



# His Wisconsin Wallflower (Stateside Doms #25)

**Author:** *Karen Nappa*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** She's still clinging to their past. He refuses to be defined by it.

When Quinten Carrington first walks into the quaint little bookstore in his hometown, he doesn't recognize the gorgeous, curvy woman behind the counter.

And nothing could have prepared him for her true identity.

Wallflower Winslow, the sweet, shy girl from high school has blossomed into a stunning bombshell. One look at her and Quinten is ruined for any other woman in Cedarburg—or anywhere else, for that matter.

But Raisa Winslow has good reasons not to trust him. And Quinten soon realizes that overcoming their painful shared past is going to take more than a few pretty promises.

He's going to have to prove once and for all that he's left his own past behind him, and that he's ready for a future with his Wisconsin Wallflower.

**Total Pages (Source):** 28

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:34 am*

## Chapter One

The sign for Cedarburg creaked on its hinges, swaying in the chilly January breeze.

“Historical.” He let the words on the sign sink in.

“Picturesque,” it boasted in bold white letters against a forest-green background.

Quinten Carrington snorted as he rolled down his window, a gust of cold January wind almost cutting off his air supply.

He welcomed the cold as a reminder he wasn’t landing in a made bed.

Picturesque, sure. But historic? That was just a polite way of saying “unchanged.”

The scent of wood smoke and pine trees hit him as he pulled off the highway onto Main Street.

His truck’s tires crunched on the snow-plowed, salted road, and he scanned the familiar row of red-brick buildings, each one perfectly preserved, as if the whole town had been stuck in amber.

The clocktower still stood tall at the center of it all, its face faintly illuminated, even in the daytime.

He’d barely crossed into town, and already he could feel it—Cedarburg hadn’t released its grip on him, no matter how long he’d been away.

“Welcome home, superstar,” he muttered drily.

Yeah, he was being sarcastic. From what his father told him, things weren’t looking good for the company.

So, instead of signing a lucrative contract for another two years, Quinten had left Green Bay, packed his belongings into his Ford pickup truck, and had driven the one hundred twenty miles home to Cedarburg.

He slowed down as he passed Miller’s Hardware.

A lopsided wreath still adorned the door, a remnant of Christmas no one had bothered to take down yet.

Mrs. Miller herself stepped out onto the sidewalk, bundled in a coat that looked two sizes too large.

She waved enthusiastically, her eyes bright with recognition.

Quinten lifted a hand off the steering wheel in a half-hearted wave but slowed the truck to a stop at the curb outside Miller’s Hardware.

Mrs. Miller pressed a hand to her chest, her smile deepening as she stepped closer, gaze fixed on him like she hadn’t expected to see him again but was damn glad she had.

“Quinten Carrington! Back in Cedarburg, are you?” she called, her breath visible in the cold air.

He forced a smile and stepped out, bracing against the wind. “Hey, Mrs. Miller. How’s business?”

“Oh, can’t complain.” She scanned him with sharp eyes. “Not as busy as it used to be, though. Say, did Carrington Construction put in a bid for that bridge expansion? You know, over on Route 33?”

Quinten hesitated, the question hitting like a punch. “Not yet. I’ll have to check on that.”

She frowned. “Well, you better hurry. Folks are saying it’s the biggest project this town’s seen in years. Would be a shame to miss it.”

“Thanks for the tip,” he said, his jaw tightening as he climbed back into the truck.

His father should’ve been on top of that, but after breaking his back the previous year during a fall at a site, things had spiraled.

Corbin had stepped in, but at twenty-five, he was drowning in responsibilities no one his age should carry alone.

As Quinten pulled back onto Main Street, a knot of guilt settled in his chest. He’d walked away from Cedarburg once, chasing fame and fortune.

Now, with a few good years still left in his arm, he’d chosen to come home instead, back to a business teetering on the edge of collapse.

Turning down a lucrative deal might be unheard of, but he had done it without having a second thought.

For Corbin’s sake, and for their father’s, he couldn’t afford to let Carrington Construction fail. Not again.

Surely, it was acceptable to retire from an active NFL career at thirty-five, especially

when the family needed him.

The truck rumbled to a stop outside the Carrington Construction offices, housed in a squat, weathered building his father had laid brick by brick when the town still had dirt roads.

The sign “Carrington Construction: Building the Heart of Cedarburg Since 1978” above the entrance was faded now and the paint chipped around the edges.

Nearly fifty years of sweat, stubbornness, and sacrifice, and if he screwed this up, it could all come crashing down.

Quinten killed the engine and stepped out, boots crunching in the snow.

The sharp and unforgiving cold hit him like a linebacker, and he shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and let his gaze linger on the faded sign.

He’d always assumed the family business would go to his younger brother, Corbin.

That had been the plan, but life had a way of intercepting the perfect pass.

The front door flew open before he could knock, and a blur of red flannel and wiry limbs barreled into him.

“Quinny!”

Corbin pulled him into a rib-crushing hug that nearly knocked him off his feet.

“Jesus, Corbin,” Quinten wheezed, laughing as he pulled back. “You trying to break my ribs before I even get inside?”

“Just making sure you’re real,” Corbin said, grinning. “You’ve been a ghost around here for too long.”

Quinten ruffled his brother’s hair, the way he had when they were kids, and Corbin swatted away his hand with a grunt that was more amused than annoyed.

Gone was the lanky teenager Quinten remembered.

This version of his brother was broader, stronger, with shoulders that looked like they carried too much weight these days.

The same boyish smile curved his lips but didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Inside, the office was both comfortingly familiar and frustratingly chaotic.

Blueprints covered the desks, sticky notes clung to every available surface, and a faint aroma of sawdust perfumed the air.

He remembered how their mother used to wage a losing battle against that smell.

She scrubbed every surface and cracked the windows even in winter, but it never quite left.

The woman in question appeared from behind a door marked private, wiping her hands on a paper towel. She looked smaller than he remembered, her once-iron-gray hair now almost completely white. But her eyes were the same—sharp and full of determination.

“About time you showed up,” she said, though her voice softened as she crossed the room to hug him. “I thought you might chicken out.”

“Not a chance,” he replied, though the truth was, he’d considered it more than once. “How’s Dad?”

Her face darkened, and she folded her arms across her chest. “Same as always. Stubborn. He’s at home resting. Doctor’s orders.”

Quinten nodded, his jaw tightening. He hadn’t been back in years, and now here he was, expected to step in and save the day. The town’s golden boy returned, not as the former NFL wide receiver who’d helped win a championship ring, but as the reluctant heir to a struggling construction company.

Corbin grabbed a bundle of blueprints from the counter. “Please tell me you’ve got something in that truck we need to haul in—gifts, tools, anything—before Ma finds more chores for us.” As they stepped outside, he shot Quinten a sideways glance. “You are staying at the house tonight, right?”

“Yeah,” Quinten said, popping open the tailgate. “My place hasn’t been lived in for years. It’ll need a serious scrub-down before it’s even close to livable.”

Outside, the wind bit at Quinten’s face as they hauled gifts and an overnight bag from his truck. Corbin kept up a steady stream of chatter about the company, the town, and everyone who’d been asking about him.

“Beth stopped by yesterday,” Corbin said, smirking. “Asked if you were really coming back or if it was nothing more than a rumor.”

Quinten groaned. “Don’t start.”

“What? She’s single again, you know. Divorce number two just came through. Might be worth?—”

“Not a chance,” Quinten said. The last thing he needed was to dredge up high school drama.

As they finished unloading, Quinten looked out over Main Street again.

A woman bundled in a navy coat hurried across the street, her arms full of papers, and for a second, something about her was familiar to him.

He shook his head. Probably nothing more than his imagination.

Everyone looked familiar in a town this small.

He sighed and turned back to the office. He wasn't sure what he'd expected to find here, but whatever it was, it sure as hell wasn't closure.

“Welcome back,” he muttered to himself.

The wind offered no comfort, just a cold whisper that seemed to echo his mood.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:34 am*

### Chapter Two

The timer on the oven beeped sharply, breaking the morning stillness.

Raisa Winslow put away her accounting book, slid her reading glasses from her nose, and leaned over the counter.

She had dropped her Coke-bottle glasses after a clear lens extraction in her mid-twenties and now had excellent distance vision though her near sight was rubbish.

She narrowed her focus on the blueberry muffins that were precisely the right color of golden brown on the top, grabbed a dish towel, and opened the oven.

She slid the tray onto the cooling rack while taking care not to touch the hot metal.

Fresh-baked sweetness filled the air in the small kitchen tucked behind Winslow's Shelf: Pages & Pastries.

The first part of the name was an homage to her grandmother. Raisa had added the second part when she took over almost twenty years ago.

Early morning baking for her shop was a ritual that anchored her days. Books and baking were two things she could control in a world that otherwise often appeared to be too big, too loud, and too complicated.

She wiped her hands on her apron and glanced toward the doorway leading to the shop. The morning light slanted through the display windows, catching on the spines

of books she'd arranged yesterday morning. Everything was exactly as it should be, orderly and inviting—the way she liked it.

Nana's bookshop had been dying when she took over. A small town like Cedarburg didn't account for many customers. Adding a lunchroom slash coffeeshop had saved Pages and Pastries, while providing enough income to support her and her grandmother, as well as hire part-time help.

Raisa grabbed her coffee and leaned against the counter, savoring the quiet before her morning customers arrived. She'd been up since five, a habit ingrained from years of waking early to help Nana before she went to school.

The thought of her grandmother conjured a genuine smile.

Nana was still spry for someone nearing her nineties, but it was only a matter of time before the little house they shared became too much for her.

It wasn't a burden—nothing about caring for Nana ever felt that way—but it was a reminder of why she'd stayed in Cedarburg all these years.

Not that she minded. She had Pages and Pastries, her writing, and her routines. It was enough.

The bell over the shop's front door jingled, pulling her attention back to the present. She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, straightened her apron, and stepped into the main shop.

"Morning, Miss Winslow." Mr. Carter held up a copy of *Birds of Wisconsin*. Like clockwork, the elderly man came in every Tuesday to browse her nature section.

"Good morning, Mr. Carter," she said warmly, taking the book from him. "Did you

find what you were looking for?”

“Always,” he replied with a chuckle. “Can you please add an Americano? No one makes coffee like you.”

“Of course, sir.”

The transaction was quick, and he departed with a wave, leaving Raisa to reorganize a display of cookbooks. As she worked, her fingers sometimes lingered and stroked over the covers of the shining books, and she let her mind drift.

The ideas for her current story had been nagging at her all morning.

Like a thorn below the skin, one scene wouldn’t quite take shape.

She always reserved an hour before bedtime for her writing, but the previous night the words hadn’t come.

During the quiet moments—like she had right now—she came up with the most awesome idea.

She glanced at the clock. It was almost time to call Nana and check in, but something made her pause. Her reflection in the window grasped her attention, and she frowned slightly.

Something about it made her pause but not out of vanity.

It was more a quiet awareness that the woman staring back seemed slightly off today.

Maybe it was the sweater, a bit snug across the bust, or the way her ponytail tugged at her nape.

She shifted her stance, acutely aware of her curves.

As she'd grown into her five-foot-ten height, she'd lost most of her baby fat, but she still was a plus-sized woman—something the high school cheerleading squad had pointed out with glee almost daily.

She pulled off her reading glasses and tucked them in her collar.

There was nothing more exhilarating than opening her eyes in the morning and being able to see clearly.

But she still liked to wear glasses like armor, a shield against the world that never quite saw her the way she wanted to be seen.

The bell jingled again, startling her. This time it was Lila, her part-time employee and occasional voice of reason. The younger woman swept in with her usual burst of energy, her cheeks pink from the cold.

“Morning, boss,” Lila said, shrugging out of her coat. “It smells amazing back there. Blueberry muffins?”

“You have the nose.” Raisa smiled faintly.

Lila paused, giving her a look. “Are you okay? You seem... off.”

Raisa hesitated. “Just thinking. About Nana. About... stuff.”

“Stuff?” Lila grinned. “Like that hot firefighter who came in last week asking for a book on grilling?”

“Lila.” Raisa groaned, though her lips twitched.

“Or maybe it’s writer stuff,” Lila teased, dropping her bag behind the counter. “You’re working on something, aren’t you?”

“Always,” Raisa admitted.

“Good,” Lila said with a wink. “Because you’re way too talented to be only writing for yourself, dufus.”

Raisa’s smile faltered. She loved her writing, but the idea of sharing it—of making herself vulnerable to the kind of judgment she’d spent her whole life avoiding—made her chest tighten. She was also frightened about how her judgmental environment would react to her fantasies.

“It’s nothing more than a hobby,” she said quietly, more to herself than to Lila.

As the morning sun climbed higher, customers trickled in, and Raisa fell into the rhythm of her day. However mundane her life might be, she would keep her fantasies for her stories and stop daydreaming about finding Mr. Right for herself.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:34 am*

### Chapter Three

After a brief lull in the steady stream of morning customers, Raisa busied herself with unpacking a box of romantic books featuring young and new adults, while Lila stayed behind the counter preparing for lunchtime.

The door swung open, letting in a gust of winter air, but Raisa didn't feel the cold thanks to the six-foot-four hunk who'd entered.

It was he.

Quinten Carrington.

The handsome boy from high school, Cedarburg's golden son, was standing in her shop.

He was more imposing than she remembered, his frame broader, shoulders filling out the buttery-soft, black leather jacket that looked like it cost more than her monthly rent.

His faded black jeans and crisp white shirt were effortlessly casual, but he commanded the room with his presence.

Those unruly brown curls were still as wild as they'd been back in school, though now they framed a rugged, more mature face.

The short beard was new, lending him an edge that made her breath catch.

And his eyes—intense and dark brown, intelligent and piercing under dark eyebrows with that ever-present sardonic tilt—swept over the shop with casual interest.

Instinctively, Raisa pressed her thighs together and squeezed her eyes shut.

A small, traitorous sound tried to escape her lips, but she smothered it before it could embarrass her.

She couldn't let him see her like this—caught between awe and the kind of desire that shouldn't hit this hard after all these years.

He hadn't noticed her yet and approached the counter, glancing around with an easy familiarity that was so quintessentially Quinten it made her stomach churn.

"I heard your coffee's as good as Starbucks," he said to Lila. His voice was resonant and smooth, carrying a hint of amusement. "Figured I'd give it a try."

Lila's head snapped up, and her face lit with recognition. "Oh, my... we. Yes. yes, we're way better than Starbucks. My boss makes the best coffee in Cedarburg." She turned, calling out, "Raisa! You've got a customer."

Raisa's stomach plummeted. She couldn't stay frozen forever.

With great reluctance, she set down the box of *The Shadowhunter Chronicles* by the popular YA romantasy writer Cassandra Clare and stepped out from behind the bookshelves, her legs wooden as she forced herself to move.

Her fingers twitched nervously at her sides as every old insecurity she'd buried since high school came rushing back.

Like it wasn't in the past, the weight of her braces, the pinch of her too-tight clothes,

the sting of being ridiculed and ignored rushed back and made her cringe.

Don't trip. Don't do something stupid. Her internal mantra grew louder with every step. The counter loomed closer, and with it, Quinten.

When he lifted his gaze so that it landed on her, she swore his eyebrows twitched upward. His lips curled into an easy, almost lazy smile, the kind that had made half the girls in their school swoon.

"You must be the barista," he said. "I'm Quinten."

"I know who you are," Raisa blurted out before she could stop herself. Her cheeks flushed immediately, and she hurried to add, "Welcome. I—uh—what can I get for you?"

Quinten tilted his head to the left, narrowing his eyes as if he were trying to place her. "A latte. Unless you think there's something better on the menu?"

"The lattes are great," she said, steadier now. She moved behind the counter, grateful for the barrier between them. "Give me a minute, and I'll make it for you."

As she worked, steaming the milk and pulling the perfect espresso shot, she was aware of his eyes on her.

It wasn't unpleasant, but it made her acutely aware of every movement.

She focused on her task, her fingers steady even as her mind whirled.

The boy who had never given her more than a cursory glance in high school was now here, in her shop, and she had no idea how to handle it.



After sliding the mug across the counter, she forced herself to meet his gaze. “Here you go. One latte. I hope it beats Starbucks.”

“Thanks. Keep the change.” Quinten pushed a tenner over the counter and took the coffee. “I’ll let you know about the coffee.”

His pure-male voice sent a shiver down her spine, but she maintained her composure, watching as he turned and strolled to a nearby table. She let out a slow breath, her grip tightening on the counter as she tried to steady herself.

This is fine . You’re fine. He’s nothing more than a customer. That’s all. What a shameless lie!

Sipping his coffee—and it was darned good—Quinten let his gaze wander around the shop.

The place had the kind of charm that made you want to linger, warm wooden shelves stocked with colorful book spines, a few cozy tables tucked into corners, and a gleaming counter.

The shop smelled of coffee, baked goods, and something sweet.

The faint hum of the coffee machine mixed with the pleasant jazz playing discreetly overhead.

He chuckled quietly to himself, remembering the dark, dusty shop as it had been in his youth.

Back then, it had only been a bookstore, and not once had he set foot in it.

Books were for nerds, he used to think, back when his priorities revolved around

football practice and Friday night parties. Funny how time changed things.

His focus drifted from the past to the alluring barista.

She moved back to the bookcases like the paperbacks and hard covers reeled her in.

Her elegant fingers with unpainted nails held the books with reverence as she placed them on shelves in the ‘romantasy’ section. Whatever the hell that might be!

Her casual outfit—jeans, a simple sweater, and sneakers—did little to disguise her curves. Even her choice of footwear didn’t rob her of height. Tall enough that he wouldn’t have to bend like a pretzel to claim her lips when he kissed her.

He shook his head sharply, trying to erase the carnal thoughts from his head. Where the hell had that come from? He was here to fix the mess his father had left at Carrington Construction, not to get tangled up in some woman. No matter how stunning she was.

Still, there was something oddly familiar about her.

It gnawed at the edges of his memory, but he couldn’t quite place it.

He drained the last of his coffee and stood, taking his empty mug to the counter.

She glanced up as he passed but darted her gaze away just as fast, focusing instead on the books she was holding.

“Thanks,” he said. “That was... excellent. Better than Starbucks, hands down.”

“Glad you liked it,” she replied, polite but distant. She still didn’t look him in the eye.

That grated. Quinten prided himself on making an impression, and that she appeared to be determined not to acknowledge him properly only made him more curious.

“Are you new here?” He leaned casually against the bookcase.

She lifted her chin, and a small, almost imperceptible smile crossed her lips. “No. I was born and raised in Cedarburg.”

He frowned as he studied her face more closely. “You were? You look vaguely familiar, but I can’t remember your name.”

“It’s Raisa Winslow,” she said, for the first time willingly meeting his gaze. She sounded calm, but there was a flicker of something beneath the surface—annoyance?

The name hit him like a freight train. “Wallflower Winslow?” The words slipped out before he could stop them and he winced inwardly.

Her expression didn’t change, but the faint tightening of her jaw was answer enough.

A punch in the gut wouldn’t have surprised him more. The shy, awkward girl who’d been invisible in high school had grown into a woman so gorgeous it made his head spin. The ugly duckling wasn’t simply a swan now; she was the whole damn lake.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:34 am*

### Chapter Four

The cursor blinked impatiently at the end of the last sentence, taunting Raisa with its silence.

She leaned back in her chair, rolling her shoulders to ease the tension that had built up during her writing sprint.

This wasn't her best work, but the bones of the scene were there. She could polish it later.

She reached for her mug of now-lukewarm tea and took a sip, letting her gaze drift over the words she'd poured onto the screen moments ago.

Yani's heart thundered in his chest, each beat syncing with the primal pull toward the girl standing across the clearing. For years, she'd been a fixture in his life—a face he failed to register beyond its familiarity. But now... now she was everything.

Her dark hair reflected the moonlight, gleaming like the surface of a calm lake under the stars. The lines of her face were sharp but softened by her innocent eyes, bright with curiosity and a hint of uncertainty.

It wasn't just her beauty that struck him—it was the way she stood, quiet but unyielding, a strength woven into the very fabric of her being. Yani's wolf stirred, growling softly in recognition.

Fate had chosen her. And there was no going back.

Yani, the hero in her latest story, was a high school senior, an absolute hunk and the crush of all the girls in school. He also was a werewolf and the pack Alpha's son.

Raisa exhaled as she took in that last scene, fidgeting with her mug. Something about the hero felt... off—or maybe too real. She wasn't sure which.

She returned to the beginning of the chapter where Yani was introduced as a broad-shouldered, brown-haired wide receiver shrugging into a black leather jacket.

Frustrated with herself, she lowered her mug to the desk and closed her eyes in exasperation. No wonder her words unsettled her.

Yani is Quinten.

She chuckled to herself. Not that she thought she lived among werewolves, but the physical descriptions and the background. Yeah, that was Quinten Carrington all right.

She saved her work, closed her laptop, and pushed back her chair. Raisa rubbed her upper legs while attempting to ignore the throbbing in her core. She rose and tried to walk off the tension, but it was hopeless.

Resigned, she went to the bathroom and turned on the shower. The pipes in the old house came groaning and clanking to life while she hastily undressed.

By the time she stepped under the sputtering spray, the temperature was only lukewarm. She took her favorite white-peach-and-jasmine body wash and squirted a small dollop on her loofah. She sidestepped the water for a moment as the flow became ice-cold, and the showerhead sputtered.

After a few moments, the stream became steadier, and steam started to waft toward

the ceiling.

Stepping under the stream, Raisa ran the coarse material over her neck and shoulders, down her arms and up and over her breasts.

As the loofah stroked over her sensitive aureola, her nipples tightened to hard, almost painful points.

Teasingly, she ran the soapy loofah over her breast, circling and teasing the peaks.

Between her legs, she moistened in a way that had nothing to do with the shower.

Knowing she didn't have long before the water would turn cold again, she dropped the sponge and stroked her soapy hands over her belly and down between her legs.

She braced herself against the tiled wall and widened her stance as she delved a hand between her legs and found her pleasure spot.

She let her head drop back and connect with the unforgiving tiles but ignored the sting as her body wound tighter and tighter.

Her stomach muscles cramped, and she pressed her knees together, trapping her now frantically rubbing hand.

Although it hampered the friction somewhat, she didn't relent until an orgasm tore through her with the power of a tornado, and she sluggishly slid down the wall as her legs refused to hold her weight.

While she caught her breath and told herself to get up and finish showering, she couldn't ignore the little voice in the back of her head that told her she was an ugly, stupid, silly girl for having eyes for Quinten.

It wasn't a huge surprise that the voice sounded unerringly like a certain person Raisa would rather forget.

The coffee shop had become a routine. No, scratch that—it had become a necessity.

Each day, as Quinten worked to untangle the disaster that was Carrington Construction's finances, he found himself drawn back to Raisa's shop.

It was stupid. Pointless. He wasn't a masochist, but apparently, he didn't mind walking around half the day with a chubby and a head full of complicated numbers.

The soft tinkle of the old-fashioned bell above the door, now so familiar, stirred a Pavlovian reaction in his loins, the scent of fresh coffee and baked goods wrapping around him like a warm embrace.

The shop was busy enough to feel alive, but quiet enough to offer sanctuary from the chaos of spreadsheets and invoices.

Raisa worked behind the counter, deftly handling an espresso machine that whirled and hissed.

She wore the same casual outfits every day, usually jeans, sneakers, and a sweater or T-shirt.

They suited her in a way that was almost maddening.

Her every movement was unassuming, efficient, yet impossibly alluring. In short, she was his living wet dream.

Quinten let his gaze linger on her a beat too long before he forced himself to focus. He had no business getting tangled up in a crush—or whatever the hell this

was—while he was trying to save his family’s company from another financial tailspin.

His father had been a damn fine builder, one of the best in the county, but numbers weren’t his strong suit.

After the accident left him with a broken back and a lifetime of pain, keeping the books had become even more of an afterthought.

Twice before, Quinten had stepped in to fix things.

The first time had been manageable. The second... not so much.

Five years ago, he’d discovered a six-figure hole in the company’s accounts—courtesy of sloppy bookkeeping and missed deadlines with the IRS.

Cleaning that up had cost more than a hundred grand and had nearly driven him to the edge.

After that clusterfuck, Quinten had hired a bookkeeper—someone who was supposed to be excellent—and had handed off the responsibility with strict instructions to never let it happen again.

But here he was, back in Cedarburg, staring at another mess. For the past eight months, things hadn’t been adding up. Payments were late. Balances didn’t make sense. And no one seemed to have any answers.

“Hey there, stranger. The usual?”

Raisa’s voice pulled him from his thoughts. She was smiling at him now, her expression open but professional.



He nodded and cleared his throat. “Yeah, thanks. A latte, please, but can you add a pastry of your choice?”

“A latte and a cheesecake coming right up.”

As she turned to the espresso machine, he leaned on the counter, pretending to read the daily specials written in chalk.

In truth, he was watching her—the curve of her neck, the way a loose strand of hair fell across her cheek.

She wasn’t glamorous in an obvious way—not the type of woman he usually gravitated toward—but there was something about her that made it impossible to look away.

Every day he told himself, it would be the last time he came in. And every day, he found an excuse to walk through those doors. Who was he trying to kid? He wasn’t there for the coffee, and he damn well knew it.

When she handed him the mug, their fingers brushed, and the jolt of warmth that shot through him was almost enough to make him drop it.

She turned and bent to pull the cheesecake from the display case, giving him an excellent view of rounded hips and a heart-shaped ass filling her jeans.

Using his free hand, he adjusted himself behind his zipper and was just in time to accept the plate with his cake.

He managed a muttered “thanks” before retreating to his usual table near the window.

The shop had convenient outlets near the tables, and he usually brought his laptop to

sort through the never-ending stack of spreadsheets and invoices.

Today, though, he stared out the window and scanned the café and bookshop, the steam rising from his coffee blurring the bookcases in the background.

