me.” Swallowing, she squeezes my hands as she repeats, “ Eres mi para siempre, mi amor. ”

A quiet hush falls over us as our words hang in the air. I feel a tear slip down my

cheek, and as Fallon reaches up to brush it away, I don't fight against the emotions, letting more slip free as I peer into her eyes.

Killian clears his throat again, his own voice full of barely concealed emotion as he says, "I pronounce you wife and wife, you may kiss the bride."

I immediately yank Fallon against me, crushing my lips to hers once more, my heart so full of love I'm afraid it might burst. "Te amo." I whisper against her lips.

She grins, wrapping her arms around my neck as she whispers back, "Te amo."

Arriana

My heart hammers as I slip through the crowd. Even though it's been nearly a decade since Fallon and I originally fled the country, I still get worried whenever we're in large crowds. The possibility of someone taking me away from my baby again has me ready to rip out the throats of every passerby.

"Hey." Fallon whispers, squeezing her fingers in mine. "It's going to be okay."

I turn my head toward her, plastering on my usual carefree grin. "Of course it will be, baby." I murmur, bringing her hand to my lips. She giggles as I press a soft kiss against her skin and wiggle my eyebrows at her. "Now, come on, we don't want to miss our flight."

In the years since we left, Andrew's technological abilities have greatly increased, and thanks to his newfound skills, we have the capability of visiting our first home once again.

I've enjoyed our time in Mexico, teaching Fallon my first language, watching her grow and blossom into the woman I always knew she would be. I wouldn't change a single moment for anything. But sometimes I still miss my world, and, if I'm honest, I miss my family.

I never thought I would say those words, but in the years we've been gone my brother and Hudson have grown closer and as such, I've gotten to speak with Cooper more in the last nine years than I did for nearly a decade and a half before then. Spencer is still an ass, but at least he checks in more frequently now too since he settled down.

I've even got a few nieces and nephews running around I've yet to meet.

The announcement for our flight pulls my attention from my thoughts. "Shit." I mumble, glancing around the airport. We're still trying to navigate our way through and the clock is ticking. A thought crosses my mind and I pull Fallon to a stop, spinning her toward me.

"What-" She tries to ask, but her question is quickly cut off by a squeal as I yank her up in my arms. "Arriana!" She cries, giggling as she clings to me.

I smile at her before taking off in a sprint, the crowds moving much quicker to avoid being rundown by the crazy woman running through the terminal.

We make it to our gate, skidding to a stop before the flight attendant. I set Fallon down, waiting for her to rummage through her bag for our tickets. "¿Boleto?" The attendant asks, waiting expectantly for us to show her our plane tickets. Quickly scanning the small papers, she nods toward the hall beside her that leads to our flight.

"Gracias." Fallon whispers, ducking her head.

The attendant smiles at her. "Que lo pases genial en América." Fallon's returning grin is breathtaking.

I may be excited to return to Seattle, but it's nothing on my girl's excitement.

We shuffle our way onto the plane, getting settled in our seats. Fallon clings to my arm, staring out the window. "We're going home." She whispers, her voice full of so much emotion I can't pinpoint how she's feeling.

"Yes, we are." I murmur, trailing the back of my hand down her neck. "Are you ready?"

Taking a deep breath, she slowly releases it before turning to me with wide eyes. “I think so. What if...” She glances around, lowering her voice before asking her question. “What if they come after you?”

My chest spasms at the worry in her tone. Extracting my arm from her hold, I cup her face in my hands and bring my lips to her forehead. “They won’t.” I promise, feeling her tense up in response. “And, even if they do,” I lean back, the corner of my mouth ticking up in a smirk. “They’ll never take me away from you, baby. Never again.”

She studies me for several moments before whispering, “Promise?”

“Promise. Lo juro. ” Her expression softens and she melts in my hold. “You’re my forever, remember?” I chuckle, settling back into my seat and blowing out a slow breath. The rumble of the engine sounds beneath us and a now familiar worry tries to push its way past my confidence, but I just tighten my hold on Fallon.

There’s little guaranteed in life, but there is one thing I can count on.

I know we’ll be together forever, of that I’m certain. Because I won’t let it be any other way.

I groan as I stand up from the seat, stretching out my sore muscles. We only had one connecting stop in Denver, but it has turned into a day of travel and my body aches, reminding me I’m getting older.