With a sigh, he opened his laptop, forcing himself to focus.

Costs had almost doubled over the past few months, but their income had stayed closely the same.

He rubbed his hands over his face, as if it would clear his mind.

He was trying to connect the dots in the numbers that refused to make sense—but his thoughts kept drifting back to Raisa.

Numbers didn't lie, but they weren't giving him the answers he needed, either.

And until he figured out what was going on at Carrington Construction, he had no business thinking about anything—or anyone—else.

### Chapter Five

The jingle of the bell as the door opened and shut stirred anticipation and unease as Quinten left after taking his sweet time savoring his coffee, and Raisa exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

Relief washed over her, the tension in her shoulders easing as she turned back to the counter.

But even as she started wiping down the surface, she darted her gaze toward the door.

She couldn't stop herself from stealing one last look at him to admire his straight posture and long, determined stride.

As he sauntered out, his broad shoulders swayed confidently beneath his leather jacket, and darn it, that epic butt.

It was almost unfair how good he looked in those jeans.

Raisa rolled her eyes at herself, shaking her head.

"Get it together," she muttered under her breath, forcing herself to focus on cleaning the counter.

The hour before the lunch rush was always her favorite—a calm before the storm.

She used the time to organize things while Lila restocked the pastries and prepped the

coffee station.

The pair worked in easy silence, occasionally sharing a word or two about upcoming orders.

Raisa liked the rhythm of it, the predictable flow of tasks that kept her mind occupied.

Then the door opened again, and that familiar prickle ran down Raisa's spine. She didn't need to turn around to know who had marched inside Winslow's Bookshelf. Beth Ashford—Cedarburg's self-proclaimed queen bee—was impossible to miss.

“Morning, ladies!” Beth's sing-song voice floated through the air, sugary sweet but dripping with condescension.

She wasn't alone, of course. Today, she'd brought Emilia and Devaney, leaving Raisa silently grateful that nasty Vanessa and Megan weren't part of the group.

Three were easier to deal with than five, and these two weren't the cruelest of the gang.

When Devaney was alone, she could even be nice.

Beth's heels clicked against the wooden floor as she approached the counter, her bright red coat flaring out behind her like a cape.

Her impeccably styled blond hair didn't have a strand out of place, and her makeup was as flawless as always.

She radiated confidence, the kind that came from years of being on top.

Raisa's stomach twisted, and her mind flickered back to high school.

Beth, Emilia, Devaney, Vanessa, and Megan had formed their own little clique.

Not content with being the popular girls, as beautiful as fashionable, they also had been unrelentingly cruel.

They hadn't ignored Raisa; they'd made her life hell.

There had been pranks—sticky notes plastering her locker, gum stuck to her chair, her gym clothes “accidentally” tossed into the boys' locker room.

And there had been words, too—razor-sharp and whispered loud enough for Raisa to hear as she passed.

Wallflower. Freak. Piggy. Every cruel nickname had carved a little deeper, and Raisa had spent most of high school trying to make herself invisible.

Her fingers clenched around the cloth she was holding, the memory fading as she forced herself back to the present. She straightened her shoulders and plastered on a neutral expression as Beth stepped up to the counter.

“Raisa, darling,” Beth drawled exaggeratedly. Her smile showed teeth but was devoid of genuine emotion and didn't reach her eyes. “This place looks... cozy.” She swept her gaze over the shop, taking in every detail as if assessing its worth. “I love how... quaint everything is. So very you.”

“Thanks,” Raisa replied evenly, imagining a shield of ice forming between her and Beth's sharp tongue. “What can I get for you today?”

She didn't have to ask what the other women wanted. Somehow, they still followed

Beth around like they didn't have minds of their own.

"Oh, make me a skinny vanilla latte," Beth said, waving a manicured hand. "You know, it's so impressive that you've managed to keep this little place running. Must be such hard work for someone like you."

Raisa's jaw tightened, but she forced herself to keep her tone calm. "Thank you for caring. The shop's been rather busy lately."

Beth's smile didn't falter, but there was a glint of something cruel in her eyes. "How wonderful. And to think, you're still in Cedarburg after all these years. I don't know how you do it. Most of us couldn't wait to leave."

"Some of us like it here," Raisa said, her voice sharper now. In her peripheral vision, Lila glanced over, her expression a mix of concern and quiet support.

Beth laughed lightly, as though Raisa's words were a joke. "Oh, of course. It's just..." She patted Raisa's hand with mock sympathy. "...well, I mean, I can't imagine sticking around and waiting tables for people we went to school with. You know, the ones who actually did something with their lives."

"If that's all," Raisa said briskly, "it's four ninety."

Beth handed over a five with a patronizing smile. "Keep the change."

She turned toward the pastry display with a wrinkle of her nose. "I wouldn't touch those pastries with a pole."

Raisa didn't flinch. In her mind, an ice cube formed in her chest and spread outward. She turned to the coffeemaker, acutely aware of Beth's presence at her back, lingering like a shadow.

She grabbed a takeaway cup, added a precise pump of vanilla syrup, and pulled a shot of espresso.

The hiss of steaming milk filled the silence, and she focused on the whisk, tap, and swirl motion.

Her hands wanted to rush, but her pride refused.

This was her shop, with her name on the sign, and every customer—no matter how petty or cruel—got the best she had to offer.

When she turned back to Beth, her spine was straight and her expression neutral.

Raisa handed over the latte without a word, the imagined ice shield holding firm as Beth took the hot beverage with a delicate sniff.

“Thanks so much, darling.” The latter word dripped venom and condescension. Beth turned to Emilia and Devaney, who, as usual, kept quiet like silent supporters of cruelty. “Shall we?”

They sauntered out, their chatter and laughter trailing behind them, and Raisa released a slow breath. The shield of ice began to melt, leaving behind a familiar ache in her chest. She’d grown better at defending herself over the years, but it still hurt.

“You okay?” Lila came closer and placed a gentle hand on Raisa’s forearm.

Raisa nodded, forcing a small smile. “I’m fine.” But as she turned back to the counter, she couldn’t help but wonder if she’d ever stop being the butt of their jokes.

Quinten ended the call with a frustrated tap of his finger on the screen, staring at the voicemail icon as if sheer willpower could make the accountant pick up.

He'd lost count of the times he'd tried calling her this week alone.

Each time, the result was the same—straight to voicemail, his polite but pointed messages ignored.

He ran a hand through his hair, muttering a curse under his breath.

A commotion at the front of the office broke his concentration. His mother's voice rose, sharp and flustered. "Wait! You can't go back there."

Quinten pushed back his chair and strode to the front, the irritation from his failed call simmering below the surface. He needed to walk off his frustration. Turning the corner, he came to an abrupt stop.

Beth Ashford stood in the middle of the office, looking as composed and self-assured as ever.

She was dressed in a tailored crimson coat that hugged her slender body and high-heeled boots that made him wonder how she could promenade on those stilts like she did.

But even in heels, she wasn't as tall as a certain curvy brunette he couldn't get out of his mind.

Her blond hair was styled to perfection, her lips curved in a smile Quinten didn't trust for a second.

"Darling," she drawled, smooth as silk. "I was beginning to think you were avoiding me. How long have you been back in town?"

Quinten crossed his arms, tamping down the scowl that threatened to rise. Of all the



people he'd hoped to avoid for as long as humanly possible—or better yet, never see again—Beth Ashford topped the list. “Ten days.”

“Then it's time for lunch,” she said brightly, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Let's eat.”

He raised an eyebrow, her assertiveness grating on him.

He didn't like pushy women, and he didn't like Beth.

Not anymore. The memory of her betrayal came rushing back: the day he found her in bed with two of his teammates.

He hadn't seen it coming, hadn't suspected a thing until it slapped him in the face.

Their love—or whatever he'd thought it was—had been a lie. He'd walked away and never looked back.

“No, thank you,” he said curtly.

Beth's smile faltered, her flawless, arched eyebrows drawing together. “What? Why not?”

Quinten sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose as he gathered his thoughts. “Beth.” With the irritation about the accountant still burning in his gut it was hard to keep his voice calm but firm. “Listen. I'm not interested in what you have to offer.”

She brought her hands to her hips, narrowing her eyes. “What the hell does that mean?”

He dropped his hand and met her gaze, his tone softening but remaining resolute. “It

means that whatever we had... it's over. It's been over for a long time. I'm back in Cedarburg to take care of my family's business, not to dig up old history. I'm sure you'll find someone else to have lunch with."

Beth's lips tightened, and for a moment, she seemed genuinely taken aback, as if she'd expected him to fall back into her arms after the way she betrayed him.

Then her expression hardened, and her figuratively polished veneer cracked like the foundation on her face. "Well, fine," she snapped, turning from sugary-sweet to popsicle-cold. "Your loss."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:34 am*

“Take care, Beth.” He stepped aside to let her pass.

As she strutted out, her heels clicking sharply against the floor, Quinten let out a long breath. He rubbed the back of his neck, the tension in his shoulders that had been building during the brief exchange easing. If only dealing with the accountant was as straightforward as dealing with Beth.

Quinten grabbed his coat from the back of his chair and slung it over his arm as he stepped into the front office. His mother looked up from the computer, her glasses perched on the edge of her nose. “Heading out?” She tilted her head.

“Yeah. Grabbing a quick bite at the lunchroom. Can I bring you something to eat?”

She smiled, a hint of warmth softening her usual sharp expression. “A Reuben on rye, please.”

“Drink?” he asked, already halfway to the door.

“Raisa’s homemade iced tea,” she replied without hesitation.

Quinten stopped, raising an eyebrow at her choice. “Iced tea? It’s freezing out.”

“Too much caffeine makes me jittery,” she replied matter-of-factly, before adding with a knowing smile, “and there’s nothing quite like Raisa’s iced tea.”

Quinten chuckled, shaking his head as he pulled on his coat. “Tell me more about her.”

“Raisa?” His mother leaned back in her chair, her expression growing thoughtful. “I figured you knew her. She was in high school when you were.”

“I know,” Quinten said, now more contemplative. “Maybe two classes behind me?”

“Actually, I think only one,” she corrected. “She skipped a class. That girl’s brilliant.”

Quinten nodded along as he listened to his mother. “I like what she did with the bookstore.”

“Oh, yes,” his mother said with a note of admiration.

“It’s wonderful. She turned it into a thriving business again.

You know, Agnes—her grandmother—really struggled when the major internet players like Amazon started taking over.

But Raisa? She’s a fighter. She added the lunchroom and coffee shop.

Runs a couple of book clubs, too. Keeps people interested in reading.

I’m so glad she’s still here. There’s nothing like holding and sniffing a book before you buy it. ”

Quinten smirked at her enthusiasm. “Thanks, Mom.” He waved on his way out and headed for the lunchroom, needing to get rid of the burning anger coiling in his chest. The accountant’s evasiveness was maddening, and Beth’s arrogant assumption that he’d fall right back in line had pushed him over the edge.

The crisp winter air slapped at his face as he stepped outside, grounding him, but it

wasn't enough to cool the heat of his frustration.

By the time he reached Raisa's shop, he'd resolved to channel that anger into something productive—even if it meant facing another challenge head-on.

The hearty aroma of yeasty bread, roasted meat, and caramelized onions greeted him as he entered.

It was mid-afternoon, and the place was lively but not crowded.

Raisa was behind the counter, chatting with an older man as she handed him a wrapped sandwich.

She flashed him a radiant smile—the kind Quinten had never seen directed at him.

A pang of something uncomfortably close to jealousy twisted his gut.

Now he ached to make her smile like that at him.

Why didn't she? She glanced up as if she sensed his eyes on her and gave him a polite smile that didn't reach her eyes before returning to her work.

Quinten waited for a moment before stepping forward. "I've got to ask." He leaned casually on the counter. "What's the deal with your iced tea? My mom won't stop raving about it."

Raisa looked up, a flicker of amusement in her eyes. "The deal?"

"Yeah. What makes it so special?"

Her lips twitched as if she were suppressing a grin. "Fresh ingredients, mostly. Mint,

hibiscus, citrus... and lots of patience and love.”

Quinten couldn't help but grin back. “Patience and love, huh? Sounds like a secret weapon.”

“Maybe,” she replied, her tone light, but there was a hint of whimsy in her expression. “It's not as complicated as people think. You only have to let the flavors steep properly and not rush the process.”

Quinten leaned a little closer, his smile widening. “I like that.” He let his gaze linger on her for a moment before he added, almost impulsively, “You know, speaking of flavors... how about dinner?”

Raisa blinked, unmistakably surprised. “Dinner?”

“Yeah. I'd like to have a meal with you.”

“Unless you count the diner, there aren't many options around here.” Her brow arched as if in challenge. “You know a place?”

Gauntlet thrown and taken! “I do.” He puffed up his chest. “There's a spot that serves the best beer cheese soup and bratwurst you'll find in Wisconsin.”

Raisa hesitated for a moment, then smiled. “All right. Dinner it is.”

Quinten straightened, pleased. “Great. I'll pick you up at seven.

” As he turned to leave, he caught her shaking her head almost unperceptively, her smile still lingering.

Quinten slapped his forehead with a sheepish grin.

“Almost forgot to order. Let’s see...” He leaned closer to the menu, scanning the options.

“I’ll take a meat lover’s sandwich with all the fixings, a Reuben on rye, and two iced teas. ”

Raisa nodded, as she jotted down the order.

When she turned back to him, Quinten reached for his wallet and handed her a crisp fifty-dollar bill.

Their fingers touched, and again a small, not-so-unexpected jolt sparked between them.

He couldn’t help the small flicker of satisfaction when she met his gaze, her eyes momentarily soft before she turned back to prepare the order.

For the first time in a long while, Quinten felt like something was starting to fall into place.

### Chapter Six

After lunch with his mom, which now included Raisa's iced tea on his to-die-for beverages list, Quinten worked through the early afternoon, sorting the previous year's finances and making a call to the IRS to explain the mess and request time to resolve it.

He managed to buy a small window of reprieve, and by late afternoon, took his mom home and called in a family discussion.

Quinten leaned back in his chair, glancing around the small living room where the Carrington family's impromptu meeting had gathered.

His father sat in the recliner by the window, his once-broad shoulders slumped, and his face lined with worry.

At sixty-three, he looked more like seventy.

The sight hit Quinten harder than he expected.

His dad wasn't invincible. He was aging and fading.

And damn it, Quinten wanted his parents to have a few happy years together without working themselves into the ground.

Thinking of his mother, he stole a glance at her. She looked effortlessly put together, her blouse unwrinkled, her smile calm, like the day hadn't touched her at all. How did



she do that?

She perched on the edge of the couch with a cup of tea in her hand, her posture straight and her expression calm but alert.

Corbin sat cross-legged on the floor, a notepad balanced on his knee, ready to take notes.

Across from him, their foreman and cousin, Gavin, leaned forward on the arm of a chair, flicking his sharp gaze between them all.

“All right,” Quinten began, then paused to clear his throat before squaring up like it was fourth and long. “I have some bad news and good news to share with you. To start with the bad: the books are a mess.”

“How bad?” Corbin poised his pen above the notepad, looking like an eager schoolboy.

Quinten sighed. “Bad. Things aren’t adding up for the last sixteen months or so. Payments are late, balances don’t make sense, and it’s obvious things haven’t been reconciled properly.”

His father let out an irritated grumble. “Vanessa Clark was supposed to handle that. Damn girl’s been doing it for years.”

“I know Vanessa,” Quinten said, leaning forward. “I’ve known her since high school. She has a good reputation, but right now? She’s not answering her phone. I’ve left more voicemails than I can count, and I even went by her house.”

“And?” Gavin raised an eyebrow.

“Her car’s gone, the house is dark and empty. I don’t know where she is, and frankly, it’s making me nervous.”

“Could she be on vacation?” Corbin sounded skeptical.

“Maybe.” Quinten ran a hand through his hair. “But she’s not exactly the type to take off without warning. Something is off. I don’t know...”

The room fell silent for a moment as they all processed the information.

“I can ask around town,” Gavin offered. “See if anyone knows where she went or if they’ve heard anything. She’s close with a couple of women. They should know where Vanessa is.”

Quinten nodded. “Good idea. Thank you. We need to figure this out. The longer this drags on, the harder it’s going to be to fix.”

“You said you have bad news and good news.” Corbin tapped his pen on the notepad. “What’s the good news?”

Quinten allowed a small smile to creep onto his face. “There’s a big contract coming up for the new bridge over on Route 33. It’s a government project—solid money and a chance to put Carrington Construction back on the map.”

His mother’s eyes lit up. “A bridge? That’s wonderful news, Quinten.”

His father, however, grumbled again, shaking his head. “I’m useless. Can’t do a damn thing to help with this.”

“Come on, Dad,” Quinten said, firm but not unkind. “I’m thirty-five, and Corbin and Gavin are in their mid-twenties. It’s about time we start weighing in. You’ve done

more than your fair share. Let us carry the load now.”

His father didn’t reply but shifted his hand on the armrest, tightening momentarily before relaxing.

He looked down, then back up, his jaw working as if he wanted to speak but couldn’t find the words.

Eventually, he gave a small, almost reluctant nod, the barest hint of pride flickering in his weary eyes.

“Are you staying for dinner?” His mother’s question cut through the tension in the room.

Quinten stood, shrugging on his coat. “No, thanks, but I can’t. I have a date.”

Four heads turned toward him in unison, a mix of surprise and curiosity etched on their faces.

“A date?” Corbin sported a shit-eating grin. “With whom?”

“None of your business,” Quinten shot back. “I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

He left them staring after him, their curiosity palpable as he headed out into the crisp evening air.

The doorbell rang precisely at seven, its chime cutting through the quiet murmur of the kitchen. Raisa glanced at the clock, her stomach flipping. He was punctual.

Her nerves oscillating between anticipation and dread, she’d spent the entire afternoon debating whether to cancel the date.

But here she was, sitting at the kitchen table with her grandmother, dressed in clean jeans, a red sweater that complemented her complexion, and her favorite black boots.

She wasn't sure if it was enough, but it would have to do.

She went to the door, her boots thumping rhythmically on the hardwood floor. As she passed the hallway mirror, she glanced over—just to make sure everything was where it should be. Her clothing was still stain-and-wrinkle-free.

Whew! No accidental wardrobe malfunctions.

Still overweight, though at least she had an hourglass figure now. Society didn't seem to favor Marilyn Monroe types anymore; the stick-thin ideal of Kiera Knightley was the prevailing norm. After tearing away her gaze, she straightened her shoulders and opened the door.

“Hi,” she said, softer than she'd intended.

“Hey.” Quinten's smile was easy and warm.

Before she could invite him in, he stepped forward, holding out a bouquet of flowers. She instinctively reached for them, their vibrant colors and delicate fragrance momentarily stunning her.

“You look lovely,” he said, leaning in to kiss her cheek. The brush of his lips sent a flush racing up her neck. She blinked down at the bouquet, wonder flooding through her. He brought me flowers?

“Is your grandmother here?” he asked, breaking her reverie.

“Kitchen,” Raisa managed to say, nodding toward the second door on the right,

slightly ajar.

Quinten strode forward confidently, another bouquet peeking from the crook of his arm.

Creamy roses, soft pink blooms, and sunny yellow petals peeked out between fresh greenery, like spring gathered into one perfect handful.

Raisa lingered behind for a moment, the air still bright with something crisp and floral, like citrus peel and early spring rain.

She let herself breathe it in before following him.

In the kitchen, Nana looked up, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. Quinten held out the second bouquet with a flourish.

“For me?” her grandmother exclaimed, her laugh light and delighted. “It has been years since a handsome young man got me flowers.”

“Not just flowers, ma’am,” Quinten replied, setting a grocery bag on the counter. “I’m going to cook for you and Raisa.”

“What?” Raisa hurried into the kitchen, taking in the bag where vegetables, herbs, and a block of cheese were poking out.

Quinten turned to her with a grin. “I’m making dinner. It’s my grandmother’s recipe—the best in all of Wisconsin.”

Nana clapped her hands together, showing her obvious delight. Raisa, meanwhile, stood frozen, equal parts bewildered and intrigued.

Who was this man, and how was she supposed to keep up with him?

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### Chapter Seven

The butter melted in the pot, sizzling pleasantly as Quinten sautéed the onions. The rich aroma filled the kitchen, creating an odd sense of warmth and familiarity. Raisa busied herself wiping an already clean counter, her movements brisk and precise, while her gaze kept straying to him.

“What’s your favorite recipe, Mrs. Winslow?” Quinten asked, like it was the most normal thing in the world for him to be standing in their kitchen, making beer cheese soup. He added the garlic, hot sauce, Worcestershire sauce, and seasonings as he waited for her grandmother to answer.

“Call me Nana,” her grandmother said with a laugh, waving him off from the table where she sat, nursing her tea.

Raisa’s eyebrows shot up.

Call me Nana?

Clearly, he’d already charmed her grandmother. It was hard to reconcile this version of Quinten, so at ease and respectful, with the boy she remembered—the one who had laughed so carelessly when Beth made Raisa trip in the cafeteria, sending her tray of spaghetti spilling onto the floor.

“Clumsy Raisa strikes again!” Beth had sung, her laugh echoing in the crowded room. Quinten had been sitting with the popular crowd, his chuckle blending with theirs as Raisa scrambled to gather her dignity, along with her tray.

“Raisa?” Quinten’s voice pulled her back to the present.

She blinked, gripping the edge of the counter. “What?”

“I said, could you pass me the flour?” He gestured with the spoon, his grin easy but questioning. “You okay?”

“Fine,” she hurried to say, distracting herself by grabbing the bag of flour and setting it on the counter with a thud. Her pulse thrummed as she stepped back, brushing her hands over her jeans.

“Thanks,” Quinten said, sprinkling the flour over the softened onions and stirring it in to create a roux. “You come off as distracted.”

“Just thinking about work,” she lied, crossing her arms. And high school. And how much I hate that you’re making yourself so damn hard to hate.

Nana chuckled loud enough to cut through the tension. “You’re doing great, Quinten. I can already tell this is going to be delicious.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Er, Nana,” he corrected with a sheepish smile. He poured the chicken broth in slowly, whisking with steady movements. “This soup always reminds me of my own grandmother. She used to make it on game nights.”

Raisa tightened her arms across her chest. “Big family tradition?”

He nodded. “Yeah. My grams was all about traditions. She said they gave life structure.” His voice softened, his whisking slowing for a moment before resuming its steady rhythm. “She’d be happy to know I’m still keeping it alive.”

His sincerity made Raisa’s chest ache. She glanced at Nana, who was beaming at



Quinten like he was the best thing to happen to their kitchen in years.

Okay, granted, he was a fine specimen to look at—the way he moved with ease, the confidence he exuded, whether it was on the playing field, speaking to the press, or standing in their kitchen making dinner.

Yeah, she'd kept tabs on him, followed his career, and had never gotten over her crush on him, darn it!

Crumbling some of the cheese grates between her fingers, she forced her mind back to the present. Grandmother. He's talking about his grandmother. "She sounds like a great woman."

"She was." Quinten met her gaze for a beat, something wordless passing between them before he turned back to the pot. "Mom and Dad were always busy with the company, so Grams was a big fixture in mine, Corbin, and Gavin's life. That woman raised us."

"And a fine job she did." Nana rose and scuffled to the sink to place her empty tea mug.

"Nana, I could have done that." Raisa stepped closer.

"Nonsense, girl, I need to keep using these old joints, otherwise they will rust."

"She's right, you know." Quinten took the chopping board from her and added the cheese a handful at a time. "Use it or lose it."

Nana chuckled and went back to sit at the kitchen table. "Smart lad. I like him."

Yeah, yeah, that much is obvious enough. Well maybe you should date him, then.

Disconcerted by her thoughts, because this wasn't a real date anyway, she instructed Quinten, "You should lower the heat to ensure the dairy doesn't separate."

He tipped his chin and gave her a straight look. "You know, for someone who's not cooking, you're awfully bossy."

"Somebody has to keep you on track." Despite her plummeting mood, a small smile tugged at her lips.

"Oh, I'm perfectly capable," he shot back with a grin. "I made this soup often when I got a little homesick in during my stay in Green Bay, back when I was with the Packers. It was only a little over a one-hour drive, but I didn't manage to get home often due to my training and game schedule."

Raisa tried to stay in the moment, as she, her nana, and Quinten talked about his time in Wisconsin, the small changes in Cedarburg, and favorite recipes.

"I'm sorry you lost your grandmother, lad.

Eileen was a wonderful and kind woman, and her embroidery was exquisite.

"Despite Raisa's protests, Nana rose against to fetch spoons from the drawers.

"Your family has suffered quite the setbacks lately. First the financial problems, then your granny died, before your dad's horrible accident.

"Nana shook her head, while she sank back in her chair. "Life is hard."

"Life usually is." His tone was even but his shoulders stiffened, and he turned back to the soup, stirring it one last time before ladling it into bowls Raisa handed him. "But it's still worth living. Especially when you get to taste Gram's soup!" He handed

Raisa a bowl.

She welcomed the comforting warmth of the bowl in her hands, the heat seeping through the ceramic and comforted her as she placed it carefully in front of Nana, letting the rich aroma of the soup fill the room.

“It smells divine.”

Quinten placed a plate of bratwurst, bacon, and a small bowl with green onions on the table, along with some rolls. “The bread is store-bought, I’m afraid. I would give my throwing arm for homemade biscuits or rolls, but I never got the hang of baking.”

“Well.” Nana winked. “Lucky you are sharing a table with the finest baker in town.”

“Nana!” The heat rose in her cheeks. She almost jumped when Quinten placed his hand over hers.

“She’s right, you know. I’ve sampled your pastries. They are to die for.”

Judiciously, she extracted her hand from underneath his palm. “Let’s see if the same goes for your soup,” she said, lifting the spoon from the table to dip in the bowl.

Quinten’s grin widened. “I think you’ll find it does.”

They fell silent as all three concentrated on devouring the food, the soup’s scent mingling with the bread’s yeasty fragrance.

Raisa savored every bite; the soup was excellent, creamy, and seasoned to perfection.

For a moment, she almost forgot the weight of the past. Quinten was unexpectedly great company.

He was attentive to Nana, genuinely interested in Raisa's shop, and spoke knowledgeably about the world beyond Cedarburg.

To her surprise, she discovered he was active in several charities, including the local animal shelter she supported.

After the meal, Quinten stood and began clearing the dishes without being asked.

He stacked the bowls with ease, rinsed them at the sink, and set them in the dishwasher, moving through her kitchen like he'd done it a hundred times.

Raisa watched, too surprised to stop him.

This new version of him was disarming—so much so she nearly allowed herself to relax.

Her tension returned when Nana pushed herself up from the table. "Well, I think I've had enough excitement for one evening. These old bones need to rest. Thank you for the flowers and this lovely dinner, Quinten."

"My pleasure, Nana," he said, helping her to her feet.

Raisa sat back in stunned silence as he guided her grandmother toward the hall, his hand light on her elbow. His gentleness tugged at something buried inside her.

When he returned, he leaned against the counter, his gaze settling on Raisa. "I'm not the same guy I was in high school, you know."

Her stomach twisted. "What makes you think I'm still hung up on high school?"

"Come on." He raised an eyebrow. "You can hardly look at me without flinching."

Look”—he rubbed the back of his neck—“I messed up the first time by using your old nickname. I’m sorry.”

She swallowed hard, her grip tightening on her spoon until the edge dug painfully into her palm. “There’s nothing to be sorry about. I was and will always be Wallflower Winslow.”

“The hell you are.” With two steps he was beside her chair. He pulled her up, and slammed his mouth over her lips.

Quinten hadn’t intended to kiss her, but now that he was, he couldn’t stop. Somehow, this woman appealed to the best of him—wanting to covet and court like some old-days’ gentleman—she also conjured his worst to the surface, making his inner caveman want to dominate, tease, and fuck her senseless.

Her taste was intoxicating, the mix of sweetness and warmth more addictive than any victory on the field. Initially, her body had gone rigid in his arms, maybe in shock or surprise or maybe from inexperience.

Don’t screw this up. He allowed the kiss to linger long enough to let her set the pace. He brushed his lips against hers again, more teasing than demanding this time, coaxing her.

When he flicked his tongue featherlight against the seam of her lips, she opened for him, and he didn’t hesitate. He deepened the kiss, sliding one hand to cradle the back of her head while resting the other lightly on her waist.

Her body softened, her curves molding against him in a way that made his pulse race. The tentative way her fingers curled into his shirt sent a rush of protectiveness through him, cutting through the heady mix of desire.

She did trust him—if only for this moment—and that trust was more precious than anything he'd held in his life.

He pressed his thigh against her core and swallowed her moan.

But it wasn't only about the lust between them.

He wanted more—needed everything she had to give and then some.

He craved not only her delectable body pressed against his, but her laughter, her sharp wit, and her guarded but perceptive mind. In short, he wanted all of her.

He longed for her to see him, the real Quinten Carrington, not the shallow boy he'd been in high school or the athlete for whom the world had cheered.

The thought hit him like a freight train, and he eased back a few millimeters, breaking the kiss but keeping his forehead pressed against hers. She blinked up at him, her lips slightly swollen, her breathing uneven.

"I'm not the same guy I was back then," he murmured and had to clear his voice that was thick with emotion.

"I swear, I'll prove it to you." He stepped back, and after making sure she was steady on her feet, let go of her.

"I'm going to prove it by ignoring how much I want you and walk away now, but I'll be back tomorrow. "

Her gaze flickered with something unreadable—caution, curiosity, maybe even hope.

Quinten turned, his chest getting tighter with every step. He left the kitchen slowly,

the warmth of her still clinging to his body and her taste on his tongue. At the front door, he hesitated, long enough to hear the soft hush of her breath behind him, then opened it and stepped outside.

The door clicked shut at his back. His boots scuffed against the gravel, each step feeling like an eternity. His legs felt leaden, and the few yards to his truck stretched endlessly before him, as though the ground itself was conspiring to slow his progress.

His balled his hands into fists at his sides, the urge to turn back clawing at him with every passing second.

His cock was painfully hard and pressing against his zipper, but it wasn't only his body that ached—it was his heart, raw and exposed, every step forward pulling him further from the one thing he wanted most.

By the time he reached the truck, the distance felt like several football fields, not mere feet. But he'd made a promise, and the only thing stronger than the pain of leaving was his determination to prove her wrong about him.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:34 am*

### Chapter Eight

Quinten knocked on the door of the Clark residence, his breath visible in the frosty morning air.

The house looked much the same as it had when he was a kid—a small, weathered ranch with peeling paint and sagging gutters.

As he waited, he couldn't help but notice the overgrown bushes and a faded welcome mat that was more ironic than inviting.

When the door creaked open after minutes of waiting, the odor hit him first—a strange mix of mothballs, old books, and something faintly floral that reminded him of the antique shops in town.

Mrs. Clark stood there, her frail frame dwarfed by the oversized cardigan draped over her shoulders.

She squinted up at him as though trying to place his face.

“Mrs. Clark.” Quinten forced a polite smile. “It’s Quinten Carrington. I’m looking for Vanessa. Have you seen her lately?”

“Quinten,” she echoed, sounding distant. Her gaze drifted past him, as though she were searching for something. “You are the football player, aren’t you? Vanessa loves being a cheerleader and watching those games.”



Quinten blinked as he tried to absorb the cheerleader remark but nodded. “Yes, ma’am.” He stepped inside as she waved him in. The living room was cluttered with knick-knacks and old photos, the furniture mismatched and worn. The chill inside made him wonder if the heater was even working.

“It’s so nice to have company,” she said, settling into a chair that looked like it might have been around since the Reagan administration. “I don’t get visitors much these days.”

“Have you seen Vanessa recently?” Quinten pressed gently, as he took in the room with the layers of dust on the mantel and the stacks of unopened mail on the side table.

Mrs. Clark’s brow furrowed. “Oh, Vanessa...” Her voice became uncertain.

“She was here... not too long ago, I think. Maybe she’s with Beth?

Or with her other friends. She doesn’t need to study much but has great grades.

She got the math brains from her daddy.” Her eyes brightened.

“Did you know she got the highest grade in her math class? She is such a bright girl.”

Quinten’s jaw tightened. He was trying to piece together any useful information, but Mrs. Clark appeared to be stuck in the past. “Do you know where she might be now? Her house was empty when I stopped by.”

“Her house?” Mrs. Clark shook her head, appearing the epitome of confused, and her expression clouded as if she tried to see inside her head. “I... I don’t know. She’s been spending time elsewhere lately, but this is her home... Where is Ernie? Have you asked her daddy?”

Quinten suppressed a sigh, his frustration building.

Ernest Clark had left more than twenty years ago.

It had been such a scandal in their small town—a local man taking off with his secretary and leaving behind his wife and daughter.

Something was wrong with Mrs. Clark's memory, and she wouldn't be any help in finding Vanessa.

None of this was Mrs. Clark's fault, though, and it wasn't right to push her.

"Thank you, Mrs. Clark. I appreciate your time."

As he stepped outside, the cold hit him again, sharper this time. He speed-dialed Corbin, pacing the snow-dusted walkway while the phone rang.

"What's up?" His brother's voice crackled through the line.

"We need to meet at the police station," Quinten said, running a hand through his hair. "Vanessa's mom... she's not all there. It's a bad situation, bro. I don't feel right leaving her alone, but I don't know what else to do."

"I'll head over to the station now," Corbin replied without hesitation. "Why don't you give Mom a call? She'll figure it out."

"Great idea! Thanks!"

After hanging up, Quinten called his mom. "Hey, Mom. I just came from Mrs. Clark's place." In a few words he explained the situation to his mother, who was all empathy.

“Poor Milly,” his mother said. “Don’t worry, honey. I know her nearest neighbor, Clarice, pretty well. We went to school together. I’ll call her and ask her to check in. I knew Vanessa was spending more time at her mom’s, but I didn’t realize it had gotten this bad.”

Relieved he could leave the matter in his mother’s capable hands, Quinten rang off and continued driving to the police station.

When he reached Wauwatosa Road, Corbin’s beat-up pickup truck was already parked in front of the station.

The once-red paint had faded to a dull, almost pinkish hue, and Quinten made a mental note to check if the vehicle was still safe and plan to replace it if necessary.

Inside the station, the kid behind the front desk looked barely old enough to be out of high school. His black uniform and shiny badge seemed too heavy for him.

“We want to report a missing person,” Quinten stated.

The officer gestured to three plastic chairs. “Please wait. Someone will come for you shortly.”

Quinten squeezed into one of the uncomfortable chairs, his frame too large for its small design.

Corbin plopped down beside him, slouching like it was second nature.

They didn’t wait long before Maureen came over, her familiar face stirring a mix of memories.

She’d been in his class, quiet and kind—not part of the popular crowd.

“Quinten,” she greeted, a hint of surprise in her tone. “What brings you here?”

“We’re reporting Vanessa Clark missing.” He leaned forward. “She hasn’t answered her phone, and her house is empty. Her mom doesn’t know where she is, either.”

Maureen listened intently, jotting down notes. “Has she been in contact with any friends or other family?”

Quinten shook his head. “Not that I know of. It’s... complicated. Her mom’s not doing well. Vanessa’s been spending a lot of time there.”

“All right,” Maureen said, nodding. “We’ll file a missing person’s report and start looking into it. I’ll keep you updated.”

As they left the station, his little brother said, “The police have more resources than us. They can check credit cards, traffic cameras, and probably more.”

Quinten grunted. “I hate waiting. I feel like I should be doing something.”

Corbin clapped him on the back. “It’s like being on a football team. You might have been great on the field, but you relied on your teammates. Now, rely on the police.”

Quinten chuckled, and the tension seeped from his body. “When did my little brother get so smart?”

“Always been smart,” Corbin shot back with a grin. “You’ve just been too dumb to notice.”

Quinten smirked and lunged, pulling his brother into a mock wrestling hold as they laughed. For a moment, the weight of the day lifted, if only slightly.

### Chapter Nine

The tall glass cases that had been filled with sandwiches and pastries were now almost empty as the lunch rush simmered down.

Raisa rearranged a few frosted doughnuts, put a discount sign on her colorful fruit tarts then wiped down the counter.

Her gaze drifted to Quinten, who sat at a corner table, scowling at his phone's screen.

His expression was fierce, and his broad shoulders were tense—not a happy bunny.

He tapped the screen once, then leaned back with a sigh, and ran a hand through his hair. The curls flopped back in a perfect style.

Curious, Raisa hesitated for a moment before deciding to approach. She placed a fresh slice of apple pie and a mug of steaming coffee onto a tray and crossed the room.

Quinten gave her a cursory glance. His expression was still tense, and she almost took a step back.

“I didn’t order anything.”

“I know, but it looked like you needed something sweet and strong.” After setting the tray down in front of him, she gave him a tentative smile. “On the house.”

Quinten looped an arm around her waist and squeezed her opposite hip. “Sweet and strong, hmm. Are you offering yourself?”

What? “Emm, I...” She shook her head to unfog her mind and tried to summon a good answer.

Even through the thick denim waistband, she could feel the heat from his palm as it warred with the heat in her face.

Darn it. I’m blushing again. Stepping back, she said, “Made the pie this morning with a mix of Honeycrisps and Pink Lady.” She sounded way less confident than she would have liked.

“It smells divine.” His tone was distracted, and he was the epitome of... sadness.

Despite her reservations, she scuffled forward again and placed a hand on his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

Sighing, he gestured to his phone’s screen. “I was just chatting with Gavin. We’re worried about Vanessa. She seems to have vanished, and I’d like to talk to her. He’s been around town, asking about her. Nobody knows anything.”

“Vanessa Clark.” She swallowed, and her stomach twisted at the mention of her name.

The woman had been one of her biggest tormentors in high school—beautiful, popular, and ruthless—often the instigator of cruelty.

And of course, he’s worried about her. Vanessa had been in his group of peers—an equal—whereas Raisa had been on the outside, existing in the periphery and fun to tease.

As if noticing her spiraling thoughts, Quinten continued. “She’s our bookkeeper, and I desperately need someone with a head for figures. The books look fine on the surface, but something isn’t adding up. I think she’d have some answers, but I can’t get ahold of her.”

“Do you want help?” Raisa asked, surprising even herself.

“Actually, the police are already looking for her. It’s like no one has seen her for days.”

“No, not I didn’t mean with finding her. I wouldn’t know where to start, even if I tried. No, I mean, with the books. I’m good with numbers.”

Quinten looked up, and his left eyebrow quirked up. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I know,” she said simply, “but I’d like to. Let me help.”

Quinten regarded her for a moment, and something shifting in his expression. “You serious?”

She nodded. “I can’t leave just yet, but once the lunch rush dies down—if Lila’s okay to cover—I can come with you.”

His mouth curved. “That works. I’ll hang around until then.”

Before either of them could say more, the door swung open with a sharp jingle, and Beth swept in, flanked by two of her usual posse. Her heels clicked against the floor as she approached, her lips curving into a saccharine smile.

“Good afternoon.” Beth’s eyes narrowed as she took in how close Raisa was standing to Quinten.

Oh god, how embarrassing.

Raisa fought the urge to put space between her and the gorgeous man sitting beside her.

“Make me a latte.”

“Good afternoon, Beth.” Ignoring the rudeness and imagining her ice shield, Raisa nodded at the two women behind her.

“Devaney. Megan,” she managed to say politely before returning her attention to Beth.

“You can place your order with Lila. I’ll be with you in a moment, and do check out the fruit tarts. They are discounted right now.”

“Well, I don’t want hips like yours, so I will skip the sweets.” Beth’s words dripped mock sweetness. “Maybe you should do the same. Or exercise a teensy bit more, huh? How about you move your fat ass to the counter and. Get. Me. My. Coffee!” The latter words came out cutting and menacing.

Raisa forced herself to stay calm, even as she curled her hands into fists.

“Beth!” Quinten’s voice cut through the room, and he rose from his chair, towering over them both.

“What the hell? She might be serving drinks and food, but she’s not your servant, and there are other customers who came in before you.

Get off your high horse, take a seat, and wait for Lila or Raisa to come to your table.  
”



Beth's cheeks flushed, and her expression hardened. "Yeesh, Quin, are you really speaking up for Wallflower Winslow now?"

Raisa couldn't hold back the flinch at the slur.

Quinten crossed his arms. "That nickname is juvenile, Beth. I never should have gone along with it back in high school, and it's long past time to let it go."

Beth looked over her shoulder, obviously expecting the other women there, but they had scuttled away when Quinten rose. Wise decision. The man could be downright scary. For once being at a disadvantage, Beth huffed and turned to join her friends at a table near the back.

Raisa gnawed on her bottom lip, her chest tightened, and she ducked her head slightly, brushing her hands against her apron as though smoothing away invisible wrinkles.

He didn't have to do that. Heat prickled the back of her neck, ears and cheeks, but other than the embarrassment, a flicker of gratitude warmed her.

She glanced at Quinten, whose firm stance was unwavering.

Her breath hitched. Why did he have to make it so hard to stay guarded?

After serving Beth and a few other customers, Raisa turned to Lila. "Do you mind staying a while longer and running the shop for me? I'm heading over to Quinten's for a couple hours."

Lila smiled. "Not at all. I could use the extra cash anyway."

Quinten and Raisa stepped outside, the cold air biting at their faces.

The snow had stopped, and sunlight gleamed off the rooftops and icy sidewalks.

The cheerful winter sky seemed to be mocking the simmering anger in Quinten's chest. He clenched his jaw and shoved his hands into his coat pockets.

What the hell was wrong with Beth? Her behavior had been uncalled for, and the way she'd sneered at Raisa made his stomach churn.

Did Raisa always have to deal with this kind of treatment?

Or had Beth's jealous streak been triggered by his obvious interest in Raisa?

He didn't doubt Beth had picked up on that. It was hard to miss.

"Sorry about Beth." Quinten cleared his throat as residual frustration squeezed his windpipe and made it hard to speak. "She's always been... difficult and self-absorbed."

Raisa gave a small shrug. "It's fine." She burrowed into her oversized coat like she could use it as a shield against the old pain and insecurity. "I'm used to it."

He stopped mid-step and turned to look at her. Narrowing his eyes, he stated, "You shouldn't have to be."

Her gaze flicked up to meet his. Whatever she was feeling stayed carefully guarded, and he hated not being able to read her.

"Thank you," she said quietly, almost as though the words cost her something. Turning her gaze forward, she started to walk again.

They continued in silence for a short while, their boots crunching over the snow-

covered pavement. Quinten stole a glance at her from the corner of his eye. She seemed lost in thoughts. Her jaw was tight, her shoulders hunched slightly like she was bracing for something, or keeping too much in.

There would be a day she wouldn't hide her emotions from him, but that took time, and he needed to win her trust first. He returned his gaze to the path ahead as if it was a metaphor for the way forward with Raisa.

When they reached the office, he pushed open the door and held it for her. The warmth inside was immediate and comforting, though the tension in his chest didn't ease.

"Raisa!" his mother exclaimed, looking up from the desk with a smile that brightened the room. "It's so nice to see you. How are you doing?"

"Hello, Mrs. Carrington." Raisa's beautiful and sweet smile appeared. "I'm fine. How are you?"

Before his mother could answer, Corbin emerged from the back, his usual grin firmly in place. "Hey, big bro. Raisa." He nodded at her.

"Shouldn't you be at the Nicholson farmhouse, today?"

"No. Gavin is working on the old farmhouse renovations, today. I came in to help you with the books."

Quinten frowned. "Well, oh, okay. And how about Gavin's assignment?"

"We gave that to Bill Oswood and his crew."

Raisa perked up at the mention of Bill. "Bill is a great craftsman. He helped with

some renovations in the shop a few years back. The man for sure knows what he's doing."

"True." Quinten nodded absently, before turning back to his brother.

"Raisa offered to lend a hand, too." He led them both into the office and took Raisa's coat, before leading her to the desk piled high with ledgers and papers.

His thoughts lingered on her smile, the way her face lit up when she said hello to his mother.

Forcing his mind to the business at hand, he offered Raisa the chair. "Let's see if we can find where things don't add up." Pressing a few symbols on the keyboard he booted the computer and navigated to the accounting program.

With the bare minimum of explanation, Raisa was handling the mouse and keyboard like it was something she did daily. A few times, she asked for clarification, but he never had to explain something twice to her.

While she flipped through the records and crosschecked numbers on the computer, Quinten admired her tenacity.

He couldn't help but watch her, the way her brow furrowed, and her lips pressed together when she found something interesting or the way the point of her pink tongue would touch her upper lip before slipping away in an instant.

The memory of their kiss the other night surged back, and his pulse quickened.

He'd wanted more then, and the thought of her focused intensity transported his mind dangerously close to uncharted territory.

Did she bring that same focus to everything she did—to her work, to the numbers in those ledgers... to lovemaking?

She paused, pointing to a line item. “This payment to Bill Oswood ... the account number isn’t right.”

Quinten leaned closer, his knee brushing hers under the desk. The touch sent a jolt of lust straight to his groin, but he ignored his impulses and focused on the matter at hand. “You’re sure?”

“Positive.” Raisa leaned back and nodded. “I told you he worked on the bakery. I remember his account number.”

“You remember his account number?” Quinten almost slurred the words as he tried to wrap his head around that nugget of info.

Are you kidding me?

“That’s as impressive as it is unbelievable.”

She shrugged. Biting her lip, she dropped her gaze and murmured, “I have an eidetic memory.”

He stared at her for a moment, then let out a laugh. This woman! “Thank you!” He gripped her cheeks and pulled her in for a hard kiss before releasing her. Resting his forehead against her, he whispered, “You never cease to amaze me.”

Color crept over her face and spread to her ears and neck. Now he wanted to make her blush more often. He grinned when she quickly focused back on the records.

### Chapter Ten

The late afternoon sunlight slanted through the windows of the Carrington family dining room and cast long shadows over the table where Quinten sat.

The room seemed smaller than usual, filled with the murmurs of his parents, Corbin, and Gavin as they settled into their seats.

He'd called the meeting to address the chaos brewing within the family and the business, but his mind was elsewhere.

Raisa had refused to come.

"I'm not part of the family," she had said firmly, folding her arms in that quiet but unyielding way of hers.

Quinten had protested, pointing out how much she had already helped, but Raisa wouldn't budge.

Now, as his family gathered around him, he wondered what she was doing.

Was she at the shop, tallying numbers, or taking a break with one of her secret notebooks?

The thought of her sitting cross-legged in a corner, scribbling away, made his chest tighten.

She was too good to be dragged into this mess, yet he missed having her here.

He cleared his throat and addressed the room. “Let’s start with the update from the police.”

His brother leaned forward, his hands clasped tightly on the table.

“Still no sign of Vanessa.” The knuckles of his fingers turned white.

“No cash withdrawals, no traffic camera sightings. They checked her home, and it looks like she left voluntarily. A suitcase and some clothes are missing, as well as toiletries from her bathroom.”

“Convenient,” Gavin muttered, leaning back in his chair, his arms crossed tightly over his chest.

“Did they find anything else?” his dad asked. He seemed to be having a good day, and there was even some color in his cheeks.

Quinten shook his head. “No. They didn’t, and I didn’t get far with Mrs. Clark, by the way”—he turned to his mom—“Any news about her?”

His mother sighed, and the lines around her eyes deepened.

“Milly’s neighbor called the doctor. As you might have suspected, the poor thing has Alzheimer’s.

Right now, she’s lucid enough to stay at home, but it’s only a matter of time before something more permanent will need to be arranged.

The neighbors are keeping an eye on her for now. ”

A heavy silence settled over the room as they absorbed the information. Quinten experienced a pang of empathy for the woman. Milly Clark had been a fixture in Cedarburg for as long as he could remember. To see her fading away like this was hard to stomach.

“Does Vanessa know?” Corbin hadn’t shaved for a few days, and his fingers rasped over his skin as he stroked his chin.

“She probably does.” His mother’s voice was almost inaudible. “Whether or not that played into her decision to leave, I can’t say.”

Quinten exhaled. “Okay, let’s move on to the books and what Raisa found.”

“Raisa?” His father raised his brows in surprise. “What does she have to do with this?”

Gavin shot upright.

“Oh, right,” Quinten said, realizing he hadn’t updated everyone. “She offered to help look through the accounts. Turns out she has an eidetic memory and picked up on some things we missed. Payments to subcontractors with account numbers that don’t match. It’s how we started connecting the dots.”

“Tampering with the books?” Gavin’s chair scraped loudly as he pushed back from the table. “Again, the arrows point toward Vanessa?” he snapped. “You’re telling me we’re still chasing her mess?”

“Calm down.” Quinten held up a hand. “We don’t have all the facts yet.”

“Calm down? How am I supposed to calm down?” Gavin’s face was flushed, and his arms shook as he gripped the edge of the table. “First, she disappears. Then we find



out she's been skimming money. And now you're saying she might be behind the whole damn thing?"

"It's not definitive," Quinten said, though he felt the weight of the evidence pressing on him. "The way it looks now, she's the most likely person to have stolen from us, but we need more proof before jumping to conclusions."

Gavin let out a bitter laugh, shaking his head. "Yeah, well, I wouldn't put it past her. She was always self-serving, even back in high school."

Quinten tried to keep his tone level. "We're going to figure this out, but losing our tempers won't help." He glanced around the table, letting his gaze linger on his father and Gavin, both of whom were clearly struggling to contain their frustration.

His mother broke the tension with, "If Vanessa is behind this, then we'll deal with it, but until then, let's focus on what we can control."

Quinten nodded and relaxed his shoulders. "Agreed. I'll keep digging into the books and coordinate with the police. In the meantime, Gavin, keep asking around. Someone has to know more than they're letting on."

Gavin grunted his acknowledgment, though his jaw was still tight. Corbin leaned forward, and his expression turned thoughtful. "I'll help where I can. Just let me know what you need."

Quinten gave him a brief nod. "Thanks. It's a huge help already that you coordinate the schedule."

As the meeting wound down, Quinten's thoughts drifted back to Raisa.

He couldn't shake the impression that she would have brought clarity to this chaos,

her steady focus cutting through the noise.

As much as he wanted to keep her out of the mess, he couldn't deny that he wanted her at his side—and not only for the investigation, but for everything.

The light from Raisa's laptop screen cast a pale glow across her small desk, illuminating the half-finished cup of tea beside it.

She stared at the blinking cursor on the blank page, her fingers hovering over the keyboard.

A single sentence flickered in her mind, but no sooner had she typed it than she hit the backspace key, erasing it once more.

Her heroine was supposed to be wrestling with the revelation that were-beasts, demons, witches, and other paranormals were real like a normal woman suddenly thrust into a supernatural world.

Yet Raisa couldn't find the words to convey that disbelief, the raw edge of fear mingled with curiosity.

She wanted to write the scene, to immerse herself in that fictional world, but her thoughts kept drifting to Quinten.

How was his family taking the news? Was Vanessa really the one behind the missing money?

Raisa leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms tightly across her chest. She didn't like Vanessa, or any of the cheerleaders from high school, for that matter, but thinking of Vanessa as a criminal—it didn't make any sense.

The woman came from old money. What reason would she have to steal from the Carrington Building Company?

Sighing, Raisa pushed back her chair and stood, the wooden legs scraping softly against the floor.

She padded into the kitchen with her mug, and after flipping on the light, she drained the tepid tea and reached for the kettle.

As she filled it with water and set it on the stove, the gnawing doubts crept in again.

What if I'm not cut out for this? She glanced back at the desk.

The white page on her screen mocked her, the blinking cursor like a silent accusation.