Holding my hand out to Fallon, I wait for her to hurriedly shove her eReader in her bag. “You and your books.” I chuckle, earning myself a glare.

Over the years, my baby’s books have done very well, earning her a nice income. Which she promptly used on purchasing every book known to mankind, calling it research . I can’t complain when her research on certain topics bleeds into our relationship.

Huffing, she pushes to her feet, slinging her bag's strap around her shoulders. My gaze travels down her body and I bite my lip. Even after a full day's travel, dressed in an oversized hoodie, leggings, and ballet flats, she's the most beautiful creature in existence.

Unable to help myself, I pull her into my arms, my lips crushing against hers. Her earlier moodiness melts away as the kiss deepens, her hands clinging to my arms as if to hold herself upright.

A throat clears behind us. Breaking the kiss, I scowl at the flight attendant for daring to interrupt. Her eyes widen at the gleam in mine. I've had just enough stress and weariness from the day I feel like a rubber band about to snap. From the look on her face, she can tell she really doesn't want to be on the receiving end when that happens.

Before I can act on any of the thoughts running through my mind, Fallon's hand squeezes my arm, drawing my attention back to her. I shift my gaze and become lost in her beauty once more.

"Let's go." She whispers, indicating the exit with her head.

My earlier annoyance already gone, a smile spreads across my face as I shuffle out of the way, half bowing and extending my arm. "After you."

She giggles, slipping past me. I watch after her for a moment, enjoying the view of her luscious ass as it sways with each step.

My desire for her has only grown over the years, the need to have her in every way increasing with each moment I'm blessed with her presence.

As I gather our carry ons, all I can think of is how I got so goddamn lucky to have captured a goddess.

Fallon

I feel disgusting. Exhausted, stuffy from the poor air circulation, and just all around miserable.

Sneaking a peek over at Arriana, I can't help but shake my head.

How does she still look so gorgeous?

It's both not fair and exciting beyond words how beautiful she is. On one hand, I don't want to be alone in the frumpy appearance when we meet our friends. On the other hand, that's my girl I get to show off how stunning she looks, even after a day of hellish travel.

"What has you smiling like that, baby?" Arriana chuckles, resting her hand on the small of my back.

I melt into her touch, leaning my head on her shoulder. "You." I admit, my lips turning up into a sly grin. The thought of us sneaking off to one of the airport bathrooms plays in my mind and has me biting my lip.

She chuckles quietly, pressing her lips to my head. "Whatever you're imagining right now, the answer is yes."

My face flames and I quickly duck my head, letting my hair hide both my embarrassment and excitement. It doesn't matter that I can read and write the filthiest books, filling the pages with creative and steamy sex. I still find the old shame tries to creep up at my desires.

I hope one day to be able to exist without the need to hide away, but it's a journey and every step on it has brought me closer to full freedom to be and express who I am.

Before I can get too lost in my head, the terminal opens to a revolving door exit. My body tenses as we grow closer, the familiar anxiety crawling up my throat and a heaviness settling on my chest.

“Hey, it’s okay, baby.” Arriana reassures me, shifting her arm to wrap around my waist and pull my body close to hers. I jerk my head in agreement, even though my instincts are screaming at me to run.

Each step closer to the exit has my anxiety growing until I can’t think past the fear. Planting my feet, I glance around and mumble, “May-maybe we should have just flown everyone to us instead.” The worry bleeds into my tone as I fist the fabric of my hoodie in a tight grip.

Arriana chuckles again, brushing back my hair to lean and whisper into my ear. “You know why we couldn’t do that, mi vida .” She releases her hold on me to walk through the slowly spinning doorway.

I watch after her for a moment, swallowing down the fear.

She’s right. We’ll be fine. And there’s no way I was going to miss this.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly push it out of my lungs, repeating the process a few times until I can breathe a little easier. I hold onto the certainty that Arriana wouldn’t let anything happen, that she would move heaven and earth to make sure we make it home safely after this.

With one last mental pep talk, I walk through the spinning exit and step through the other side. My heartbeat races as I don’t find Arriana waiting for me. An impending sense of doom settling inside at her absence.

“Fallon!” My head jerks to the side, the panic easing when I find the small group of people waiting for me. I spot Arriana in a hushed conversation with Andrew as he

stands beside a girl with gorgeous long black hair and the body of a dancer.

My focus is pulled away as I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. I brace myself moments before a small body slams against mine, tiny arms wrapping around my legs. “Auntie Fae!” The little voice makes the tears slip over, sliding down my cheeks as I bend to scoop the little boy into my arms.