It wasn't the first time she'd questioned whether she had what it took to write professionally.

Creating stories in her head was one thing, but putting them on paper—cohesive, compelling, worth reading—was another entirely.

The kettle hissed and popped as it began to heat, and Raisa busied herself by selecting a teabag from the assortment in her cupboard. Chamomile's soothing properties would hopefully calm her restless mind.

As she poured the hot water into her mug, she tried to shake her nagging thoughts.

She'd finished scenes before, even when they felt impossible.

What she needed was focus, but as she returned to her desk, cradling the mug in her hands and letting the warmth seep into her body, the cursor blinked back at her.

Her gaze drifted again, not to the screen, but to the window, where the faint outline of the moon glowed in the night sky.

What was Quinten doing right now?

Had his family rallied together, or was the tension boiling over?

She imagined him sitting at the head of the table, his brow furrowed in that sexy way of his as he explained everything.

She could envision how his voice would be steady and sure.

She'd heard him give countless interviews.

Whether his team had won or lost, he had been polite and modest while still emanating authority.

She set down the mug and placed her hands on the keyboard again. Her fingers hovered for a moment before she typed a single sentence. Then, just as swiftly, she erased it.

With a groan, she leaned her head in her hands, unable to face the empty page. "Come on," she encouraged herself out loud. "You can do this."

### Chapter Eleven

Vanessa had now officially been missing for ten days.

The tech room was cramped with equipment, making three people feel like a crowd.

The overhead light glared, creating a reflection on the monitor that distracted her, while a hum that resembled Nana's old refrigerator came from a server rack in the corner, and the faint scent of dust and old electronics hung in the air.

Raisa stood beside Quinten, hands loosely clasped in front of her.

She didn't reach for him, but stayed close, offering what little comfort she could simply by being near.

His cold, closed-off demeanor hadn't shifted.

With his arms folded tightly and his shoulders tense, he looked every bit like a man trying to hold something in.

But despite all that, his body radiated a quiet strength, and he leaned toward the computer screen, eyes narrowing as the technician clicked through a string of files.

"Hold on a sec."

The police technician, a wiry man with thinning hair, paused the playback, his finger hovering over the controls as he gestured at the shadowy figure getting into a sedan.

“That’s her car, but is it her?”

Quinten nodded, his jaw tight. “It looks like it.”

Beside him, Raisa clutched her purse tightly against her belly, her fingers flexing over the strap.

Her head ached from how hard she was staring at the screen.

“Can you rewind it?” she asked, her tone polite but strained.

The tension radiating from Quinten bled into her, and her shoulders kept creeping upward until they nearly touched her ears.

The technician obliged and rolled back the footage. They watched as the figure, obscured by a hood and the poor resolution, slid into the driver’s seat.

“I can’t even say for certain if it’s a woman or a man getting in,” the technician said, rubbing his neck as he glanced between them and the screen.

The timestamp indicated it was just past midnight. Quinten let out a sharp breath, his fists clenching at his sides. “We’re not going to get much from this.”

“No, no, we aren’t—but that’s not what’s important,” Raisa countered hurriedly.

She stepped closer to the screen, tilting her head as if the new angle might reveal a hidden detail.

“I think I recognize the coat they’re wearing.

I’ve seen Vanessa in it a couple of times.

However..." She squinted at the screen, lamenting that she hadn't brought her reading glasses.

She had perfect vision in the distance but at close range, the artificial lenses didn't help. "I don't think it's Vanessa."

Quinten's brow furrowed as he leaned closer. "No?"

Raisa didn't answer immediately. Instead, she turned to the technician, resting her fingers lightly against the desk. "Can you please start it from the beginning?"

Quinten's lips pressed into a thin line, the muscle in his jaw ticking. "What? Why?"

"Please, bear with me." Raisa spoke calmly, though she tightened her grip on the desk.

"Suppose for a second it is a possibility this isn't Vanessa.

Her car—yes. Probably even her coat," she continued softly, drumming her fingers against the wood.

"But it doesn't have to be her. Think about her walk.

You know how she moves—that catwalk kind of way. "

She gestured at the screen and waved her hands in the air to mimic the motion. "It's like... they're trying to walk like Vanessa."

Quinten tilted his head, his frown deepening as he glanced between Raisa and the footage. "Trying?"

Raisa nodded almost absentmindedly, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear as she analyzed the figure's movements.

“Vanessa has this way of walking—straight back, shoulders down, hips moving just enough to catch people's attention.

It's like a model on a catwalk. Everything she does is deliberate but smooth.

But this...” She pointed at the figure, hovering her finger a few inches above the screen, her lips pursing.

“It's stiff. Like they're imitating her, but it's not natural. The rhythm's off.”

Quinten squinted, leaning in closer, as if proximity might help him see what Raisa was indicating. “I don't see it.”

“She's also never without heels,” Raisa added, gaining confidence as she stepped back and crossed her arms over her chest. “Vanessa hates being only five foot one. Always wears heels—pumps, stilettos, you name it. This person...” She dropped her gaze to the figure's feet and firmed her lips.

“They're in sneakers or something flat. Vanessa wouldn't step outside in those—not unless her house was on fire. ”

Quinten straightened abruptly, the tension in his shoulders returning as he absorbed her words. “So, you don't think it's her.”

Raisa let her arms drop, shaking her head. “Whoever this is, they know how Vanessa walks, but they're faking it.”

Quinten darted his gaze back to the screen, his brows knitting. “Then who the hell are



we looking at?”

“I don’t know.” Raisa wrapped her coat tighter around herself. “Nor do I know how they got her car and coat.”

“Maybe she has an accomplice.” Quinten ran a hand through his hair, leaving it slightly disheveled. “But why would they pretend to be her?”

“It just doesn’t make sense,” Raisa murmured, biting her bottom lip. She glanced at the technician. “Can you enhance the footage?”

He gave a small nod. “I can zoom in, sure—but just so you know, it’s not going to magically enhance anything. I can’t add pixels that aren’t there.”

“Zoom in anyway,” she said. “Let’s see what we can get.”

The man tapped a few keys, and the grainy image filled the screen. Raisa leaned in, scanning the shadowed face, searching for an earring, a scar, a twitch of movement that would give the impersonator away. Nothing. Just vague outlines and blur.

Quinten shifted beside her, his posture tense. “Can you freeze it there?”

The image stilled. Both stared.

But nothing clicked. Nothing fit.

“I don’t know who that is.” She let her shoulders slump. “But I’m sure it isn’t Vanessa.”

Quinten shook his head, still staring at the screen. “I don’t know who that is either, but I think you’re right. This ain’t Vanessa.” He turned his gaze to the technician.

“There’s nothing you can do to make this picture clearer?”

The man shrugged apologetically, gesturing at the outdated equipment in front of him. “Sorry, folks, but that’s the best I can do.”

“Damn it,” Quinten muttered, clenching his fists before shoving them into his coat pockets. The sharpness of his tone earned a pointed look from Raisa. He sighed, straightened, and nodded politely at the technician. “Thanks for your time.”

They stepped out of the server room, leaving behind the dry warmth radiating from racks of equipment. The corridor felt cooler by comparison, and both instinctively shrugged into their coats as they walked. Neither said much as they passed the front desk and pushed through the glass doors.

Outside, the temperature was even chillier, and the wind was merciless.

She pulled her scarf tighter around her neck and burrowed into her coat.

Snow crunched beneath their boots as they headed toward his truck.

Quinten opened the passenger door for her without a word.

Raisa slid onto the seat, murmuring a quiet “Thanks,” and tugged her gloves tighter as he rounded the hood.

They had too many unanswered questions.

A moment later, Quinten climbed into the driver’s seat, and the truck’s cab filled with an oppressive silence as he shut the door against the biting cold. He exhaled heavily and some of the tension seemed to leave his body.

His breath was visible in the chilly air inside the truck as he twisted the key, and the engine rumbled to life. To her relief, he turned on the heater.

Raisa shifted restlessly and twisted her hands in her lap. "I'm sorry," she muttered, her voice just audible over the roar of the heater.

Quinten snapped his head toward her and frowned. "For what?"

She hesitated and fixed her gaze on her fingers. "For not being able to help more. For... all of this."

"That's not on you." There was a bite to his tone that made her want to disappear. "None of this is your fault." His grip on the steering wheel tightened, until his knuckles turned white. "You've done more than enough."

Raisa turned to him. "I don't feel like it.

" The bare and uncertain words slipped out.

Her shoulders curled inward, as if trying to make her smaller.

A knot rose in her throat, tight with something between disbelief and the quiet ache of being seen.

She blinked hard, not trusting herself to say more.

Quinten reached across the console, his fingers brushing against hers before he clasped her hand in a gentle hold. "You're wrong." He softened his voice, meeting her gaze in the dim light of the dashboard. "You've been... incredible. Smarter than I deserve, honestly."

Her cheeks heated, and she glanced away, sure her face was bright red. But she didn't pull her hand from his. "You don't mean that."

"I do," he said, brushing his thumb over her knuckles. "You're... I don't know. You make me want to be better."

His vulnerability made Raisa's chest tighten. She turned back to him, searching his face. The harsh lines of frustration from earlier had softened, replaced by something raw and unguarded.

"Quinten..." She wasn't sure what she wanted to say.

He leaned in, his gaze locked on hers, and the small space between them grew charged. "Tell me if I'm wrong," he murmured, his breath warm against her skin as he closed the distance between them.

Raisa's breath hitched, her heart pounding as she met him halfway.

Their lips brushed hesitantly at first, the contact sending a jolt through her.

Then the kiss deepened. Quinten brought his hand up to cradle her cheek, his palm warm, rough in the best way, his thumb brushing slowly over the curve of her jaw.

The touch sent a shiver straight through her, and she leaned into it before she could stop herself.

Then he pulled her closer—his other hand slipping around her waist, fingers splaying possessively at the small of her back. The move wasn't forceful, but it left no room for second-guessing. He wanted her close. And God help her, she wanted it, too.

His lips moved over hers again, slower this time, more deliberate.

He tilted his head, deepening the kiss, and his mouth coaxed her lips open with quiet insistence.

The first brush of his tongue sent a pulse through her, sharp, liquid, and impossible to ignore.

She tasted coffee, heat, and something uniquely him.

Her knees went soft, and she gripped his coat, needing something to hold onto.

The kiss turned hungry. His lips and tongue no longer exploratory but claiming.

His mouth slanted over hers unhurried but full of purpose.

His fingers pressed firmer into her waist. His thumb dragged lightly along the edge of her jaw, coaxing her to tip her head just right, and when she did, he stroked his tongue deeper.

Her breath caught, and she melted into him.

There was no mistaking it now. This wasn't just gratitude. This wasn't just comfort. This was want, need, and a promise wrapped in heat.

And when he eased back, just a fraction, the loss of his mouth invoked a phantom ache.

The truck's heater hummed quietly in the background, the warmth cocooning them as the snow swirled outside. Raisa tilted her head, letting her hands rest on his chest after uncurling from the fabric of his coat, and enjoying the steady beat of his heart pulsing against her palms.

### Chapter Twelve

Raisa's heart pounded as Quinten's lips met hers.

Their kiss was clumsy at first, a collision of desperation and longing until soon, they found their rhythm, inhaling at the same time, diving in for more.

His hands, warm and firm, cupped her face, guiding her deeper into the kiss.

A surge of heat rushed through her, a wave of desire she hadn't anticipated.

"Quinten," she whispered against his mouth. Her voice trembled with barely contained need.

He responded with a deep-throated growl, his lips moving to her neck, nibbling and sucking gently.

He slid a cold hand under her T-shirt, but his fingers warmed instantly as he stroked her skin, lifted her breasts, and pinched and rolled her nipples through the fabric of her bra.

She gasped, the sensation sending a jolt of pleasure through her.

She wanted to lift her hips, to guide his hand to her throbbing core where she needed him most, but then he sucked on her earlobe.

Every coherent thought left her brain. His touch was electric, igniting her senses, and

all she could do was surrender to her overwhelming desire.

Raisa arched her back as Quinten's touch sent a ripple of pleasure over her skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake.

A rush of heat coursed through her body, a tingling sensation that started in her nipple and spread outward.

Her breaths came in shallow gasps. Her heart was stampeding like racehorses on their way to the finish.

She was acutely aware of every stroke, every touch, as if her entire being was focused on the sensations he was creating.

She let out a soft moan, gripping at fabric, shoulders, his hair, her body surrendering to the overwhelming pleasure. She drew him closer, wanting more.

"You feel so good," he murmured, his breath hot against her neck. She could only moan in response, lost in the sensation of his touch. The world around them faded, the frustrating news about Vanessa momentarily forgotten.

Raisa tried to straddle him, but her movement was awkward, and she bumped against the steering wheel.

Quinten's low, throaty chuckle sent shivers down her spine. "We must look like horny teenagers." His dark eyes twinkled with amusement.

She offered a breathless, giddy laugh. "Hmm-hmm. I think we do." Her voice was husky and throaty and didn't sound like her at all.

He pressed her back into her seat, his gaze intense, locking onto hers.

She could happily drown in those dark brown pools of his.

He wormed his hand under her waistband, and with that same intense eye contact, started stroking and patting her pussy.

His fingers found her clit with an almost magnetic pull.

Maintaining eye contact, he began to play with the little bundle of nerves with a precision that made her gasp.

Each touch was finetuned like she had a manual, and he had studied it, firm enough to make her moan but never crossing into pain.

His rhythm was impeccable, a slow, deliberate increase that spoke of a man who enjoyed the journey as much as the destination.

He was playing her body like a finely tuned instrument, one only he knew how to master, indulging in her responses as much as she was lost in the sensations he was creating.

The sensation was electric, a surge of pleasure that made her gasp.

The heat was building, the tension coiling tightly within her. “Quinten.” His name on her lips between her ragged breaths was a feather in the wind.

“Let go, Raisa.” His words came out on a growl. “Just feel.”

And she did. The pleasure washed over her in waves, intense and overwhelming. It was like electric dominoes falling in different directions under her skin. She was aware of nothing but how his fingers moved against her, bringing her closer and closer to the edge.



A throbbing need hit her at the apex of her thighs and spread throughout her body like a wildfire. It was like a real moment in the day that was purely for her, and maybe Quinten, too. She couldn't think, couldn't focus on anything but the all-consuming euphoria.

Her body trembled as the pleasure peaked. It was like a hard candy, and she sucked on it until she reached the center with its burst of flavor. She was falling, falling into a pile of tingling ecstasy. She screamed, feeling everything and nothing at the same time.

Gradually, her breathing eased, her heart rate slowing to almost normal. She gasped and shuddered, vaguely aware of Quinten withdrawing his hand from her pants and holding her in a tight grip as she gathered her scattered emotions.

As the waves of pleasure subsided, she lay there, catching her breath, her body still tingling with the aftershocks. Quinten stroked her cheek, and she could smell herself on his fingers. It could have been embarrassing, but instead it felt... intimate.

She let herself melt against him for a few seconds longer, cheek pressed to his shoulder, his fingers still lightly stroking her back. Then, reluctantly, she shifted off his lap and slid back into the passenger seat, tugging her clothing in place as she exhaled.

She looked at him, letting a soft smile playing on her lips. "What about you?"

He let out a pained chuckle and adjusted himself behind his zipper. "I'll survive. I'm getting used to being hard around you." He started the car, shifted into gear, and pulled away from the curb.

Raisa couldn't stop studying him, and her mind raced faster than Joey Logano in his Ford Mustang Dark Horse.

Quinten Carrington wants me? Bad?

Oh my gosh, oh my gosh —the girly-girl inside her was waving pompoms and doing a happy dance. Her inner critique partner was scoffing, telling her that her tits bounced harder than her pompoms. But for now, she let herself bask in the afterglow, the memory of his touch still fresh on her skin.

Quinten drove her home, the scent of her arousal filling the car like the sweetest perfume.

His mind raced with the memory of her body pressed against his, the way she had responded to his touch.

He should get a medal for ignoring his inner caveman and not doing what he wanted to do right at that moment, which involved throwing her down and sinking his cock into her wet heat until his balls touched her buttocks.

The image of her, spread out before him, her eyes clouded with desire, was almost too much to bear.

He wanted to tie her to a bed and feast on her pussy until she begged him to stop.

He wanted to edge her until that brilliant mind of hers shut down and she could only process what he was doing to her.

The thought of her losing control, of her surrendering completely to the pleasure he could give her, made his pulse race.

He wanted to have her sweet mouth around his dick, to see her cheeks hollow as she sucked him off.

He imagined her lips wrapped around him, the sight of his entire length disappearing between those plush lips until she had to fight her gag reflex.

The idea of her on her knees, looking up at him with those big, innocent eyes, was a too-appealing picture.

Fuck, he shouldn't think like this. He might embarrass himself and come in his pants.

This wasn't high school, but he felt like the Cinderella from the prom—his wallflower turned into a princess—was his and his alone.

The warmth of her body still lingered on his skin, and the way she had melted against him was driving him crazy.

He glanced over at her, her face flushed, her lips swollen from their kisses.

She looked like she had been thoroughly ravished, and the thought sent a fresh wave of desire through him.

He wanted to pull over, to take her right there in the car, but he couldn't.

He had to get her home, maintain some semblance of decorum.

As a former top athlete, he had more control over his body and urges than the average man.

Nevertheless, the drive appeared to be endless, every red light a torture.

He could feel her observe him and knew she was thinking about what had happened between them only moments ago.

When he turned to face her at the next red light, the question in her eyes and the cogs in her mind turning were palpable.

Between them, the air pulsed with everything unsaid, thick with want and the ache of holding back.

When they drew up in front of her Nana's house, he killed the engine, and the already charged silence in the car turned expectant. He faced her, his gaze intense, searching her face for any sign of what she was thinking.

"Despite the thing with Vanessa, I had a wonderful time tonight," she whispered.

"Me, too." His voice was rough with emotion, and he reached out, brushing his fingers against her cheek and tracing the line of her jaw. She leaned into his touch, her eyes fluttering closed.

"I don't want this night to end." The husky words were roughened with the echo of her release, and slight tremble to them dug under his skin like a hook.

Quinten's grip on the steering wheel tightened.

God, that voice. He wanted to bend her over the hood and bury himself in her until she couldn't say another word.

But she was looking at him with wide, searching eyes, and the raw edge in her tone wasn't just lust. It was vulnerability.

His heart raced, and his breath was trapped in his throat. He wanted her more than he had ever wanted anything, but he didn't want to rush her. He didn't want to push her into something she wasn't ready for.

“We have all the time in the world.”

The words felt heavier than they should and lodged in the back of his throat. He wanted to pull her closer, crush her against him, and erase the space between them but instead, he threaded his fingers deeper into her hair, holding on like he wasn't quite ready to let go.

Every nerve in his body screamed to claim her right there, now, but somewhere beneath the ache was a quieter voice—one that told him this, whatever this was, had to last.

“We can take this one step at a time.” His libido screamed at him, but his inner gentleman nodded approval.

She sighed, leaning in to brush her lips against his in a hint of a kiss. A hum of regret escaped her. “I should go inside.”

“I'll walk you to your door.” He opened his door and stepped out into the cool night air.

### Chapter Thirteen

Quinten's hands tightened on the steering wheel as he merged onto the empty road, the faint scent of Raisa's arousal still lingering in the car, heady and sweet.

It was the kind of fragrance that snuck up on him to remind him of her coming all over his hand that sent his settled dick back to hard in an instant.

Damn. He opened the window a crack, letting the cool night air rush in to clear his head. It didn't help.

"Focus, Quinten," he muttered, shaking off the warmth pooling low in his stomach. A distraction. He needed a distraction.

He pressed the hands-free button on the dashboard, the ringing tone cutting through the hum of the engine. Corbin picked up after the third ring.

"Quint? What's up? It's late," Corbin's voice crackled through the speakers. "Has something happened?"

Quinten glanced at the clock. 11:47 p.m. Late was an understatement. "Oh, shit, sorry bro. Did I wake you up?"

"No, no, actually I couldn't sleep, and I was binge-watching Netflix."

"Oh yeah? What series?"

“The Sinner. I’m halfway through season two. It’s awesome.”

“Awesome, huh?” Looking over his shoulder he made a left turn. “Given your preferences, it has a lot of murder and death, right?”

“Right.”

Quinten chuckled. “To each their own.” He preferred documentaries over fiction himself.

“So, what’s up, bro?”

Blinking, Quinten tried to remember why he had called in the first place. “Oh, right. You know that Detective Maloney got hold of some CCTV footage, right?”

Corbin hummed in acquiescence.

“I took Raisa with me.”

“Ah, Raisa.” Corbin’s tone shifted, teasing but laced with a brotherly edge.

Quinten exhaled and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Forget you’re my brother and teasing is your second job and focus. We watched the footage.”

Corbin laughed out loud before clearing his throat. “Yes, sorry. A normal guy takes his girlfriend to the movies, but Mister Documentary takes her to watch CCTV footage. Go on.”

“She’s not my gi—” He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Raisa thinks it’s not Vanessa. Her car and coat—yes but not her.”

Quinten turned onto a quieter street, and the crunch of his tires over snow and salt indicated not many cars had driven here today.

Cautiously, he slowed the car. A man walking his dog came into view under the orange glow of a streetlamp.

The dog stopped to sniff at a bush, taking his time to find the right spot.

Maybe he was a little bit like the dog, sniffing at bushes until he found a scent that would lead him to the truth. He turned his mind back to the conversation. “Raisa pointed out the walk is off, oh, and the shoes don’t match.”

“The shoes?” Corbin sounded skeptical. “What does that mean?”

Quinten raked his dominant hand through his hair. “Have you ever seen Vanessa wear anything other than high heels?” The move brought him another whiff of Raisa still lingering on his fingers, and he almost cursed.

Corbin let out a thoughtful hum. “Not often, but she’s got to own sneakers or joggers, right? I mean, she must do something to maintain that stick figure, and you can’t run in stilettos.”

“True,” Quinten admitted, though the tension in his shoulders didn’t ease. “But then there’s still the way that person in the footage walked... I didn’t see it, but Raisa did. Said it didn’t was like the way Vanessa walked. I didn’t get half of it, but she was pretty convinced.”

“What do you think?”

“She could have a point. I... Hell, I don’t know.”



“What did the police say?”

“I didn’t speak with the detective or her partner Zanetti, there was some technician who showed us the tape. He didn’t look that much invested in the whole business. He was mostly bored, I think.”

Static crackled briefly, until Corbin spoke. “Okay. We need to talk with the detective. I mean, if it’s not Vanessa, then who? And why would someone pretend to be her?”

Quinten tightened his grip on the wheel. “I don’t have those answers. Not yet. It’s suspicious that she disappeared just as we discovered the tampering with the books. Anyway, I have an appointment with the detectives on Monday. Let’s see what their take on the whole thing will be.”

Another hum from his brother.

The dog walker disappeared into the shadows as Quinten passed another streetlamp. The road ahead was empty, stretching out into the quiet of the night.

“We need to figure this out,” Corbin said after a moment. “Why don’t we do a family brunch on Sunday? Get everyone together, go over everything. Bring Raisa.”

Quinten frowned. “Brunch? You think pancakes are going to solve this?”

“No,” Corbin replied, a hint of a smile in his response. “But putting our heads together might. Besides, you could use an excuse to see Raisa again.”

Quinten rolled his eyes, though a small smirk tugged at his lips. “You’re insufferable.”

“And you’re avoiding the fact that she’s got you tied up in knots,” Corbin shot back.

Quinten's smirk faded as he pulled into his driveway, the weight of the conversation settling over him. "Sunday, then. I'll let her know."

"Good. And Quint?" Corbin hesitated, before he added with quiet conviction, "We'll figure this out. Together."

The call disconnected with a soft beep, leaving Quinten alone in the stillness of the car. He leaned back against the headrest and let out a long breath.

Raisa slipped into her home and shut the door quietly behind her. The night air clung to her skin, but the memory of Quinten's touch burned brighter than the cold. She leaned back against the door, her fingers brushing her hips as a shy, incredulous laugh bubbled up.

What are you, seventeen? Making out in a car like some lovestruck teenager? Her lips curved into a smile. It had been reckless, impulsive, and entirely unlike her. But, oh my goodness, it had felt good.

"Raisa." Nana's frail voice from the kitchen was soft but enough to make her jump.

"Nana?" She started, her breath catching as she turned.

Her grandmother appeared in the doorway, a teacup in hand and a light blue robe draped over her thin frame.

The kitchen light cast a soft glow around her, turning her fine white hair into a delicate halo.

Raisa's breath hitched at the sight—Nana had always been the strongest person she knew, but age had softened her, made her fragile in ways Raisa wasn't ready to acknowledge.

“You’re up late,” Raisa said, stepping toward her.

“So are you,” Nana replied with a small smile. “Want some chamomile tea?”

“Yes, please.” Raisa followed her grandmother into the kitchen and sat at the small, well-worn table, watching Nana shuffle around.

“How was it with Quinten?” Nana asked as she poured the tea.

Raisa froze, a jolt of panic racing through her. Did she see us? Her mind scrambled, piecing together alibis before it clicked—Nana meant their visit to the police station. She let out a breath, trying not to laugh at her overreaction.

“It was... interesting,” she said, cautiously choosing her words. “We watched some CCTV footage of someone who might be Vanessa. But... I’m not so sure.”

Nana placed a steaming mug in front of her and sat down across the table, her weathered hands resting on the edge. “Why not?” She pushed forward and cocked her head, looking like a little bird waiting to be fed.

This little birdie wanted information.

Raisa hesitated, wrapping her fingers around the mug for comfort. “The walk was off, for one thing. Vanessa has this confident sway, like she owns every room she enters. This person... didn’t. And the shoes—chunky sneakers. Have you ever seen Vanessa wear anything but heels?”

Nana chuckled. “Not once.”

“That’s what I mean. It doesn’t add up. But the footage is grainy, and I could be wrong.”

“You were always a good observer, child,” Nana said. “And your memory is flawless. If you say it’s not her, then it’s not her.”

Raisa blinked, a rush of warmth spreading through her chest. The absolute confidence in Nana’s words wrapped around her like a comforting blanket. “Thanks, Nana.” Her throat became tight with emotion.

Her grandmother stood, patting Raisa’s hand as she did. “I’m going to bed. I’m too old to stay up this late.”

“I think I’ll take my tea up to my room and write for a bit,” Raisa said. “I’m too wound up to sleep.”

Nana nodded, her eyes twinkling. “You do that, child. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Nana.”

Raisa rose as her grandmother shuffled out of the kitchen, her slippers scuffing against the tiles. Once Nana disappeared into the hallway, Raisa moved to close the curtains, double-check the gas stove, and turn off the light, before taking the narrow staircase up to her quarters.

In her room, Raisa set the untouched mug of tea on her desk and opened her laptop.

She had intended to continue the story where she’d left off, but as her fingers hovered over the keys, her mind drifted back to Quinten.

To the way his lips had felt against hers, firm but coaxing, leaving her breathless and craving more.

Without a second thought, she began typing, the words flowing faster than her brain

could catch up.

The love scene spilled onto the page in vivid detail—heated touches, whispered words, and a connection that was far too personal to be purely fictional.

She didn't stop until she typed the final sentence with a satisfied sigh.

Raisa leaned back, staring at the screen.

Heat bloomed in her cheeks as she reread the scene, realizing how much of her own emotions had bled into the text.

She reached for her mug, took a sip—and grimaced.

The tea had gone cold, and she had left the teabag steeping, making the resultant brew bitter and far too strong.

She set it aside with a small shudder. With a quiet laugh, she saved the document and shut the laptop.

Her phone buzzed on the desk. The device's soft light indicated the arrival of a new text. Her heart gave a small, involuntary flutter when she saw Quinten's name.

I'll pick you up at 11 am on Sunday. We're going to talk with my family about the CCTV. Sleep well and dream of me.

Raisa frowned. Facing his family? She didn't know if she was ready for that. After a moment, she typed a quick reply.

Okay. I'll be ready. Goodnight, Quinten. Sweet dreams.

After dropping her phone on the nightstand, she went into the upstairs bedroom to get ready for the night. When she crawled into bed, she found herself hoping the morning wouldn't come too quickly. For the first time in a long while, she didn't mind losing herself in a dream.

### Chapter Fourteen

Sunday mornings were usually quiet in the Winslow household. Nana had already left for church, her gentle words of encouragement lingering in Raisa's mind from the night before.

"You should take your time with that nice young man at Sunday brunch," Nana had said with a playful wink, adding that her visit to the Wisconsin Museum of Quilts this was about the Vanessa problem.

Of course, he'd invited the family members who worked at Carrington Building Company.

Still, as she found herself surrounded by Quinten's family, their easy camaraderie and warmth made her feel like an outsider looking in. She hadn't come prepared for this, and the weight of their attention was overwhelming.

Quinten must have sensed her unease because he placed a steadying hand on the small of her back, his touch settling her.

"Come on, brunch is ready." Mrs. Carrington waved to a wide, open space, where the dining table was laden with a feast of comfort food.

A platter of crispy bacon sat alongside a dish of creamy-looking scrambled eggs, their golden curds topped with a dash of parsley.

There was a bowl of fresh fruit—vivid reds, yellows, and greens—and a stack of

fluffy pancakes, dusted with powdered sugar and accompanied by a pitcher of warm maple syrup.

Raisa's stomach growled, the enticing smells making her realize she hadn't eaten yet.

Quinten's mother poured orange juice into glasses. "Would you like coffee or tea with your breakfast, Raisa? Take a seat, child. Don't be shy. We are happy to have you here."

Quinten pulled out a chair for her, and she slid into it, grateful for the gesture. The room buzzed with conversation as plates were passed around, everyone piling their dishes high. Corbin reached for the bacon, teasing Quinten about how he'd eaten half the batch before Raisa arrived.

"Don't let him fool you." Quinten shot his brother a mock glare. "Corbin's the real bacon thief in this family."

The laughter was warm, but Raisa couldn't shake the tension in her chest. She knew why they were here, and as the small talk drifted into silence, she braced herself for the inevitable shift in tone.

It was Gavin who steered the conversation.

Sitting at the end of the table, Quinten's cousin had an air of quiet skepticism.

He buttered a slice of toast with meticulous precision before looking up.

"So," he began, his voice measured. "Quinten tells us you're not convinced it's Vanessa in that footage. "

The table stilled, the easy chatter fading. The weight of their focus landed squarely on



her, but she straightened her back, channeling the quiet confidence Nana had instilled in her. “I’m not convinced, no. There are things that don’t add up.”

Gavin raised an eyebrow. “Like what?”

Raisa drew a breath, her mind vibrant despite the nervous flutter in her stomach. “The walk was off. Vanessa’s gait has a distinctive sway. This person didn’t move like that. And the shoes—Vanessa is always in heels. I’ve never seen her wear sneakers.”

Gavin let out a soft laugh, not unkind but undeniably doubtful. “You’re basing this on how someone walks? Walking is walking. It’s not like a fingerprint.”

Corbin chimed in, his tone light but supportive. “I don’t know, Gav. Some people do have a unique stride. Like Dad—he’s got that lumbering walk like he’s still carrying bricks even when he’s not.”

Their father grunted, his lips twitching into a reluctant smile. “Watch it, kid.”

But Gavin wasn’t deterred. “Come on, though. Vanessa’s a model. She’s fit. She probably jogs now and then. Of course she has sneakers.”

Raisa opened her mouth to respond, but Gavin pressed on. “And let’s be real—how good is this footage? I haven’t seen it, but I bet it’s grainy as hell. Probably hard to make out any details.”

Quinten’s father, who had been quiet until now, nodded in agreement. “He’s got a point, Raisa. It’s easy to misinterpret things when the image isn’t clear. Could be a simple mistake.”

The words stung, but Raisa held her ground. Before she could speak, Quinten’s mother interjected. Her voice was firm but kind. “Don’t dismiss her so quickly. Raisa

has a sharp eye. If she says something is off, we should listen.”

Corbin nodded, his expression thoughtful. “I agree with Mom. Besides, she’s the only one who—beside me—has actually spent time studying the footage.”

Raisa glanced at Quinten, who gave her an encouraging nod.

His silent support steadied her, and she found her voice.

“It’s not just a gut feeling,” she said, calm but resolute.

“I’ve been observing people my whole life—how they move, how they carry themselves.

It’s part of what makes me a good writer. Details stick with me.”

“Writer?” Quinten’s left eyebrow slid up.

Her eyes widened. “Erm... yes... well that’s not important. What is important that I’m observant, and I have a good memory for details.”

Gavin leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. “Fair enough, but what if you’re wrong?”

“I’m not.” The words came out stronger than she expected, fueled by a quiet confidence she hadn’t felt in years. She thought of Nana’s unwavering belief in her, the gentle pat on her hand as she’d assured Raisa that her memory and observations were flawless.

The room went quiet for a moment, the tension thick in the air. Then Quinten’s mother smiled. “Well, I, for one, trust your instincts, Raisa, and I think we should all

keep an open mind.”

Quinten’s father didn’t argue, though his expression remained skeptical. Gavin, too, seemed less than convinced, but he didn’t push further.

As the conversation shifted to practicalities—what the next steps would be, who would follow up with the police—Raisa allowed herself a small smile. She might not have swayed everyone, but she’d held her ground. And that, she realized, was enough for now.

Quinten reached under the table and gave her hand a brief squeeze. The simple gesture warmed her more than his scarf around her neck had, and for the first time that morning, she felt like she truly belonged.

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### Chapter Fifteen

Quinten and Raisa stepped out of his parents' house, and the winter sun hung low and blinding against the snow covering the lawn.

Raisa's mind raced with thoughts and snippets of conversations.

She was also somewhat sad her time with Quinten was coming to an end.

She liked being around him. Darn it, she liked him .

She glanced at Quinten, her heart pounding as she met his intense gaze.

Raisa swallowed. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Want to come home with me?" He took her hand and drew a circle with the pad of his thumb.

Raisa hesitated, while goosebumps erupted over her entire body. A brief inner debate flickered through her mind. She was developing feelings for him, and it might be best for her to keep some distance from him. She... oh who am I kidding? She drew a fortifying breath and nodded. "Yes."

As they drove through the winding rural roads, Raisa's anticipation grew.

She knew where he lived but had never been inside, and her curiosity and apprehension mingled.

Would Quinten kiss her again, maybe hold her for a while?

Would he— she pressed her thighs together—would he make her come again with his fingers?

When they arrived after a thirty-minute drive, she recognized some of the design elements from his parents' house in his home now.

He took her hand as he led her inside into a spacious hallway with a beautiful, rounded staircase.

As she ran her fingers along the smooth wooden banister, she remembered the same design in the sprawling two-story building where she had brunch.

“This is beautiful,” she remarked.

Quinten smiled with pride in his eyes. “My house was built by the Carrington Building Company and designed by my dad. I had it done right after I signed my second Packers contract. Figured it was time to invest in something solid, even if I wasn't living here full-time yet.

” Gripping her hand again, he pulled her forward, “Come on.” They entered a large living area with an open kitchen.

“Wow.” She swiveled her head around, taking in the spacious room. “It's very masculine but still homey.”

He grinned. “What did you expect? Frou-frou pillows and throw blankets?”

Raisa laughed. “Of course not, but this doesn't scream bachelor pad to me either.

” She nodded, trying to take in as much of the details as possible at once.

The couch was huge and bulky but had a nice deep blue color and looked comfortable.

Of course, a massive wide-screen TV was mounted on the wall, but there were also pictures featuring houses, sports moments, and family gatherings.

To her surprise, the room was also adorned by a couple of healthy-looking plants. “I like your home. It has character.”

Quinten shrugged. “Mom’s been keeping an eye on it. And I had a housekeeping company swing by a couple times a month. Figured I’d want the place to be tended to, even if I wasn’t around.”

Before she could say more, Quinten stepped closer, trapping her between the wall and his chest. He brought up his arms and braced himself with his hands to cage her in.

When he spoke, his voice had dropped in pitch and was husky. “I want to fuck you so bad. Do you want me, too?” He lowered his forehead against hers.

Raisa blinked at his sudden declaration. He wanted... wowzers !

Her brain short-circuited, and her breath completely halted as he pressed his thigh against her. The friction sent a wave of heat through her body, and she moaned softly. The promise of what was to come made her heart race.

“I do,” she admitted in a small voice.

It was as if she unleashed a beast. Quinten was on her in an instant, his mouth devouring hers, eliciting gasps from her throat as they dueled with their tongues.

Raisa's mind spun as the intensity of his kiss overwhelmed her senses.

He broke their liplock but kept his lower body pressed against hers. His eyes were almost black as he stared at her hungrily. "Come with me."

Quinten took Raisa's hand, guiding her through the hall.

They left a trail of clothing in their wake: her scarf, her coat, his jacket.

He paused to kiss her again, pressing her against another wall.

She kicked off her shoes, and he did the same, shedding his hoody as they stumbled past a door.

Her blouse followed, then they made it another few steps.

The magnetic attraction between them was undeniable as they moved further into his home.

She had never been this passionate with another person in her life.

They reached the massive master bedroom, and a thrill of excitement coursed through her veins. The space was quietly stunning. Masculine enough to fit Quinten, yes, but inviting in a way that made her want to curl up and stay awhile.

A large four-poster bed anchored the room, the dark-wood frame solid and beautifully crafted.

The mattress looked thick enough to drown in, dressed in a rich navy comforter that shimmered faintly in the light.

It had to be silk, or something close to it.

Her feet sank into the plush beige carpet, soft enough to forgive its otherwise neutral tone.

Matching nightstands flanked the bed, their sturdy lines echoing the bedframe's design.

Discreet lighting cast a warm glow, while behind the bed, the wallpaper caught her eye.

It was cream with delicate flourishes of blue and gold that gleamed just enough to feel expensive without trying too hard.

The other walls were painted a matching, creamy white, subtle enough to keep the focus right where it belonged.

Raisa drew a slow breath, taking in the room. It was the kind of space that whispered comfort and confidence, exactly like the man beside her.

Her heart pounded as Quinten led her to the bed.

His grip on her arms was tight but not painful.

Intimacy had always felt overrated to her, the physical act pleasant enough, but never worth the hype.

But nothing like how she felt with him. It was like he took over her mind and body at the same time.

It could have been scary, but it was... exhilarating.



Quinten was a leader—had been on the playing field and showed it in the way he took control of his family business—and it looked like he carried those dominant ways over with him into the bedroom.

She wasn't going to object to that.

Quinten pushed her onto the bed, roaming his hands over her body possessively.

He followed her with his bodyweight and pressed her into the mattress, and she gasped as he pinned her wrists above her head, his mouth finding hers in a searing kiss that left her breathless.

He trailed his kisses down her neck, his teeth grazing her skin and sending waves of pleasure as she arched into his touch.

Still holding her wrists, he moved lower and traced a path to her breasts with his lips, biting, licking, and sucking at the mounds through the fabric of her bra. He took his time and circled his tongue around her nipples until she begged for more.

“Hold on to the slats of the headboard, bright eyes.”

With her thoughts dissolving into a haze of pleasure, she struggled for a moment to comprehend his order. However, when he moved her hands and she touched polished wood, she understood what he wanted.

She curled her fingers around the smooth surface, and warmth streamed over her when he whispered, “Good girl,” in her ear.

“Don't let go until I tell you you can, okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I mean it, Raisa. In here, I call the shots.” Quinten moved his hands to her thighs, spreading them apart as he settled between them.

Oh my gosh. She was naked and he had a front seat view of her large thighs, flabby belly, and exposed pussy. She tried to draw her legs together and lowered her hands to cover her body.

“Oh no.” Quinten gripped her hands and carefully squeezed them.

Raisa wanted to die of embarrassment.

“Wow, wow, what just happened here?” He settled beside her and stroked her hair from her face.

“I, uhm, I... Can...” She swallowed. “Can we close the curtains? It’s so light in here.”

“Light?” His eyebrows knit together, and he narrowed his eyes as he studied her. “Are you self-conscious? Is that it?”

She didn’t speak, didn’t flinch, or did she?

“Goddamn it!”

She winced—both at his curse and at the venom in his tone.

“Bright eyes, you are a beautiful woman, and I love every single inch of your body. I want to look at it, touch it, be inside it. I want you so goddamn much my cock is hard when I’m around you. Every. Single. Time.”

Pinning her to the bed with his body weight, he leaned over to the nightstand and pulled out something red.

What is that?

Before she had a chance to look, he slipped red rope around her wrists and tied the ends to the headboard. “If you want me to stop, tell me. But if you don’t call it a halt, I’m going to tie you to my bed and feast on your pussy until you beg me to fuck you.”

Her nipples pebbled, and wetness trickled from her pussy to her buttocks.

“Are you going to tell me to stop?”

“N-no.” She shook her head against the pillow.

“Good.”

God fucking dammit!

Quinten wanted to edge her until that brilliant mind of hers shut down and she could only feel what he was doing to her.

After binding her wrists and tying her legs wide apart, Quinten took a moment to admire her. He shouldn’t do this the first time they made love, but Raisa had too many hangups and body issues.

Unbelievable. She is gorgeous.

Big enough for his large body to fit, soft enough to provide some padding, and sturdy enough that he didn’t have to worry about breaking her when he was passionate and rough in the bedroom.

Quinten’s heart pounded as he looked down at Raisa. Her wrists were bound, and her legs were spread wide—an entire playing field for him to conquer.

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He leaned down to brush his lips against her skin as he began to explore her body. “You’re so beautiful, Raisa,” he murmured, his voice husky with desire. “I love how smart you are, how you’re not afraid to speak your mind.” He kissed her neck, her collarbone, each word a caress.

He took his time playing with her breasts and nibbling on her skin, discovering what her hot spots were. He loved how responsive she was, and how she struggled with her breathing and the bindings as he drove her up and up.

Grinning, he noticed how her belly quivered, and her legs shook once he settled between her thighs and looked his fill.

“My baby likes to be tied down and helpless,” he murmured, swiping a finger through her wet folds and stroking the inside of her thigh, letting her feel for herself how wet she was for him.

Raisa’s breath hitched, her eyes fluttering open to meet his gaze. “Quinten,” she whispered, her voice trembling with a mix of fear and desire.

“Are you ready to come for me?”

He didn’t wait for her to answer, but settled in. He found her most sensitive spot with his mouth and began to feast on her with a fervor that left her gasping. “You taste so good,” he groaned against her pussy, before dipping his tongue inside and letting it do its magic.

His senses were on fire. He drank in every single detail, how her body responded to

his every touch. She gulped in air and held her breath.

Lifting his head, he pressed a finger inside her. She was so fucking tight, managed to add another, and found the spongy spot. Making a 'come here' gesture with both fingers, he ordered, "Come for me, baby," before lowering his head and sucking her clit into his mouth.

Letting out a hoarse cry, she flew apart beneath his touch. Her hips bucked despite the bindings, and he lapped up every drop of cream she was spilling, enjoying the tangy-sweet taste of her.

She's perfect.

Bringing her down with the soft swipes of his tongue, he withdrew his fingers, grinning when her greedy cunt tried to suck them back in.

Don't worry—you'll be taking my dick next.

Quinten crawled up the mattress slowly, savoring the view. Her body was spread open and flushed, her lashes fluttering against her cheeks while her chest rose and fell in stuttering breaths. He left her ankles bound, liking the way the tension kept her open, but reached for her wrists.

He worked the knot at her wrists so that the bindings loosened, falling away with a soft whisper against the sheets. She didn't say anything—simply blinked up at him, dazed and flushed.

The moment her arms were free, she wrapped them around his neck and pulled him down, pressing her cheek to his shoulder. Her body melted into his, soft and warm and trusting.

Quinten exhaled, tension draining from his chest like air from a balloon. He buried a hand in her hair and held her close, letting her cling to him. Yeah. That was what she needed. Connection. The solid weight of him above her, the reassurance of her hands in motion.

She nuzzled into the crook of his neck with a tiny sigh, and something in his chest tugged hard. He could still feel the damp heat between her thighs, his cock throbbing with the need to be inside her, but he didn't move.

Not yet.

He let her hold him first.

When her breathing regulated, she stirred, and he glanced down at her.

Raise blinked up at him, looking dazed and glowing. He kissed her temple, her jaw, the side of her neck. His caresses were slow and tender passes of his lips that had nothing to do with arousal and everything to do with worship.

She trembled against him, still high, still letting it settle as she quested with her fingertips over his shoulders, up the thick cords of muscle along his neck and across the expanse of his upper back.

She lingered there, almost kneading. He grinned into her hair.

She liked his muscles as much as he liked her softness.

She didn't see herself clearly, not yet. She was too self-conscious and unsure about her own appeal. That was about to change. He'd spend all night, the rest of his life if he had to, fucking the doubt right out of her.

She moved in his arms, breath warm against his collarbone, and those beautiful, sleep-heavy eyes blinked open. “Can I return the favor?”

He cocked his head, brushing a knuckle along her jaw. “Not tonight.” He let his voice drop to a low, possessive rumble. “I want to fuck you, bright eyes. Are you good with that?”

She gave the tiniest nod.

He arched a brow. “That’s not a word, baby.”

Her cheeks darkened, but her voice came out steady enough. “Yes. Please.”

He reached for the nightstand, grabbed a condom, and stood to shed his clothes. She tracked every movement, every inch of skin he revealed. When he rolled the latex on, her eyes stayed fixed on his hands, and his cock twitched under her attention.

He chuckled. “The little fucker is impatient to be in you.”

Her smile was shy, but she held out her arms in invitation.

So fucking sweet!

He leaned in and retied her wrists with practiced movements. Her breath caught, but she didn’t resist. She merely watched him with those blown, trusting eyes.

Quinten knelt between her thighs, positioning himself at her entrance, one hand braced beside her head. “Still good?”

She gave a breathless nod, pelvis lifting in silent plea.

His voice went low, coaxing. “Yeah, I’d like to hear the words.”

“Please, Quinten,” she whispered, breath shaking. “Take me.”

His name on her lips cracked something open inside him. He rocked his hips forward, easing into her inch by inch. She winced—God, she was tight—but he surged forward in one long agonizingly slow thrust, until their groins were flush together.

She gasped, and her muscles gripped him hard.

He stilled, burying his face in her neck, whispering sweet nothings against her skin.

“You’re so hot and tight... Oh baby, you feel so good.

Can’t believe I’m finally inside you.” He kissed the shell of her ear, his breath ragged as he fought against the urge to pound into her.

Her pussy was gripping him like a slick fist. Quinten stayed buried to the hilt, letting her adjust, holding himself still, even as every instinct screamed to move.

Her breath stuttered against his neck, and her body trembled beneath his from the overwhelming stretch of being filled so completely.

“Breathe for me,” he whispered, brushing his lips along her temple. “You’re doing so good, bright eyes. Just let go. I’ve got you.”

He felt the moment her muscles eased, and he kissed her mouth gently before pulling back, savoring the sucking of her wet pussy, until only the tip of his cock remained inside her. Then he slid back in with one long, controlled thrust.

Her head tipped back against the pillow, lips parting on a low moan.



“That’s it,” he murmured. “Let me hear you.”

He drew back, slow and steady, dragging himself through her body’s tight channel. The friction was mind-melting. He could feel every inch of her and how wet she was for him. He savored how she fluttered around his cock as he withdrew nearly all the way.

Then he sank back in, a little harder, watching her mouth part on a gasp. Her wrists flexed in the bindings above her head, but she didn’t pull away. Her legs trembled, still tied wide, every muscle straining toward him.

He set a slow rhythm, angling just right to hit her g-spot with every long, deep stroke.

Each one made her hips lift, her breath catch, and her legs strain against the bindings.

She felt like heaven, velvet heat wrapped around the head of his dick, and she clenched tighter every time he bottomed out.

His pace grew frantic, and he had to grip the bedsheet, fingertips digging in. He rolled his hips again, deeper this time, adjusting his angle until she moaned into his mouth. Her thighs shivered as he hit just the right spot, and her back arched, despite the bindings.

“There.” He dragged his tongue of the column of her throat. “That’s it. That’s where you need me, isn’t it?”

She whimpered in response, her hips trying to follow him when he pulled back again.

He gave her more. Worked in and out of her in long, even thrusts that built slow pressure between them.

Each time he filled her, he kissed a new place: her throat, the dip between her breasts, the swell of her shoulder.

Her fingers curled into fists, her breathing ragged.

“That’s it, bright-eyes,” he whispered, lips at her ear. “Take it. Let me give you everything.”

Her entire body tightened beneath him, every nerve lit up. He felt her flutter around him, building again. Slow strokes turned deeper. More precise. Controlled, but barely. And fuck—he was already fighting the edge.

The half gasps, half helpless whimpers she made fueled the fire building in his spine, but he didn’t rush. He wasn’t ready to give into his body. Not with her looking at him like that.

He kissed her again, devouring the sound of her pleasure.

“You feel like you were made for me,” he growled against her lips. “Perfect fit. Fuck, Raisa—look at me.”

Her eyes fluttered open, glassy and wide, and when their gazes locked something clicked into place.

He thrust deeper, harder now, letting the edge of his control slip. Her back arched, and her breath hitched.

“Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god,” she chanted. “Please... don’t stop.”

He wasn’t going to. Not until she shattered around him again. Not until she knew—without a single doubt—how much he wanted her.

He adjusted his weight, his left hand braced beside her head, the other curling under her ass, tilting her just right. At the next thrust, he hit her clit. The change sent her breath hitching, her eyes flying open, her gaze—darkened—with need fixed on his.

“That’s it,” he murmured, thrusting deep, then grinding his hips into hers. “I can feel you tightening around me. You’re right there, aren’t you?”

She didn’t answer with words, didn’t seem to have the breath for it. Her head tipped back, mouth open on a soundless gasp. Her thighs trembled against the bindings. Then her whole body locked up, every muscle taut and shaking.

Her breathing hitch. He surged into her again, and again. “Come for me.”

And then she shattered.

Her cry tore out of her—raw and wrecked—as her inner walls clamped down on his cock in tight, rhythmic pulses.

Her back arched hard off the mattress, heels digging into the sheets, as she strained against the ties.

Her breath hitched, then caught completely as her orgasm rolled through her in crashing waves.

Her face contorted, overwhelmed, desperate, and beautiful.

Every inch of her begged for more even as she flew apart, her body writhing under him, trembling with release.

It was too much for the precarious hold he had on his control.

Quinten groaned, as her orgasm dragged his right out of him. The hot, tight, and impossibly wet way she clenched around him ripped away the last thread.

His rhythm faltered.

His hips snapped forward, one last time, burying himself to the root. He stilled as his blinding and brutal release crashed through him. Heat surged up his spine and spilled out of him in deep, pulsing waves, drawn from the center of his soul. His body bowed into hers

His heart hammered

His vision dimmed.

His mind blanked.

He clutched her hips, grounding himself her—slick, shaking, and wrapped tight around him—pussy like she never wanted to let him go.

He dropped his forehead to hers, still throbbing inside her, their breath tangling in the narrow space between their mouths.

When the wave finally passed, he kissed her—soft and reverent. “I’m not done with you yet, bright-eyes,” he murmured. “Not even close.”

### Chapter Sixteen

Raisa stirred, the comforting curl of her body mirroring her usual waking position. But that was where the familiarity ended.

A faint trace of Quinten's cologne clung in the air, mingling with something heady, tangy, and sweet. Her nose twitched at the unfamiliar scent, her brows drawing together as she cracked open her eyes. I had sex. I had sex with Quinten. I had wild and kinky sex with Quinten, and I liked it!