“Hey, buddy.” He wiggles in my hold, trying to get back on his feet. “Okay, okay.” I chuckle, releasing him and quickly wiping my cheeks.

“Look! Look what I has.” He bounces on his feet, shoving a small action figure into my hands. “His name is Buzz.” I look down at the toy, the recognizable space cadet with white, green, and purple markings bringing back memories from my own childhood. “I has a secret.”

I glance up, leaning close to whisper, “What is it?”

He beams at me, his jerky movements growing more erratic as his excitement grows. “He comes to life, just like the movies!” Glancing over his shoulder, he lowers his voice as he whispers, “But don’t tell Daddy.”

Following his gaze, I smirk, holding out my pinky finger. “Promise.” His face lights up as he wraps his tiny finger around my own.

“Oliver, are you bothering your Auntie?” A breathless voice sounds above us.

Oliver shakes his head aggressively. “Nu uh, Mommy.”

Ava chuckles, ruffling his dark hair with her hand. “Stop it!” He cries, moving out of her reach. In doing so, he spots my other half, his earlier grin appearing once more as he takes off in her direction.

I watch after him for a moment before pushing to my feet. Turning toward her, I wrap Ava into a hug. Well, as much as I can manage around the large bump between us. “Hey, Ava.” I smile, leaning away to take her in.

“Hi, babe!” She greets, her eyes alight. A sheen of sweat has formed on her forehead, face flushed from the exertion of traveling to greet us.

One look at her and I know Arriana was right, there’s no way they could have traveled to come see us.

Killian steps up beside her, wrapping his arm around her body protectively. “You need to sit down, baby girl.” He gently demands, nudging her toward the row of seats behind them.

Ava waves off his concern, focusing on me instead. “I am so fucking excited you’re actually here!” She cries, resting one of her hands on her extended stomach.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” I ignore the nagging reminder that I missed her last pregnancy.

There was still too much heat at the time, and traveling to the States was out of the question. She was able to come see me a few times, but Killian put his foot down as she got farther along, his worry that something could happen while they were out of the country both endearing and beyond frustrating.

Ava smiles softly at me, reaching her hand out to gently squeeze my arm. Glancing over her shoulder, she catches Killian’s concerned gaze. She looks back at me, rolling her eyes and indicating the exit. “Well, you ready to get this show on the road?”

My eyes seek out Arriana, finding her enraptured by Oliver, nodding along with his animated exclamations and reacting to his stories in an overly exaggerated manner to show her enthusiasm.

My heart swells at the interaction, somehow falling more in love with her than I already was. She peeks over at me, throwing a wink my way before returning her attention to our nephew.

“Yeah, let’s go.” I reply, finding the earlier worries have melted away by being surrounded by those we love and who love us right back.

“Oh. My. God.” Ava barks a laugh, clapping her hand over her mouth. “What is this?”

I jerk my head to look at Arriana. “What did you do?” She simply shrugs, sipping at her drink. Rolling my eyes, I turn back to Ava. “I had no part in this.” I laugh, holding my hand out. “Can I see it?”

Ava leans to hand over the small box, huffing at the movement. I smile at her, taking it from her outstretched arm and inspecting the gift closely, both horrified and near hysterical giggles threatening to break free.

The box looks just like any other toy box, except the child on the front is holding a plushie knife, another concerning plush toy in the shape of a body bag lies beside the child. Written across the top is *El primer kit de asesinato del bebé*.

“Baby’s first murder kit? Seriously?” I can’t hold back the laugh this time, incredulous that she was even able to find something like this.

“I’m sorry, what?!” Ava cries, her eyes widening.

Arriana glances between her and the gift, a sly grin pulling up the side of her lips. “Can never start too early.” She shrugs once more, settling back in her seat as if this is the most normal interaction.

I glance up and find Killian glaring at Arriana, the hard set of his jaw and expression

so furious I'm certain if the kit was real he would be using it on her. Laughing awkwardly, I hand the box back over to Ava. "She watches too many true crime documentaries." I offer, trying to ease some of the tension in the room.

It's obvious Killian still hasn't disclosed what his job consists of, and while I hate keeping Ava out of the loop, I have to agree that it's probably for the best.

Ava shakes her head, examining the gift once more. "Is it bad that I find it kind of adorable? In a creepy as fuck kind of way." Arriana beams at the comment, winking at Killian's furious gaze.