She blinked, keeping her breathing steady. She wasn't ready to face him.

The room was dim but far from her cozy, cluttered bedroom. The sheets she was lying on were smoother, the bed wider. Her body ached in all kinds of interesting places. She shifted her legs, and her muscles protested. Her ears started to burn like they were on fire. Oh. Oh. Last night.

A rush of heat surged across her cheeks as fractured images flashed through her mind—his command, the ropes.

The pressure of his cock when he finally surged inside her after making her come more times than she could count.

His dirty talk egging her on as she allowed him access to her body and into her mind.

Her heart thudded as she closed her eyes.

I'll think about that later. She willed her thoughts to focus.

With a shaky inhalation, she scanned the unfamiliar surroundings. A soft light filtered from an ajar bedroom door. It had to be Monday morning.

I need to go to work.

The thought triggered a pang of panic. Oh no, no, no, she was going to do the walk of shame. Or... was it a walk of victory?

A slow smile curved her lips. After last night? Definitely a victory. That man is a champion between the sheets.

She stretched her legs under the covers, each movement slow and deliberate as she unfurled like a cautious chameleon blending into its surroundings.

The cool sheets brushed against her, and she worried her lip as her muscles groaned from the unusual exertion.

Turning over, she noted the rumpled emptiness beside her.

She grazed her fingers over the mattress, and the chill confirmed Quinten had been gone for a while.

Relief trickled in but was soon chased away by disappointment.

What was the protocol here? What do you say to a guy after a night like that?

Uhm, hello-oh, how about 'thank you'!

She smothered a groan . Her pussy was sore—in a good way—from the overuse the

night before. Before Quinten, she had only had sex twice, and it had never been like this. Heck, the man was even better than her favorite toy, and she would never ever have thought she would say that about a person.

The soft creak of the door swinging open startled her upright. Light from the hallway framed a tall silhouette, and her heart leapt. She clutched the blanket to her chest, her pulse thundering in her ears.

“Easy, killer.” Quinten’s low drawl smoothed over her nerves. “You’ve already seen me, and I’ve seen... well, plenty.” His smirk sent another blush burning through her as she yanked the blanket higher, propped up her pillow, and scooted against the headboard in one awkward motion.

Only then did she notice the tray balanced in his hands.

Her jaw slackened. “You made breakfast?”

Quinten, clad in nothing but boxers that left very little to the imagination, set the tray on the nightstand and switched on the side lamp.

The aroma of bacon and coffee wafted toward her, making her stomach rumble.

He plucked a shirt from the floor—his dress shirt from the night before—and handed it to her.

“Here, put this on—you’ll need your hands to eat.” His tone left no room for argument. “While I don’t mind seeing you naked, I want you comfortable enough to eat.”

She slid her arms through the sleeves and fumbled with the buttons. Before she could secure the second, he brushed aside her hands and deftly buttoned the shirt for her.

He stopped three buttons shy of the top, grazing his knuckles over the swell of her breasts.

She sucked in air and didn't miss how the lines beside his eyes crinkled wickedly. Half expecting him to take it further, she braced herself, but he straightened, gave her a soft peck on her lips, and a mumbled, "Good morning, bright-eyes."

The oversized shirt hung loose on her frame, the fabric soft against her skin. She glanced down—no cleavage showing. Thank goodness.

Quinten retrieved the tray, perched beside her on the bed, and placed it on her lap. The mug of coffee wobbled slightly, and she steadied it with both hands.

Unreal.

This man—her man?—had made her breakfast in bed.

"Eat," he ordered gently, spearing a fluffy mound of scrambled eggs with a fork and lifting it to her mouth.

She obeyed, the first bite melting on her tongue. Creamy, perfectly seasoned, warm. He followed it with a bite of buttered toast, and she couldn't hold back a hum of approval.

She had so many thoughts and questions. The most important one— how the hell am I going to make up for the lost time this morning ? "What time is it?"

He fed her another forkful before she could protest.

She swallowed and flicked her gaze toward the window.



He grinned, leaning back against the headboard with an air of smug satisfaction. “A little before 5 AM. I figured you’d need an early start.”

Her jaw slackened again. Could this man be any more perfect?

Before she could find the words to express her gratitude, he fed her a piece of bacon and more toast, leaving her to savor the perfect blend of flavors. “Next time,” he murmured, his voice low, “I’ll wake you early so you can make us biscuits.”

Next time?

Her heart gave a small, hopeful flutter as the words sank in.

### Chapter Seventeen

Raisa traced her fingers over the spines of books in the romantasy section, a soft hum of satisfaction escaping her lips.

The new titles were disappearing faster than she'd anticipated.

"Good problem to have," she murmured, pulling out a notebook to jot down potential reorders.

If this pace kept up, she might even need to expand the section.

The thought made her smile—Winslow's Shelf thriving was precisely the kind of distraction she needed today.

But her focus slipped, her pen pausing mid-word.

I can't believe how I spent last night. Heat crept up her neck as she tried to banish the memory of Quinten's arms around her, the way his breath had tickled her skin, the heady mix of his cologne and something utterly him.

How his take-charge attitude had completely shut down her brain, leaving no room for doubts, and letting her be completely in the moment.

How the ropes had prevented her from doing, well, anything and how the helplessness had heightened her pleasure.

Her heart fluttered, and her cheeks started to burn. Nope. Not going there. Not in the middle of work.

“Getting all red-faced over there?” Lila’s teasing cut through her thoughts, and Raisa nearly jumped as she slapped shut the notebook.

She turned to face her employee, clutching the notebook a little too tightly. I am not about to tell her about last night—nuh-uh. Not happening. “What? No.” She touched her cheek. “It’s the heat. Isn’t it hot in here?”

Lila leaned on the counter, her grin pure mischief. “No, it’s not, but nice try. What’s got you all flustered?”

Think, Raisa. Think fast. “I think I’m getting into my menopause,” she said with mock seriousness, turning back to the shelf. That’s a good excuse. If I’m the only one feeling hot, might as well blame hot flashes, right?

Lila barked out a laugh, crossing her arms. “Oh, please. You’re way too young for that. These are hormones, all right, but the get down and dirty and make babies hormones.”

“Lila!” Raisa spun around, her exclamation coming out louder than intended. A few customers glanced their way, and the gentle murmur of folks flipping through pages or chatting over lattes stilled. Her cheeks burned even hotter as Lila doubled over in laughter, waving off their curious looks.

“Okay, okay. I’ll stop,” Lila said between giggles, wiping at her eyes. “For now.”

The chime of the door drew their attention, and Raisa exhaled, grateful for the distraction.

Two men strolled in, and Raisa immediately recognized Gavin and Corbin.

They were talking animatedly, Gavin gesturing with his hands while Corbin smirked at whatever his cousin was saying.

She offered a polite smile and straightened her posture.

“Welcome to Winslow’s Shelf. What can I get for you?” she asked, stepping toward the counter.

Gavin returned her smile, leaning casually against the counter. “I’ll have a cappuccino and whatever today’s special is.”

Corbin, beside him, folded his arms and scanned the shop, his sharp gaze eventually settling on her. “Make that two. The strawberry tart looks delicious.”

“Coming right up,” Raisa replied, turning to Lila, who immediately got to work on steaming milk for the cappuccinos.

Raisa plated the tarts herself, their custard centers gleaming under the light, topped with glossy strawberries.

As she carried the tray to their table, her earlier distraction melted into curiosity.

She couldn’t remember the last time Gavin had come by—or Corbin. This was new.

“Here you go,” she said, setting down the drinks and pastries. “Enjoy.”

“Thanks,” Gavin said, picking up his coffee. “So, you’re going to the police station with Quint later today, huh?”

Raisa blinked at the unexpected question. “Oh, uh, yeah. I’m only trying to help.”

“Are you going to tell them about your suspicion?”

“About the footage? Yeah.”

“You’re absolutely sure about it not being Vanessa?” Gavin asked. Corbin raised an eyebrow at his probing but stayed silent, sipping his cappuccino.

“Yes, I am. Absolutely, totally and utterly,” Raisa replied firmly. “Why?”

Gavin shrugged and popped a piece of the strawberry tart into his mouth.

“Just don’t want you to get in trouble with the police.

When I spoke to Devaney earlier this week, she mentioned they’re getting frustrated.

She said something about you wasting time and resources. It could come back to bite you.”

The words hit Raisa like a sudden gust of cold air. “What do you mean?”

He waved a hand, brushing off the sharpness in her voice. “It’s just... I mean, how can you be so sure? These things are tricky, and sometimes it’s hard to tell with grainy footage. Plus, Vanessa’s been seen running before. She has sneakers, you know.”

Raisa’s jaw tightened, but she kept her tone even. “I’ve never seen her without heels. And it’s more than the shoes; it’s the walk, the whole posture. It wasn’t her.”

Corbin, who had been listening this far, chimed in, leaning forward. “You sound

pretty confident. Hope you're right."

"I am." Raisa's response was steadier now, bolstered by a quiet conviction she honestly didn't know where it came from. "I wouldn't say it if I wasn't."

Before she could question Gavin further about his statement, a customer near the shelves called for her assistance.

"Excuse me," she said with a polite nod to Gavin and Corbin before heading away.

By the time she returned, the table was empty, the cappuccino cups neatly stacked, and the tart plates cleared.

Lila looked up as Raisa approached the counter. "Those two didn't stay long."

"No," Raisa murmured, frowning. What a strange thing for Gavin to say.

She glanced at the clock. Almost closing time. But Gavin's words stuck in her head, gnawing at her thoughts as she started wiping down the counter. Wasting police time? Why would he say that?

Quinten leaned against his truck's passenger door, the crisp January air biting at his skin.

The yellowish glow from the streetlight overhead cast soft shadows, bouncing off the frost-rimmed shop windows as Raisa turned the key in the lock.

She tugged the door twice to make sure it was secure, then checked it again.

Her movements were quick, almost mechanical, her face set in concentration.

Her shoulders hunched slightly as she turned toward him, her steps deliberate but lacking their usual bounce. When their eyes met briefly, she offered a small smile—lukewarm at best—and before she darted her gaze away, as if pretending to adjust the scarf he'd given her the day before.

He pushed away from the car and closed the distance between them, leaning in for a kiss.

For a few seconds, she seemed almost frozen before responding to him.

Uncomfortable with PDA, huh?

“Hey.” He stepped back to give her more space and opened the truck door for her. “You all set?”

“Yeah, thanks,” she murmured, as she climbed into the seat. She settled in, tugging the scarf higher around her neck, her attention fixed on the dashboard.

Quinten shut the door and went around to his side.

He climbed in, letting the truck's heater kick in before saying more.

Usually, she'd make some comment about the cold or crack a joke, but the silence lay heavy between them.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye as he pulled onto the main road.

Her posture was rigid, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, and her face was turned toward the passenger window.

“Everything okay?” he asked after a moment, keeping his tone casual.

“Mm-hmm,” she hummed without looking at him.

Well, that’s not convincing. He frowned, taking in the position of her shoulders and the tightness in her jaw. “Long day at the shop?”

“Yeah,” she said, reaching up to twist a strand of hair.

One-word answers. Not a good sign. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, searching for something else to say. “You seem a little... distracted. Is it about the meeting with the detectives?”

She shook her head and was still avoiding his gaze. Damn it!

“No.”

“Something bad happen?”

“No.”

“Okay, well, how was your day?”

“Fine.”

That was it? Just fine . Quinten clenched his jaw as he battled inwardly with his irritation then decided to let it go for the present.

She wasn’t a moody person and certainly didn’t take out her irritation on others.

Whatever was on her mind, she unmistakably wasn’t ready to share.

Maybe it was nerves about the police meeting, or maybe it was something else



entirely.

Does she regret last night? his brain supplied unhelpfully, which made his chest tighten.

The rest of the drive passed in uncomfortable silence, he pressed a few buttons, and a local radio station filled the quiet.

Every so often, he stole a glance at her, catching the way she fidgeted with the edge of her scarf or how she never settled her gaze on one thing for long.

She was clearly preoccupied, and it was driving him crazy trying to figure out why.

“Hey.” He kept his tone soft and gentle, as if she was a skittish foal. “We’re going to figure all of this out. Don’t worry.”

Her lips parted, as if she wanted to say something, but she hesitated, before pressing her mouth into a stubborn line and nodding instead.

### Chapter Eighteen

Quinten parked the car next to his brother's faded-red clunker and turned off the ignition.

In the quiet that followed, a series of faint pings and ticks began to rise from the engine as the metal cooled and contracted.

He let the noises fade into the background, his focus shifting to Raisa.

She hadn't moved, her hands resting tightly in her lap, her knuckles pale against the dark fabric of her coat.

"You ready?" He forced himself to keep his voice light.

Her hand tightened on her purse strap, the leather creaking under the pressure. "Let's get this over with."

Not exactly reassuring. He reached over and gave her knee a gentle squeeze, surprised at the tension coiled there. She didn't pull away, but she didn't relax either. He let his hand linger a moment longer before stepping out into the biting January air that smelled faintly of salt and ozone.

Raisa climbed out after him, shutting the door a little harder than necessary.

Quinten adjusted his coat and waited for her to join him on the sidewalk.

She didn't look at him as they headed to the entrance, her boots tapping sharply against the concrete.

Above them, the precinct's security light buzzed faintly, haloing her in its cold glow.

Her movements were too mechanical and stiff.

She fumbled with her scarf, as if trying to buy herself time, then moved the strap of her purse an inch higher on her shoulder.

Once they reached the frosted glass doors, he discerned the faint outlines of two figures on the waiting benches.

As he let Raisa in, he didn't miss how she stiffened at the sight of Gavin and Corbin.

He should have warned her that Gavin had called him earlier, telling him he would be there to support them.

And Corbin... well, he was always solid. Still, his brother's and cousin's presence might add more pressure on Raisa, and he should have taken that into account.

Raisa slowed, and her brows drew together.

Quinten settled a hand at the small of her back and tried to ignore how good her ass looked in the dark blue denim jeans.

He failed. A rush of heated air blasted against his face, providing the distraction he needed.

The chemical scent of cleaning detergent and pine air freshener battled against the scent of stale coffee, old sweat, and something sour he didn't try to put a name to it.

“Hey.” Gavin gave them an easy smile, his tone light and breezy, as always. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat, giving Quinten a nod before shifting his attention to Raisa. “Thought we’d come check in. Big moment and all that.”

Raisa gave him a cursory glance and pressed her lips into a tight smile. “Something like that.”

Gavin didn’t miss a beat, his smirk deepening. “Don’t worry too much. You’re not on trial here.”

“Yet,” she muttered under her breath, just loud enough for Quinten to hear. He frowned but didn’t comment, instead nodding a greeting to Corbin, who gave him a firm clap on the shoulder.

“Let’s go,” Quinten said, steering Raisa gently toward the receptionist’s desk, where a bored-looking officer motioned them through. Gavin and Corbin followed at a respectful distance. Raisa kept her head high, but tension radiated off her.

They were ushered into a small room with plain white walls, a steel table, and a flickering fluorescent light overhead. Detective Maloney stood waiting, a clipboard in hand.

Her short silver hair was neatly styled, and her angular features gave her an androgynous look that leaned toward the masculine.

Dressed in a sharp navy blazer over a crisp white shirt and tailored slacks, she looked professional and efficient, with no extra frills.

Her athletic build and confident posture showed she took care of herself, and the fine lines around her eyes suggested she had plenty of experience—both in life and on the job.

Her gaze was sharp and steady, the kind that would make people think twice before lying, yet there was an approachable quality to her as well.

Despite her no-nonsense demeanor, there was something about her calm, self-assured appearance that put Quinten at ease, like she'd seen it all and wasn't easily rattled.

She carried herself with the quiet confidence of someone who knew exactly who they were and what they were doing.

She nodded to them as they entered, then glanced over Raisa with what Quinten could only describe as quiet curiosity. Detective Zanetti joined a moment later, balancing a notebook and a laptop and setting them on the table before sitting down.

Detective Zanetti was the picture of polished femininity, in stark contrast to her partner's no-nonsense edge.

Her honey-blond hair was swept into a sleek ponytail, with a few loose strands framing her soft, heart-shaped face.

She wore a tailored gray blazer over a blush-pink blouse that hinted at a floral pattern, paired with slim trousers and heels that clicked softly against the floor when she walked.

Her warm smile made her more like a friendly neighbor than a cop.

While Maloney came across as tough and unyielding, Zanetti exuded patience and understanding, but both broadcasted an undeniable air of authority.

"Now we're all here." Maloney gestured for them to sit. "Let's get started."

Quinten pulled out a chair for Raisa, but she hesitated before sitting, smoothing the

wrinkle-free fabric of her sweater. She folded her hands on the table in front of her and hunched her shoulders. He took the seat beside her, cradling his hands in his lap to keep from reaching out to her again.

“We’ve made some progress,” Maloney began, flipping open her clipboard. “We located Vanessa’s car.”

Raisa inhaled sharply, and Quinten glanced at her. Her eyes widened a bit, though her expression stayed neutral. If only she’d look at him—give him something—but she kept her gaze locked on Maloney.

“Abandoned on a back road about six miles outside of town. Tests on the car revealed a large amount of blood in the trunk. The blood type matches Vanessa’s.”

Raisa stiffened beside him, and Quinten’s chest tightened. He glanced at Gavin and Corbin across the table. Gavin leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, his face unreadable. Corbin’s brows drew together in what looked like concern.

“But you can’t confirm it’s hers?” Although Raisa’s question had come out steady, there was a faint tremor at the edges of her voice.

“Not yet,” Zanetti said, her tone measured. “We need DNA to be certain, but her mother refused to cooperate.”

Quinten frowned. “Refused? Vanessa’s mother is always so...” He struggled to find the right word. “Soft-spoken and sweet. Not someone who would go against the police or wouldn’t want to help find her daughter.”

Maloney gave a grim nod. “Her behavior’s likely a result of her Alzheimer’s. Advanced cases can lead to significant personality changes—agitation, hostility.”

Zanetti pushed a laptop toward the center of the table and opened a video file. “This is from the day before the car was found,” she said, hitting play. “Raisa and Quinten, you have already seen it.” The grainy footage showed a woman stepping out of a vehicle, her movements clipped and deliberate.

“Vanessa,” Maloney said simply, folding her arms. “Clearly alive and well at that moment.”

Quinten glanced at Raisa. She was leaning forward, her eyes narrowing as the footage played. “That’s the footage the technician showed us. That’s not her.”

Maloney arched a brow. “Her best friends, Beth Ashford and Devaney Martin, both identified her. Recognized the coat and the car.”

Raisa parted her lips as if to argue, but she hesitated, pressing them into a firm line. Her shoulders squared, and she pointed at the screen. “Pause it. Right there.”

Zanetti obliged, freezing the frame. Raisa leaned closer, her voice steadier now. “Look at the angle of her arm. It’s stiff and unnatural. Vanessa walks with an enviable grace. And look at the shoes. She was always in heels because she’s so, uhm, height challenged.”

Quinten bit back a laugh. You can call her just short, baby!

Maloney exchanged a glance with Zanetti, who tapped her pen against the table.

“We are unconsciously biased or have selective perception. It refers to the tendency to perceive and interpret information in a way that aligns with our existing beliefs, experiences, and expectations,” Raisa added, turning back to the detectives.

“It’s like how magicians trick the eye. People see what they expect to see, not what’s

actually there.

Our brains are wired to take shortcuts, and while it helps us make quick decisions, it also means we don't question the first impression we form.

Think about it—our brains process an overwhelming amount of information every second, but we're only consciously aware of a tiny fraction of it.

To manage that overload, we rely on patterns, assumptions, and experiences, most of which operate on autopilot. ”

She paused, glancing at the frozen image on the screen.

“When you expect Vanessa to be there—when you combine her car, and you recognize her coat—your mind fills in the gaps. It's not deliberate; it is how our mind works.

But it's why eyewitness testimonies are often unreliable and why we have to double-check the facts.

What we see isn't always the truth—it's what we've been conditioned to believe. ”

Stunned once again by her intelligence, Quinten could stare open-mouthed at his woman.

Fucking brilliant.

He checked the others. The detectives exchanged a glance before staring at Raisa, and they were clearly impressed. As they should be!

Corbin was gnawing on his bottom lip while nodding. Next to Corbin, Gavin sat



frozen in his chair—his eyes fixed on the stilted person in the footage as all the color drained from his face.

### Chapter Nineteen

Quinten sat stiffly in his chair, the stunned silence in the room heavy enough to make his ears ring.

No one spoke, not even Raisa, who had gone beet-red.

Her gaze was locked on the frozen frame on the laptop screen, her lips pressed into a thin line.

He glanced at the detectives, waiting for them to say something, anything, to break the tension.

In the booming silence that felt like hours but had likely only been seconds, Detective Maloney started to speak like she was weighting her words.

“That actually makes sense. Thanks for pointing it out. We will revise our timeline.”  
Her expression stayed carefully neutral.

“We’ll keep looking for Vanessa. We’re not giving up on her. ”

Detective Zanetti nodded, closed the laptop, and folded her hands on the table. “This footage is only one piece of the puzzle. We’ll continue following the leads and gathering evidence. Your observations, Raisa, have been noted and will be taken seriously.”

Raisa glanced toward Zanetti but said nothing.

Detective Maloney rose from her seat, signaling the end of the meeting. “Thank you for coming in. We’ll be in touch if we have any updates.”

Quinten stood, turned to Raisa, and reached for her coat that hung on the back of her chair. She didn’t look up, and her head was still slightly bowed. He held it open for her, and after a brief hesitation, she slipped her arms into the sleeves.

She moved for her scarf, but Quinten intercepted her hands and pushed them aside, wrapping the scarf around her neck himself.

“I’ve got it,” he said quietly, ignoring her small protest. He took his time, adjusting the fabric so it lay just right, his fingers brushing her skin as he worked.

There was something intensely satisfying about the act, a quiet intimacy that reminded him how much he liked taking care of her—not merely in the bedroom but in all the little ways that mattered.

“Thank you.” Her voice was muted. Where was the confident woman who explained selective perception in a way even a jock like him could understand?

He gave her a reassuring smile, resting his hand lightly on her back as they turned toward the door.

Before leaving, he glanced at Corbin and Gavin.

His brother gave him a nod, his expression steady and reassuring.

Gavin, however, seemed lost in thought, his usual easygoing demeanor replaced by something more subdued.

He hadn’t said much during the meeting, and now he trailed behind them, his hands

shoved deep into his pockets.

Quinten guided Raisa out of the precinct and held the door open for her. The cold night air hit them as they stepped outside. After the stuffy atmosphere in the police station, it was like a slap in the face.

Corbin followed him and gave Quinten a brief pat on the back as they made their way to the cars. “She’s sharp.” He jerked his head toward Raisa. “You’ve got a good one there.”

Quinten inclined his head in silent agreement, but his focus drifted to Gavin, who still hadn’t said a word.

His cousin trailed a few steps behind, his hands still buried in his coat pockets, his head bowed against the chill.

Normally, Gavin would’ve been making jokes or teasing Raisa by now, but instead, he gazed into the distance, his expression closed off and unreadable expression.

“Everything okay, Gav?” Quinten’s question came out unnaturally loud as it cut through the silence.

Gavin glanced up. His face was unnaturally pale under the streetlights. “Yeah,” he said dismissively. “Just... thinking.”

Quinten frowned but didn’t press. Instead, he turned to Raisa, who was fiddling with the strap of her purse, her gaze distant. “What about you? You good?”

She nodded, though she didn’t quite meet his gaze. “I’m fine. Only... tired, I guess.”

Corbin stepped up to Gavin’s side and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Let’s head

out. It has been a long day.”

“Yeah,” Gavin murmured.

Quinten folded his arms as the two men went to Corbin’s car, their figures silhouetted against the glow of the streetlights. He couldn’t shake his suspicion that something was off with Gavin, but he didn’t have the mental bandwidth to deal with it right now. His focus was on Raisa.

Turning back to her, he gave her a gentle smile. “Do you want to come back with me, or should I take you home?”

She hesitated, her fingers tightening around the strap of her purse. “I think I’d like to see Nana.”

He nodded, opening the passenger door for her. “All right. Let’s get you home.”

Raisa sat stiffly in the passenger seat and stared out the window without truly seeing her surroundings.

Gavin hates me. He hates me!

The thought spiraled through her mind, leaving a fiery trail like she was carving it in with relentless precision. And what about that stupid ramble about perception?

Like they care .

Her cheeks flushed hot as she replayed her long-winded explanation in the precinct.

Why do I always spout stupid information like some walking thesaurus? Wikipedia Winslow. Ha—that’s another suited nickname.

She folded her arms tightly across her chest, pushing the fabric of her scarf up so it brushed her chin. The soft, warm fabric did nothing to soothe her.

The sudden touch of Quinten's hand on her shoulder startled her so much her head nearly hit the roof of the car. She jerked around to face him, heart pounding. He was observing her. She frowned.

Shouldn't he watch the road?

The thought came and went, only for her to realize he hadn't even started the car yet.

"I want to ask you if you're okay, but you clearly aren't. And neither is Gavin."

Her stomach clenched at the mention of his cousin. She flinched, and Quinten's sharp eyes didn't miss it. "Did something happen between you two?"

"No." The word escaped too quickly. "Of course not." Even to her own ears, the words sounded brittle and unconvincing.

"Raisa ." He lowered his voice and infused that one word with enough menace to cut through glass.

Her resolve crumbled under the weight of that tone.

"He came into the shop earlier today," she blurted, her words tumbling over one another.

"Corbin was with him, but Gavin... he made these comments. About how I should be sure about what I was telling the police, how I shouldn't waste their time.

" Her throat tightened, and she glanced down at her hands, twisting her purse strap

like a lifeline. “I think he hates me.”

Quinten’s brow rose, his expression unreadable as he listened without interrupting. It was like a dam had burst, and she couldn’t stop the flood.

“Back in there, he seemed almost in shock. And his behavior’s been so off since... I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Uh-huh,” Quinten said.

“What do we do?” she asked, her heart thudding heavily.

“There’s nothing we can do right now,” he said after a long pause, drumming his fingers once on the steering wheel. He started the car, the rumble of the engine filling the silence. “I’ll take you home.”

As he pulled onto the road, Raisa glanced sidelong at him, the streetlights played hide and seek with the shadows across his face. Something dark and dangerous flickered in his expression, tightening his jaw and hardening his eyes.

“You’re not going to confront him, are you?” she asked.

“I’d like to,” he admitted, “but I won’t. If he has anything to do with it, I don’t want to alert him.”

Relief washed over her, loosening the knot in her chest, but it came with a dose of apprehension she couldn’t quite shake.

The idea of Gavin—smiling, easygoing Gavin—being connected to something so sinister didn’t sit right with her.

Yet the uncertainty lingered, like a shadow stretching long and far in the back of her mind.

Quinten briefly lifted his hand from the wheel to rest it on her knee, which comforted her in a way she desperately needed.



### Chapter Twenty

After a restless night filled with vivid, haunting dreams, Raisa had to struggle to keep her eyes open by mid-afternoon.

The dreams had started innocently enough, with Quinten's touch lingering on her skin, their bodies entwined in a way that made her wake panting and wet.

But that wasn't the worst of it. The second half of the night carried darker visions as she tossed and turned.

The grainy footage of the woman stepping from the car replayed in her mind, but this time, the face looking back at her wasn't Vanessa's but Gavin's.

She had startled awake, her pulse racing, only to fall back into another nightmare.

This time, it was Corbin's face on the screen.

Each dream had been too vivid, the faces so real they clung to her like cobwebs even after waking.

She had given up on sleep entirely. Instead, she had dragged herself to the shop in the pre-dawn hours and dived into a baking frenzy to drown out her lingering unease.

Raisa stood behind the counter and suppressed a yawn, as the comforting hum of conversations, clatter of cutlery, the hissing coffee machine, and soft music filled the shop.

Business was steady for a Tuesday, with a handful of customers browsing the shelves or enjoying their coffee and pastries at tables near the window.

She glanced at the clock. Only an hour left until closing time.

Movement at the door signaled incoming customers, and she straightened reflexively.

Her heart sank when Beth and Devaney swept into the shop.

As usual, Beth led the way, her blond curls bouncing as she sauntered to the counter.

Devaney trailed behind her, her dark hair cascading over her shoulders like a raven's wing, her perfectly arched brows raised as if she were too good to be here. Raisa forced a polite smile.

"Well, well, there are even some customers in here." Beth's voice dripped with condescension. "Must be a relief for you to make some money, huh?"

Raisa swallowed the sharp retort on the tip of her tongue, plastered on a polite smile, and instead asked in a neutral tone, "What can I get you?"

Beth smirked, leaning against the counter. "I'll take a vanilla latte. Extra foam."

"Coming right up." Raisa reached for a large mug.

Despite the irritation prickling under her skin, she poured all her love for coffeemaking into the beverage.

"I'll have the same," Devaney said.

Raisa blinked, caught off guard. Devaney rarely ordered anything, likely because she

assumed Raisa would spit in it.

The thought brought a flicker of amusement.

She half turned to hide her smirk, but it was soon extinguished by the unsettling sway of Devaney's hips as she moved toward a vacant table.

Like all the cheerleaders, she walked with deliberate, practiced grace.

The click of her heels against the wooden floor was unusually loud.

Raisa's gaze dropped to Devaney's feet. Normally, she didn't wear heels, Raisa knew that much.

With her taller-than-average frame and large feet, Devaney rarely drew attention to them.

She preferred sneakers, like the red, white, and black Nike Air Jordans with the distinctive pattern.

Steadying herself with a hand braced on the edge of the countertop, her mind raced.

Could it really be Devaney? The possibility made her stomach churn.

She glanced back at the table where Devaney now sat, looking around the shop with disdain written all over her face, like a queen who was visiting a peasant living in a trailer.

Her heart pounded, her mind screaming at her to not act rashly. This was more than a coincidence. The heels, the order, the way Devaney swanned into the shop like she owned the place—everything.

The skin between Raisa's shoulder blades prickled, her whole body going still. She didn't want to turn her back on them. The idea of walking away—of showing them the vulnerable line of her spine—made her throat tighten. Her lizard brain told her she should keep them where she could see them.

She wanted to act, but how? Devaney couldn't leave, not until she figured out what to do. She forced herself to focus on making the lattes.

Could it really be Devaney?

Did she have something to do with Vanessa's disappearance?

This seemed absurd, but the evidence was mounting.

Or is my dislike for the woman clouding my judgment?

Raisa's hands shook as she carried the drinks over and placed them on the table.

Beth reached for her latte, her sharp eyes narrowing. "You took your sweet time with that."

"Sorry about that," Raisa said quickly, averting her gaze. She glanced at Devaney, who was staring at her, her back to the window. Straightening, she managed a breezy, "Enjoy your drinks."

She scuttled back behind the counter, muttered an excuse to Lila and disappeared into the kitchen. After closing the door, Raisa pulled her phone from her pocket and, typed out a quick text to Quinten: Devaney is here with Beth. I think she might have something to do with Vanessa. I need help.

She hit send and tucked away her phone. Her pulse thundered in her ears.

Devaney? For sure? But how? And why?

After putting her phone away, she left the kitchen. Lila cocked her head in a clear but silent, “Are you all right?”

Goodness, I love that woman.

Raisa gave her a barely there nod, before locking her focus on Devaney. The raven-haired woman was sipping her drink with a smug smile, scanning the shop lazily. She looked far too relaxed for someone who might have been involved in a crime.

Raisa’s pulse raced as she tried to think of a way to keep Devaney occupied.

She grabbed a cloth and started wiping down the counter, sneaking glances at the two women.

Beth was chatting animatedly, but Devaney’s attention flicked toward Raisa.

There was something sharp and calculating in her startling blue gaze that set Raisa’s teeth on edge.

A cold sweat broke out on her forehead. She reached for her phone again, pretending to check the time, but her fingers hovered over the screen. Should she send another message to Quinten? She hadn’t heard back yet. The tension in her chest grew unbearable.

“Raisa?”

She looked up to see Devaney standing at the counter, her arms crossed. “Is there a problem?”

“No,” Raisa rushed out the words, hating that her voice sounded higher than usual. “Why would there be?”

Devaney’s lips curled into a smirk. “You keep looking at me. It’s distracting.”

“I’m not”—Raisa started—“All right, okay. Yes, I am. I was admiring your shoes. Where did you find them?”

“My shoes?” Devaney narrowed her eyes to slits. Her gaze was cold and cutting enough to draw blood.

Raisa took an involuntary step back thanks to the intense hatred in those eyes, her movement halted by the coffee prep table behind her.

Devaney leaned in, and her voice dropped to an angry whisper shout.

“You think you’re clever, don’t you?” Her tone was laced with menace.

“Let me tell you; you’re not. So, stop whatever it is you’re trying to do. ”

Raisa’s breath hitched. “I... I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Devaney’s entire bearing was so predatory it gave Raisa a ‘deer in the headlight’ sensation.

Then the bell above the door jingled again, and the tension snapped like a rubber band.

“Hey, Raisa.” Gavin’s voice rang out, casual and light. Corbin followed close behind, looking so much like his brother as he scanned the room that Quinten’s absence was like a physical ache. Corbin glanced at Devaney before shifting his attention to Raisa.

Raisa's knees nearly gave out. Now three of the people she suspected might be involved with Vanessa's disappearance were in her shop.

"Gavin. Corbin." She inclined her head, surprised her voice sounded steadier than she felt.

Gavin glanced between her and Devaney, his easy smile fading as he took in the two of them and the tension in the air. "Everything okay here?"

"Fine and dandy," Devaney said smoothly, stepping back and straightening her posture. "We were just leaving. Check?"

"Actually." Gavin stepped forward and looped an arm around Devaney's shoulders. "Why don't you stay a little bit longer? You and I need to talk. Have another drink. On me."

Devaney's eyes flashed, but she didn't argue. Beth, still seated at the table, looked up in confusion. Raisa exchanged a glance with Corbin, who gave her a casual shrug and sauntered over to Beth, effectively parting the two cheerleaders.

The message blinked on Quinten's phone, drawing his full attention.

Devaney is here with Beth. I think she might have something to do with Vanessa. I need help.

His first thought was frustration. What now? Are they ganging up on Raisa again? But as his eyes flicked back over the words, the mention of Vanessa hit him like a gut punch. Vanessa? What the hell does she mean?

Quinten shot out of his chair, ignoring the sharp clatter as it catapulted over the tiled floor and slammed into a metal filing cabinet, and dashed toward the door.

“Quinten?” his mom called from behind the reception desk.

He winced but didn’t stop, throwing a quick apology over his shoulder. “Sorry, Mom! I’ll explain later!”

The January air hit him like a wall of ice, stealing his breath.

Only then did he realize he’d left his coat behind but there was no chance he was going back for it.

Fear and agitation burned hotter than the cold ever could as he broke into a jog, heading straight to Winslow’s Shelf: Pages & Pastries.

His heart pounded—not from the exertion but from the heavy churn of adrenaline and unease.

As he rounded the last corner, he let out a harsh exhalation as he caught sight of the familiar sign swinging gently in the breeze.

Without slowing, he pushed open the door with more force than he intended, making it slam against the facade with a loud bang.

The sudden noise drew all eyes to him. Quinten took in the tense scene where Gavin sat across from Devaney at a table near the center of the shop. His posture was stiff, and his face was unreadable.

Across the way, over by the window, Corbin was seated next to Beth, whose usual smug expression had faded into something far more guarded.

His gaze homed in on Raisa. His woman stood behind the counter, her expression worried expression. Next to her, almost pressed against her side, stood Lila, who look



mostly stunned and curious.

He returned his attention to the beautiful, brilliant woman who had captured his heart. Her eyes widened when they met his, brimming with a mixture of relief and something else, maybe anxiety?

“What the heck is going on here?” Quinten snapped out as he took a step forward and mule kicked the door closed behind him to shut out the January cold.

He took in the room, challenging them to speak.

Gavin was the first to speak up. “I’ll explain.” He pushed back his chair and stood. His cousin seemed to have aged ten years in one day.

Gavin glanced down at Devaney with disgust. She lifted her chin defiantly, and her usual haughty air was even more pronounced. But beneath that arrogant facade was something else—likely nerves.

Gavin made a distressed sound, which had Quinten swirl back to face his cousin.

“I’ve been seeing Devaney... in secret,” he admitted, shamefaced.

“I know it’s wrong—going behind Archie’s back—but her husband’s barely ever home.

He’s always off on some business trip.” He shrugged, as if trying to downplay his guilt, but the tension in his jaw betrayed him.

“You and Devaney?” Quinten’s eyebrows shot up before he looked ceilingward. “I remember you two dating in high school,” he drawled.

Gavin nodded once. “Yeah, we did.” He glanced at Devaney, who crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. She looked to Raisa before focusing on Gavin. Despite this moment, Quinten was shocked by the amount of hatred in her eyes as she stared at his woman.

“Anyway, yesterday...”

Gavin’s words draw back Quinten’s attention.

“...when I saw the CCTV footage, I recognized something.” He hesitated, glancing to Raisa. “I recognized Dev’s shoes.”

Quinten’s heart thudded. “Her shoes?” He lowered his voice. “The sneakers?”

Gavin nodded, and his expression turned grim. “Her favorite sneakers are red, black, and white Nike Air Jordans. The person in the footage is wearing the same ones.”

“That doesn’t prove a thing!”

Gavin turned to his girlfriend, but there was no love in his expression or tone.

“You told me they are a collector’s item.

Not many people in Cedarburg would have them, don’t you think?

” Returning his attention to Quinten, he continued like Devaney hadn’t interrupted him.

“At first, I wasn’t convinced. I thought maybe Raisa was grasping at straws.

But then...” He slid his gaze toward Raisa, and his tone softened.

“Then you talked about how the mind can trick you, how we see what we want to believe is true. And I realized...” He looked down.

“I have been taken for a fool.” He muttered a curse before glaring at Devaney.

“I’ve been trying to call Dev since last night.

” His voice hardened. “But you’ve been dodging my calls. ”

Quinten focused on Devaney, who sat unmoving, her chin was raised, like they and this conversation were beneath her. “Talk,” he growled. He was thankful she wasn’t within arm’s reach, otherwise he might have wrung her pretty, long neck.

Devaney’s lips curved into a small but cold smile. “I have nothing to say.” Her words dripped with disdain. Still a haughty queen looking down at her subjects.

Pulling out his phone, Quinten speed dialed a saved number. “You’ll talk to the police.” With his thumb, he pressed the call button. “Or they’ll make you.”

Her eyes widened. It was the first crack in her composed facade. “You can’t be serious!”

“Watch me.” Quinten put the phone to his ear and waited for Detective Maloney to answer his call.

### Chapter Twenty-One

Car doors slamming and hurried footsteps outside made Raisa's pulse spike.

Standing rooted behind the counter, Raisa gripped the edge, as if letting go would send her spiraling into chaos.

The door swung open, and two uniformed officers strode in, followed closely by detectives Maloney and Zanetti.

Devaney snapped her head toward them, her defiant expression faltering for the first time.

"Devaney Martin?" Maloney stepped forward with a postcard-sized, laminated card in hand. "You're under arrest in connection with the disappearance of Vanessa Franklin, currently being investigated as a potential homicide."

Devaney's chair screeched as she shot to her feet. "Arrest? On what grounds?" she demanded, her voice sharp and rising with panic.

Maloney ignored the outburst. "You have the right to remain silent."

Devaney's shoulders tensed. "This is a mistake!" she snapped, taking a step back toward the door. "I'm not playing your ridiculous games!"

It looks like Devaney isn't going to use her right then, huh?

“You have the right to an attorney.” Maloney’s tone was unshaken as she moved a little to the right to block Devaney’s path. “If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you.”

Devaney turned the other way and tried to bolt toward the exit, almost twisting her ankle on the red heels. Gavin stepped in her way, holding up a hand to stop her. “Devaney, please, don’t do this.”

She glared at him. “Move, Gavin! This is none of your business!”

“Stop making this harder than it already is.”

She shoved at his chest, her voice rising. “You think you’re so noble? You don’t know anything!”

Behind her, the officer stepped in and grabbed her arm, pulling her back. “Don’t touch me!” she screamed, twisting and fighting against his grip.

The detective asked calmly, “Do you understand the rights I’ve just read to you?”

“I’m not stupid.”

Raisa begged to differ .

But the black-haired beauty wasn’t done. “But you are,” she about spat at the detective. “Do you know who I am? Do you know who my husband is?”

Evidently ignoring Devaney’s ‘stupid’ comment, Detective Maloney didn’t even blink but lowered the card and asked, “With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?”

Devaney ignored her, turning her fury back to Gavin. “You’re a coward! You’re going to regret this. You all will!”

Beth, who had been uncharacteristically quiet until now, shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “Dev—” she began, but her voice cracked.

The officer expertly pulled Devaney’s other arm behind her back, snapping the handcuffs into place. She let out a frustrated scream, her face red with rage. “This is harassment! You’re all going to pay for this!”

“Let’s go.” Maloney spoke to the officer in a calm voice. As Devaney struggled and yelled, one of her red heels slipped off. A couple of the other customers had whipped out their phones and were snapping pictures or making videos.

The officers led the cuffed woman toward the door. As Devaney passed Raisa, she narrowed her eyes, and her lips curled into a sneer. “This is on you. You think you’re so smart you’re above anyone else, but you have no idea what you’ve done.”

Raisa’s throat tightened, but she held her ground, refusing to let Devaney see her falter. The door slammed shut behind them, leaving an uneasy silence in their wake.

For a moment, no one moved. The tension in the air was thick as everyone processed what had happened in the last few minutes. Gavin exhaled loudly and ran a hand through his hair. “Well,” he said, quietly, “that could’ve gone better.”

Beth stood, her face pale, and stared after her cuffed friend—visibly devastated.

Quinten also watched the police leave with their suspect before turning to Gavin. “Are you okay?”

Gavin nodded, though his shoulders were slumped. “I just... didn’t think it would end

like this. She told me they were getting a divorce.” He sank back on one of the chairs. He buried his face in his hands. “Oh God. I love her. Oh. God!”

The other customers had long since gone, leaving only Lila, Raisa, Corbin, Beth, Gavin, and Quinten in the shop. Lila and Raisa had made more coffee and served some of the leftover pies.

Gavin leaned back into his chair with a heavy sigh. “Well, that was... something.”

Corbin rested his elbows on the table and glanced between Gavin and Quinten. “What do you think her motive is? Why would she do something to Vanessa? I thought they were friends.”

“I don’t know.” Gavin ran a hand through his hair, his fingers catching in the dark curls so like Quinten’s.

He stared at the floor, and his knee bounced as he tapped his foot in a restless, uneven rhythm.

His usual, easygoing expression had become tight, drawn.

When he eventually looked up, his eyes were clouded, the spark of mischief that always lingered there now dim and distant.

His shoulders sagged under an invisible weight, and he pressed his lips together as if he was holding back words, he wasn’t ready to say.

“I’ve been trying to piece it together, but...

it doesn’t make sense. Dev and Vanessa were close. Why would she hurt her?”

“You tell us.” Quinten crossed his arms and a muscle in his jaw ticced. “You’ve been seeing her. Did she say anything? Did anything seem off?”

Gavin buried both hands in his hair and frowned. “She’s been... different lately. More on edge. But I thought it was because of Archie, you know? Their marriage has been falling apart. She never said anything about Vanessa. Nothing that would suggest...” He shook his head.

“What about you, Beth?” Quinten turned his gaze to her.

Beth flinched noticeably, then straightened, her usual sharpness returning.

“What about me? I didn’t know anything about this.

And before you ask, no, I didn’t suspect anything either.

Clearly, I’m not the best judge of character.

” Her tone was clipped, but there was a flicker of vulnerability in her eyes.

The conversation dwindled after that, the group exchanging theories and half-formed guesses but coming no closer to understanding the truth. One by one, they began to leave. Beth was the first to go, muttering something about having enough for today.

Wordlessly, Raisa let her leave, but a pang of empathy tugged inside her chest. Beth had been snarky, as always, but there was a heaviness to her steps, a weight Raisa couldn’t ignore. One friend possibly dead, another potentially a murderer... the murderer.

What a cognitive dissonance . Like, yeah, try to wrap your head around that.



Once everyone else had left, the shop was too quiet and empty. Quinten lingered by the counter, watching her as she began shutting things down for the day. “I can bring you home,” he offered quietly.

“No, thank you.” Raisa shook her head. “I need to clear my head. I’ll walk.”

Quinten frowned but didn’t push. Instead, he tried to make plans for the next day, suggesting they meet to go over what happened.

But she brushed him off, mumbling something noncommittal.

Even as he tried to close it, the distance grew between them.

She recognized it for what it was. It was self-preservation.

Because the moment Devaney had been hauled out, and Beth had started unraveling, Quinten had gone to her. His touch had been comforting, not romantic. He had just placed a hand on Beth’s shoulder and murmured a few kind words to her. But it had hit Raisa like a gut punch anyway.

She’d seen that tableau before.

Twenty, maybe twenty-five years ago.

High school.

Same boy, same girl.

Beth in tears after a botched test, and Quinten standing tall and noble beside her, comforting her like she was the only person in the world who mattered.

Raisa had stood by the lockers with another aced exam, but unseen and feeling like a shadow.

Too round, too nerdy, too plain to ever matter in a world that sparkled around girls like Beth.

Now it was happening all over again.

So yes, she brushed him off. Not because he'd done anything wrong, but because she couldn't bear to feel like that girl again. And maybe because some part of her still believed she didn't belong in the same story as someone like him.

When he eventually left, the silence in the shop was deafening.

She pulled on her coat and scarf and locked the door behind her.

The cold January air was crisp, and her breath left her lungs in spiraling clouds, but she didn't mind.

Hands shoved into her pockets, she walked with her head down.

The streets were quiet, and the solitude gave her too much space for her thoughts.

Her chin brushed against the soft wool of the scarf, and her mind drifted to Quinten. He had given her this scarf, wrapping it around her neck with such care. He deserves someone better . Someone like Beth, with her golden hair and perfect smile. Not me. Not little old Raisa.

The wind tore at Raisa's clothes and made her shiver, and she reached her door, her nose still tingling from the cold.

Her thoughts had twisted into a dark pit of self-doubt.

She failed to notice Nana standing at the door until the older woman called out to her.

“Saw you coming.” With a surprisingly strong grip, Nana took hold of her wrist, pulled her inside, closed the door, and smoothly nudged Raisa into the kitchen.

The room’s warmth wrapped around her like a blanket, the contrast to the frigid outdoors almost overwhelming.

Raisa hesitated near the doorway, her boots squeaking faintly on the mat.

Nana gave her a little push toward the kitchen table, her hands firm but comforting.

“Sit down, girl. Let me take care of you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:34 am*

Raisa sank onto the wooden stool, still bundled in her coat and scarf.

Her limbs were sluggish, weighed down by more than the layers of fabric.

Nana moved about, setting a pot on the stove with a quiet clatter.

The faint smell of tomato soup began to rise.

The first wisps of steam carried a sense of home and something deeper—something safe.

She reached up and unwound her scarf, the soft fabric slipping between her fingers as she folded it neatly and placed it on the table beside her.

Her coat followed, draped over the back of the chair as she exhaled, and her shoulders began to relax as she inhaled the kitchen's familiar comfort. She ran her hand over the scarf.

Behind her, Nana opened a cupboard and pulled out a loaf of bread.

She opened and shut the fridge. The fridge door thudded shut, followed by the soft rustle of cheese being unwrapped.

A grill pan clanked onto the stovetop, and soon the comforting scent of toasted bread and melting cheese mingled with the rich aroma of warming tomato soup.

Minutes later, Nana set a steaming bowl of tomato soup in front of her, its rich aroma

filling the air.

A plate followed, the grilled cheese sandwich golden and crisp, cut neatly in triangles with a dollop of ketchup on the side—exactly how Nana had made it for her on those long, tired afternoons after school.

Raisa's chest tightened at the memory, the simple meal carrying a weight of love and care that words couldn't express.

"Eat now, child." Nana gently patted Raisa's shoulder before sitting down across from her with her own cup of tea.

Raisa picked up the sandwich, the crunch of the bread giving way to the gooey warmth of melted cheese.

She closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the flavor and letting the comfort of the food settle over her.

A tear trickled down her cheek. She ignored it and let it fall. More tears followed. The kitchen was silent as she ate and gathered her thoughts.

When she had finished the last bite, Nana placed her mug on the table and folded her arms. "Talk, girl." Her gaze, watery with age but sharp as her grandmother's mind, pierced through Raisa's defenses.

Raisa hesitated. "I don't know where to start."

"Is it about your young man?" Nana's tone softened a fraction.

"That's part of it," Raisa admitted, her voice small and childlike. "And I'm not sure, he's mine."

Nana let out a mix between a snort and a huff. “All right, first tell me how you feel about him.”

“Oh, Nana.” Fresh tears spilled over. “I love him.”

Nana’s brow furrowed. “Love isn’t something to cry over.”

And then it all came pouring out—tangled and messy, like yarn unraveled too fast. She told Nana how hard it was to feel like the girl from high school again, watching Quinten and Beth fall into old patterns with barely a glance her way.

How seeing Beth’s pale face beside Quinten’s steady hand had triggered every buried insecurity she’d believed she’d outgrown.

She talked about Devaney—about the heels, the arrest, the sneer as she was led away.

About Vanessa and the gut-wrenching possibility that she might never come back.

About the quiet rage and helplessness of seeing people she’d known for years reveal cruel, ugly truths.

But mostly, she confessed the fear that clung to her ribs like ivy: that no matter how much Quinten claimed to care, he’d eventually see her the way she sometimes saw herself—too plain, too soft, too much and not enough at the same time.

That he’d wake up one day and remember what it was like to be with someone like Beth. Someone gorgeous and rich.

She talked until her throat was raw, until her chest ached from the weight of it all, until her tears slowed and the words ran out.

Silence fell. Nana didn't rush to fill it.

Instead, she reached across the table and took Raisa's hand, her grip strong and steady.

"Now listen to me," she said, brimming with the unwavering confidence Raisa wished she had.

"You're smart, beautiful, courageous, and kind.

A real man will value all those traits. And I think Quinten Carrington is a real man. Have you told him how you feel?"

Raisa's eyes widened as the realization hit her. "No," she whispered mostly to herself. "I haven't. Come to think of it; I have been pushing him away."

Nana shook her head. "What are you waiting for? Go on, go to your man. I'd like me a bonus grandson and some great-grandbabies. Go make them!"

Raisa let out a shaky laugh, wiping her tears away. "You're impossible, Nana."

"And you're stubborn. Now go."

Raisa stood, her heart pounding, as she grabbed her coat and smacked a big kiss on her Nana's cheek.

Quinten paced the room, restless and worried about Gavin.

The situation with Devaney was a nightmare.

That Gavin's lover might have killed her best friend made his stomach churn.

He shook his head and went to the wet bar, needing a drink despite not being much of a drinker.

He selected a sixteen-year-old Lagavulin and poured a generous two fingers into a whiskey glass.

The first sip was astonishing. The scent was more like Lapsang Souchong tea than Lapsang Souchong itself and deliciously smokey.

He rolled this sip around his mouth. The taste was complex.

He swallowed, letting the drink warm his esophagus all the way down to his belly.

The tang of smoke and vanilla lingered in his mouth.

He hummed in appreciation and lifted the glass back to his lips for another sip. Before he could take it, the doorbell rang. He went to the door, tumbler in hand, and opened it to find Raisa standing there.