"Okay, not that that's weird or anything, but maybe open ours next. Ya know, a normal gift." Andrew cuts in, smirking as Arriana lifts her middle finger in his direction. He slings his arm around the girl beside him, leaning back and spreading his legs in a relaxed position.

While I still don't know him very well, it's nice to see the happiness he exudes, a direct contrast to the last time we were in this room. From what Arriana has told me, a lot of it is due to the woman beside him.

She looks up, catching my gaze and smiling, her grey eyes almost ethereal in the light. I return her grin, finding I'm excited to get to know her more. Something about her presence draws you in, a fact I had noticed in all the interactions I've witnessed so far.

Is it weird to use her as inspiration for a future character? Probably weird.

Mentally shaking myself, I return my attention back to my best friend.

Ava tries to grab the gift in question, growing frustrated as she is hindered by her belly. Noticing her struggle, Killian gently rests his hand on her shoulder, reaching down and picking up the present. She smiles up at him before tearing into it.

Andrew was right, their gift was normal, maybe even a little boring. Not that I'd say it out loud.

I tip my cup back to find it's empty. Pushing to my feet, I mumble to Arriana that I'll be right back before venturing into the kitchen for a refill. I'm lost in thought, the earlier inspiration having struck and my mind now weaving together another plot bunny that my current works in progress are side eyeing.

I'll never get used to the fact that I write for a living. That people actually pay money to read words I've written, stories I've dreamed up, and worlds I've created.

The sounds of laughter wafts over to me from the living area and I can't contain the smile in response. I look over the drink selection, my mind replaying all the moments that led to this one. Some good, some bad, but each piece, no matter how broken, made up the puzzle of our lives.

As I move to refill my glass, I nearly drop it into the punch bowl at the sound of a pained cry behind me. I quickly set down my empty drink and dart into the room. Looking around, I try to find what happened. My eyes widen as they land on Ava. Her face is contorted in pain, a small puddle pooled beneath her on the floor. I glance at Killian, finding him kneeling beside her, his hand gripped by Ava's.

"Andrew." He barks. I shift my gaze to Andrew and watch as he flies around the room, gathering supplies like they've rehearsed this a hundred times.

"What's wrong with Mommy?" Oliver's voice pulls my focus away. I look to find him perched on Arriana's lap, curled up in her arms, fear on his face.

"Shhh." Arriana soothes, brushing back his hair. "Nothing's wrong, hombrecito ." Turning her gaze to mine, a wide smile spreads on her face as she says, "You're about to be a big brother."

If I ever wanted to have kids of my own, that desire has entirely disappeared after what I just witnessed.

When Ava pleaded with me to stay with her during her labor, there was no way I could say no. Now I'm going to have nightmares of her screaming and body contorted in agony.

Why she wouldn't just take the meds they offered was beyond me, but she had apparently been adamant during all their planning that this time she was going to experience everything .

I thought Killian was going to have a coronary as he white-knuckled beside her, never leaving her side. The agony she felt reflected on his own face. "Please, just let them take away some of the pain." He had pleaded with her, only getting a vicious glare in return. He didn't try again.

No matter how horrifically terrible the experience was, the moments after? They made it all worth it.

"She's beautiful." I breathe, peering down at the tiny child, amazed that any human could be so small.

Ava looks up at me, a soft smile on her face. "She is, isn't she?" Looking back down, she gently rubs her thumb on her daughter's face. "Absolutely perfect."

There's a quiet moment before Killian reenters the room with everyone else in tow. A wave of congratulations sounds as each person steps up to see the beautiful being the two created.

Arms wrap around my waist. I lean back against Arriana as she rests her chin on my shoulder. My heart is so full it feels it might burst. "Hey, baby." She whispers, tightening her hold.

“Hey.” I sigh, relaxing in her embrace.

“So, what are ya going to name her?” Andrew’s question peaks my interest.

Ava glances at Killian before smiling down at their daughter once more. “Lilliana.” She murmurs, the love in her expression nearly enough to break my heart.

I look around the room, a sense of awe filling me that this is my reality. That after all the heartache, struggle, and pain we have all endured. We’re here, surrounded by love.

Turning my head, I seek out Arriana’s lips, needing to let out some of this overwhelming joy. As she presses hers to mine, I find one thought repeats in my mind.

We found it after all.

Our happy ending.

THE END