Emotions rushed through him and heated his blood better than the whisky had.

She stepped inside, wordlessly took the glass, and gulped down the contents.

Raising an eyebrow, he asked, “You came here because you’re thirsty?”

She coughed and handed him back the glass. They stared at each other for a long moment.

“I love you.”

He didn't know who said it first, but when it registered, he dropped the now empty



glass, ignoring how it shattered on the floor. He lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Carrying her upstairs, he knew nothing was more important than burying himself to the hilt inside his woman.

Taking the steps two at a time, he jogged up with a speed that rivaled his glory days on the field. Raisa buried her face into his neck, and her breath tickled his ears as she exhaled raggedly. Against his chest, her heartbeat thudded and drowned out everything except the desire to be inside her.

With her still in his arms, he struggled with the bedroom door but managed to open it. He stumbled inside and lowered her to the bed.

Standing before her, he ordered, “Unzip my pants.”

Raisa obeyed immediately. He loved that about her. She pulled down the zipper and shoved the jeans down his hips. He wore no underwear, and his engorged cock sprang free into her waiting hands. She looked up at him, desire and insecurity in her eyes.

“Touch me, baby.” He meant it as an order, but it sounded more like a plea.

But when she wrapped her hand around him and gave him a first tentative stroke, it didn’t matter.

She rubbed him—fast and inexperienced. So, he wrapped his fingers around her hand and guided her.

She tightened her grip and nodded along as he showed her how to stroke his thick length.

When he let go of her hand, she took over like a champ.

His head fell back, and he enjoyed her hand around his cock.

It was so much softer and smaller than his own callused palm but just as tight.

He groaned when the tight grip vanished and was replaced by a wet heat that felt so fucking amazing it made his head spin.

God damn it!

Looking down, he grabbed a fist full of her hair and carefully lifted her off his cock. “I don’t think I gave you permission to suck me off, bright-eyes.”

She licked her swollen lips, and grazed the head of his dick with the tip of her tongue. His knees almost buckled. The sneaky minx .

“Uhm, actually, you didn’t specify with what body part or parts I could touch you,” she replied with sparkling eyes.

Fuck me.

He burst out laughing. “You’re right.”

She eyed his dick. “So, can I continue?”

“You can, but not until you make me come. I want to be balls deep inside you when I blow my load.”

Quinten swallowed hard as Raisa sank to her knees before him, her eyes locked on his.

She took him in her hand, her fingers wrapping around his length, and began to stroke

him with slow and deliberated moves designed to drive him crazy.

With her other hand she cupped his balls, gently massaging them as she alternated between stroking his length and fitting as much of his cock inside her mouth as she could.

Quinten's breath hitched as she worked him, her mouth hot and wet around him. He tangled his fingers in her hair, guiding her movements, his eyes crossing when he bumped the back of her throat, and the muscles there reflexively contracted around the head of his cock.

He groaned as the sensations grew almost too much to bear. Again, he used her hair to pull her face away from his body, careful not to hurt her. "Enough, baby. I want to be inside you."

They shed the rest of their clothes in a frantic rush, garments tossed aside without a second thought.

Quinten's pulse thundered in his ears as they tumbled onto the bed, grasping, pulling, clutching.

Every touch, every movement was charged, driven by a raw, unspoken need that consumed them both.

The air between them crackled with urgency, the sheets crumpling beneath their feverish motions.

He pressed her into the mattress, giving her his weight as he moved a hand between her legs, checking if she was ready. "Oh baby, you're drenched," he murmured.

"Sucking you off made me needy for you. I love you, Quinten," she told him, her soft

voice filled with emotion.

“I love you, too,” he replied, taking her mouth in a wet kiss and positioning the head of his cock at her entrance.

He moved his mouth over her lips and sank his cock partly inside her, the tight grip of her cunt squeezing the head just right.

The first sensations were even better than her wet, hot mouth wrapped around him.

Her body clung to him, inner muscles pulsing around the thick head of his cock, resisting just enough to make him grit his teeth as he pushed deeper.

He pulled back and sank back in, a little further now.

Repeating the movement, he flexed his ass as his thrusts went deep, and his rhythm became faster, until he was driving into her like a man possessed, flesh slapping against flesh as he drove in and sucked out wetly as he withdrew.

And maybe he was possessed, and she had cast some spell over him, because he had never felt this fucking amazing before in his life.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Raisa sat on the couch, curled up in one corner, wearing one of his old Packers hoodies that looked two sizes too big for her. The sleeves swallowed her hands, and the hem brushed against her thighs as she wiggled her butt to get into a more comfortable position.

She didn't know it—she never seemed to—but she looked effortlessly sexy. The way her bare legs stretched out along the cushion, the hoodie slipping off one shoulder just enough to tease, made him shift in his seat and adjust his position.

She was completely at ease, radiating a quiet confidence he hadn't seen before. He enjoyed seeing her like this—comfortable, safe, and utterly herself. It made him want to pull her into his lap, kiss her until she melted into him, and forget all about the outside world.

As if his thought about the outside world had summoned it, the doorbell announced a visitor. Quinten rose, strode to the door, and opened it to reveal detectives Maloney and Zanetti.

“Good evening, Mr. Carrington,” Maloney said with a slight nod.

After greeting them, he led them inside and into the living room. “I figure Raisa will want to hear what you have to say.”

Maloney's gaze slid past him to Raisa, her lips quirking into a knowing smile. “Ms. Winslow. Excuse us for intruding on your evening.”

“No problem.” Raisa moved to sit cross-legged on the sofa, hiding her gorgeous legs from view.

Quinten narrowed his eyes. On the one hand, he didn’t want to object to her modesty, on the other hand, she had nothing to be ashamed of.

“Baby.” He stepped in front of her and held out a hand, pulling her upright when she grabbed his fingers.

He leaned forward and whispered too low for the others in the room to hear.

“For now, I accept it when you put on some leggings or jeans to make you more comfortable. In the future, we’re going to work some more on your self-esteem, until you can walk around naked while keeping your head high.

” He kissed her, keeping it light and casual, and swatted her ass as she scurried around him and through the door.

The detectives settled into the armchairs opposite the couch, exchanging smirks with more familiarity than colleagues might have.

Quinten narrowed his eyes on them. “Are you...” His words drifted off as he tried to decide how to continue.

“More than partners at work?” Maloney seemed to derive pleasure from his unease. “We are.” She smirked. “It’s fun to witness the unflappable Quinten Carrington being tongue tied.”

Before he could retort, Raisa reappeared in leggings but still wearing his hoodie and nothing else. “I’m sorry, detectives, would you like something to drink?”

After they both politely declined, Raisa sank back into the seat next to him and sought his hand. He intertwined their fingers and tilted his head at Maloney, who operated as the spokesperson in the detective duo, in a not-so-subtle invitation to speak.

She leaned forward, resting her forearms on her knees, while Zanetti set a file folder on the coffee table. “Thank you for inviting us in.”

Raisa straightened slightly, her hands still clasping her sweater. “Do you know more about Vanessa?”

Zanetti’s mouth pulled down. “You could say that.”

Quinten tilted his head, crossing his arms as he leaned against the couch’s armrest. “We’re listening.”

Maloney straightened and made direct eye contact with Raisa. “First, we want to thank you again, Ms. Winslow. The observation about the shoes in the video footage was a pivotal moment in this investigation. Without it, we might not have realized someone else was involved.”

Raisa’s lips parted in surprise. “It was that important?”

Maloney nodded. “Absolutely. Sometimes, it’s the smallest details that crack a case wide open.”

“Did Devaney confess?” Quinten asked, his tone sharp with curiosity.

“She did.” Zanetti flipped open the folder. “It took some time, but she eventually admitted to her role. She wasn’t exactly forthcoming at first, but the evidence we gathered left her little choice.”

“And why?” Raisa’s voice trembled, and she twisted her hands together until her fingers were bent almost unnaturally.

Maloney exhaled audibly, her expression hardening.

“It’s a long story, but in short, Devaney was profoundly unhappy in her marriage.

She had tried to initiate a divorce, but Archie wasn’t cooperative.

She turned to Gavin, attempting to convince him to leave with her, but he declined, telling her he was obligated to help his uncle”—she turned her gaze to Quinten—“your father with the business. Angry and frustrated, she decided to leave on her own. But she needed more money than her trust fund would allow and knew she wouldn’t get anything from Archie in a settlement. ”

“So, she targeted the company she held responsible for Gavin’s refusal to go with her.” Raisa’s voice might be sweet and soft, but her understanding was sharp as blade.

Again, she amazed him with her brilliance.

“You’ve hit the nail on the head,” Maloney confirmed.

“Using her friendship with Vanessa, she manipulated her way into gaining access to the company’s financial records.

Devaney created fake invoices in the names of legitimate subcontractors and used a complex algorithm to funnel payments into her own account.

Apparently, she had taken an advanced online course at MIT, which gave her the skills to pull it off. ”



Raisa rubbed her forehead, as if trying to process the avalanche of information. “It’s such a waste. If she had those skills, she could have made good money as a software engineer.”

Quinten reached over and soothingly placed a hand on her knee, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “It’s a lot to take in.”

“And Vanessa?” Raisa darted her gaze back to the detectives.

Zanetti’s jaw tightened. “Vanessa found out about the discrepancies in the books and confronted Devaney. Which brings me to inform you that we’ve found Vanessa.” Zanetti’s voice was steady but carrying the weight of what was to come.

Raisa’s breath hitched, her hand flying to her chest as Quinten instinctively shifted closer, curling his arm around her shoulders.

“She’s... she’s dead, isn’t she?” Raisa’s words were almost inaudible, like saying the words out loud would make it more real.

Zanetti nodded solemnly. “Yes. Her body was recovered earlier this morning, in a remote area outside of town. We have a positive ID. Beth Ashford came in and made the formal identification.”

Raisa’s eyes widened. “Beth? Why was Beth... Oh, her mother isn’t well.”

“That’s right. Besides, Beth and Vanessa were close for years, even if things were complicated recently,” Maloney continued. “Given the circumstances and their shared history, Beth wanted to help. She insisted on coming down to confirm it was her instead of putting that on a struggling mother.”

Quinten’s jaw tightened, his knuckles whitening as he clenched his fists on his lap.

“Do you know how she died?”

“Blunt-force trauma to the head.” Maloney focused on him, and her expression hardened. “We’re still investigating what exactly happened with her.”

Raisa’s shoulders sagged as tears welled up in her eyes. “I can’t believe this... Vanessa... I thought maybe she was alive, that she just needed to be found...”

“I know this isn’t the outcome anyone wanted.” Zanetti leaned forward and clasped her hands in front of her, letting them rest on the folder.

“Do you think Devaney killed her friend?” Quinten had to ask.

“Devaney admitted to framing Vanessa as part of the cover-up, but she insists Vanessa’s death was either an accident or self-defense.”

“Do you believe her?” Quinten asked.

Maloney shook her head. “It’s hard to say.

Her story has gaps, and we’re not taking anything at face value.

What we do know is that based on her confession, we were able to locate Vanessa’s body.

We’re waiting on the medical examiner’s full report, but the initial findings suggest what lead to her death.

We’re not sure at this moment how that injury occurred.”

Quinten pulled Raisa close as she leaned into him, her body trembling.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

The weeks since Vanessa's body was discovered had been a blur of revelations, guilt, and grief.

The police had held onto the remains, delaying the funeral until Devaney's full confession had been secured.

She had pleaded involuntary manslaughter and was now incarcerated, awaiting trial.

Raisa couldn't help the bitter thought that Devaney had managed to get away from Archie—only not in the way she'd wanted.

Devaney's confession hadn't surprised Raisa, but Beth's unexpected apology had.

Two days after Vanessa had been found, Raisa had been stacking books in the sci-fi section when Beth walked into Winslow's Shelf. Raisa froze mid-movement, and her grip tightened on the stack of books in her hands until the edges of the hardcovers dig into her palms.

A sour twist churned in her stomach. The sight of Beth standing inside the doorway was enough to dredge up a cascade of bitter memories.

Beth, with her impeccable hair and sharp tongue that could cut deeper than any blade.

One of the other girls might not be flanking her this time, but the shadow of their cruel dynamic hung heavy in the air, a reminder of every humiliation Beth had dealt

her.

Raisa's instinct was to turn away, to disappear into the back of the shop where she could busy herself with inventory or hide in the comforting familiarity of her kitchen. But something stopped her.

It wasn't only Beth's presence that caught Raisa off guard; it was the way she carried herself.

Her shoulders, usually squared with an air of superiority, were now hunched as if she was bracing herself for a harsh blow.

She lingered just inside the doorway, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

She clutched her purse's strap like it might slip away if she didn't hold on tightly.

She darted her gaze around like a butterfly incapable of deciding which flower to land on, before stopping on Raisa. There was something in her expression that Raisa couldn't place—something tentative, almost... vulnerable.

Raisa shifted the books to her other arm, narrowing her eyes as she waited for Beth to approach.

This wasn't the confident, cutting woman she'd come to expect.

It was almost as if Beth wasn't sure she belonged here.

Against her better judgment, Raisa stayed where she was, curiosity rooting her to the spot.

"I need to talk to you." Beth spoke quieter than usual, the snarky edge gone and

replaced with something fragile.

Bracing herself for what was to come from her nemesis, Raisa lowered the books to a shelf and folded her arms. “About what?”

Beth glanced around, hesitating until Raisa motioned to one of the small tables near the window. They sat, the awkward silence stretching between them until Beth blurted, “I was awful to you. I mean, I know that’s not news, but... I need you to understand why.”

Raisa arched a brow but said nothing, waiting.

Beth swallowed hard. “I was jealous. Of you.” Her voice broke slightly, and Raisa’s breath hitched.

Beth continued before Raisa could process the admission.

“You’re beautiful. You always were. And you’re smart.

Like, scary smart. The kind of smart that makes people feel small just by being near you.

” She gave a self-deprecating laugh, brushing a hand through her blond hair.

“I never developed. Not really. Still wearing the same damn bra size I was in high school. Do you know how that feels? Being the cheerleader who has to stuff her bra and pray no one notices?”

Raisa blinked. Was she seriously still hung up on that? In her thirties?

Beth looked down at her hands. “I’ve always hated that insecurity about myself.

And then you walked in with your curves and your smarts, and it was just...

too much. I felt threatened. I lashed out because it made me feel powerful, but it wasn't.

It was pathetic." Her voice cracked. "I'm sorry, Raisa. For everything."

Raisa stared at her for a long moment, the weight of Beth's words settling over her. After a short deliberation, she nodded. "Thank you for saying that."

Beth's eyes lifted, hopeful but wary. "Does that mean you forgive me?"

Raisa hesitated. "I can't forget the things you've done. But... I can move on. I think we both can."

The tension drained from Beth's shoulders, and she nodded. "Thank you."

The memory of Beth's apology lingered as Raisa adjusted the collar of her black blazer dress in front of the mirror.

The ache of Vanessa's death remained, but at least one less burden was weighing her down.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Quinten's resonant voice as he called her name.

She turned as he appeared in the bathroom doorway, devastatingly handsome in his black suit and navy-blue dress shirt. The tie, black with subtle navy pinstripes, draped loosely around his neck, the top two buttons of his shirt still undone, exposing a strip of his skin.

Her breath hitched as she stepped forward. “Let me help you.”

He didn’t move, watching her as she began buttoning his shirt with deft fingers. When the last button was secured, she reached for his collar, flipping it up with a gentle sweep of her hand.

The scent of his cologne, warm and woodsy, filled her senses as she picked up the tie.

She draped the thick silk over her fingers, aligning the ends with care so the wide end hung longer than the narrow one.

Crossing the broad end over the narrow, she looped it up and through the neck opening, pulling it down smoothly before creating the first triangle at the base of his throat.

Her fingers worked with practiced precision, guiding the fabric into place as she moved the wide end over the triangle, tightening it gently.

“You know how to tie a Double Windsor?” His left eyebrow arched up.

She glanced up with a faint smile. “I did research for one of my books.”

Quinten’s brows drew together as if he was trying to remember something. “You’ve mentioned writing books before. What genre do you write?”

She swallowed and dropped her gaze.

His finger under her chin tilted her face, gentle but unyielding, and she met his eyes.

Her mouth went dry, and she croaked, “Erotic fantasy romance.”

“Do you now?” There was amusement in his voice. “Have you been published?”

“No, I’m not,” she spoke so fast the words were knitted together, and her fingers faltered for a second before resuming their work on the knot.

“Yet,” he said firmly.

Her hands stilled, and she looked up at him, confused. “What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. Why aren’t you published yet ?”

She shifted uncomfortably, looking away from his intense gaze. “Because I’m not?—”

Before she could finish, he cupped her face in his hands and captured her lips with his, stealing the words from her mouth. The kiss was firm, commanding, and left her mind reeling and her lungs craving oxygen.

When he pulled back after kissing her senseless, his dark eyes glittered with something she couldn’t quite name. “You were not going to say you’re not good enough,” he said, his words low but filled with conviction.

Her lips parted, but no sound came out. “Uhm...”

He leaned closer, his forehead resting gently against hers. “You are more than good enough, Raisa. You’re brilliant. And I don’t want to hear you doubt that again.”

Her heart pounded, and for once, she let herself believe him.

With another peck on her lips, he let go of her and turned away. “Are you ready?”



“I’m almost done and just need to brush my hair.” She picked up the heavy wooden brush. “Give me a minute.”

“Sure.” He started to saunter out of the bathroom. “And Raisa, tonight you’re going to read something from your books to me.”

“What?” She halted, the brush hovering midway.

“You heard me. Something hot and heavy. A sex scene.”

Their gazes met in the mirror.

She turned and lifted the brush, intent to throw it at him to see if his pro football self still could catch or if the brush would knock him out. Wickedly fast, he disappeared into the hallway, his laughter loud.

Quinten adjusted his tie as the congregation settled, the murmur of hushed voices falling silent.

The church was packed, the familiar creak of wooden pews a constant background as people shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

The faint scent of incense mingled with fresh-cut flowers arranged near the pulpit.

He glanced to his left where Raisa sat, her hands clasped in her lap, the soft glint of the ring he slipped on her finger less than an hour ago catching the light. His chest tightened at the sight.

Vanessa’s mother sat in the front pew. Her expression was vacant as she stared at the coffin surrounded with flowers.

She leaned into her neighbor, Clarice, who whispered reassurances every so often.

Quinten's heart ached for her, even though it was obvious the older woman didn't fully grasp the day's gravity.

Alzheimer's had stolen her sharpness, but her fragility made her presence even more poignant.

Maybe it was a blessing in disguise that she didn't remember how her daughter was the person they were mourning.

The first mournful notes of the organ swelled, filling the church with the familiar strains of "Amazing Grace." Quinten rose to his feet with the rest of the congregation, the weight of the moment settling heavily on his chest. The melody vibrated in the air, bittersweet and haunting, tugging at the frayed edges of his composure.

Around him, voices joined in—a shaky unison at first, then steadier, the harmony filling the space with an ache that pulsed in time with his heartbeat.

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He stood tall, his shoulders back, but his fingers curled into loose fists at his sides, the song striking a raw chord deep within him.

Glancing down the pew, he saw Raisa's lips moving as she sang along with the words, her eyes shimmering but steady.

Her presence anchored him, even amid the shared grief pressing down on the room.

When the hymn faded, the pastor stepped forward, his warm baritone breaking the heavy silence.

"We gather here today," he began, his measured words soothing the tension in the air, "to celebrate Vanessa's life and find strength in one another.

In loss, we are reminded of the importance of love, community, and the enduring power of memory. "

Quinten glance around, seeing many familiar faces.

Mr. and Mrs. Miller from the hardware store sat a few rows back, their heads bowed in silent prayer.

Quinten scanned the rest of crowd, recognizing so many faces from town but also people he hadn't seen in years, all gathered to say goodbye to someone whose life had been cut tragically short.

It was a stark reminder of how loss could pull a community together, even amid

heartache.

To his right, Lila sat beside Corbin, their hands entwined.

The younger couple had grown close, and the way Corbin leaned in to whisper in Lila's ear made Quinten smile despite the solemnity of the moment.

They were cute, ridiculously so, and a flicker of hope warmed him that something good had come out of all this mess.

Across the aisle, Beth sat with Megan, Megan's husband, and their two daughters.

When their eyes met, Beth gave Raisa a polite nod, her expression subdued.

There was no hostility now, only a quiet respect that hadn't been there before.

It was a far cry from the girl he'd known in high school, and he hoped that for Raisa, the apology brought some sense of peace.

As the pastor spoke of Vanessa's life, Raisa tilted her head to the symmetrical vaulted ceiling, and her gaze grew distant.

Quinten knew she wasn't studying the frescos but reflecting.

Probably she was thinking back on everything that had brought them to this point.

He didn't disturb her, instead sliding his hand over hers, his thumb brushing the soft skin in a silent gesture of support.

She turned to him, a small, grateful smile curving her lips.

After the final hymn, “Be Still, My Soul,” the congregation began to file out. Quinten stood, helping Nana to her feet as she patted his arm in thanks. Raisa lingered, glancing once more toward Vanessa’s mother before stepping into the aisle.

Outside, the January air was crisp and cold, clouds of breath forming as people gathered in clusters.

Quinten waited as Raisa exchanged a quiet word with Beth, their interaction brief but sincere.

The hostility between them had melted, replaced with an understanding that neither of them had expected but both had eagerly accepted.

When Raisa returned to his side, he reached for her hand, lacing their fingers together. “Ready?” His love for her made his heart swell.

She nodded, meeting his gaze. “Ready.”

They went to the car, hand in hand, their steps quiet against the snow-dusted path. The wrought-iron gates framed the horizon ahead, standing out against the soft winter sky. Quinten glanced at Raisa. Her cheeks were rosy from the chill, her expression pensive but peaceful.

Her fingers curled into his. Every time she touched him like this or their shoulders touched when she unconsciously leaned into him it lit something up inside him.

She’d been so composed during the service, but now, sitting beside him in the car, her lashes were heavy.

He let her have the silence.

Funerals had a way of stealing words, and this one had been especially brutal.

There would always be a scar on this town after what happened to Vanessa.

Some things didn't fade, didn't soften with time, but even deep wounds healed when tended to with care and love.

And God, he had love to give her. More than he'd ever known he had.

He glanced over at Raisa, her profile soft in the pale winter light. She caught him looking and blushed, that shy little smile pulling at the corner of her mouth. Like she still didn't quite believe he was hers. Like she didn't realize she'd upended his entire world the moment he laid eyes on her.

She'd read him a few pages of one of her stories last week.

Nervously. Her voice had trembled over her own words, cheeks flaming red as she read aloud.

But the writing was good. The words were emotionally rich and beautifully real.

She didn't see it yet, not really, but she would. He'd make sure of it.

Whatever it took, he'd support and champion her. Remind her every damn day how brilliant she was until she believed it, until her name sat proud on bookstore shelves where it belonged.

Quinten reached for her hand again and brought it to his lips.

"You okay?" She squeezed his fingers.

He nodded. "I am now."

And he was. For the first time in a long time, he felt whole.

He had a future again. With this woman beside him, he had everything.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Two weeks had passed, and Cedarburg still felt hushed. The kind of hush that settles after a scandal, when people aren't sure what to say. Not everyone had known Vanessa well. It didn't deter speculations and whispers. What happened to her had left a stain no one could quite scrub away.

On Sunday, Raisa woke to the solid weight of Quinten wrapped around her.

He had his arm slung low over her waist, and his warm breath stirred the hairs at the back of her neck.

She would've lingered in the cocoon of his hold, but her stomach roiled with an edge of queasiness that refused to be ignored.

Carefully, she shifted onto her back, holding her breath to avoid waking him. With a hand pressed over her belly, she focused on breathing slow and deep until the worst of it passed. The nausea receded in lazy waves, leaving a faint, persistent twist in her gut.

She stared up at the ceiling, absently tracing circles over her belly with her fingertips. Maybe it was something she ate. Maybe nerves, or a bug going around.

Or...

She shook her head and pressed her palm flat to her belly.



Her body felt warm, heavy, and not quite her own. Her skin had taken on a strange luminosity lately and people had even commented on it. Said she looked well-rested and radiant.

Radiant.

She snorted softly up to the ceiling. She didn't feel radiant right now. She felt queasy, puffy-eyed, and a little emotionally scrambled.

Beside her, Quinten stirred. A soft rumble escaped his throat, followed by a mumbled, "Mornin'." His arm tightened around her middle as he shifted closer, pulling her back into his chest.

He nuzzled the curve of her neck, breath warm and lazy. "You're hogging all the blankets," he muttered.

She smiled despite herself. "You're one to talk."

His hand slid behind her neck, firm and sure, and his lips caught hers with deliberate heat.

His grip on her nape tightened, and he pulled her closer.

His tongue teased the seam of her lips until she opened for him.

She was so easy for him, always willing, needy, and his to claim.

He kissed like he always did when he wanted her to feel something.

And God, she did. Every nerve lit up. Her breath hitched.

He didn't rush. He possessed. And somehow, that made her feel not just wanted but

safe.

By the time the kiss ended, she was breathless and melting against him, one hand fisted in his hair, her body draped half across his. Her thigh brushed the unmistakable hardness.

She stilled for half a second, before she smiled into the space between them, heart thudding like a drum in her chest.

She couldn't imagine life without him.

"Good morning to you," she murmured. The words came out husky.

Quinten's eyes darkened with something that looked far too much like restraint. He helped her upright, and for a beat, she stayed there, unwilling to let go.

When he didn't follow her lead, a soft sigh escaped her lips, disappointment curling in her belly.

He cupped her jaw, thumb brushing her cheek. "There'll be time for that later." His eyes were warm and full of promises. "Right now, we've got an appointment."

She blinked, still a little dazed. "With whom?"

"We're picking up Nana." He pushed back the covers. "She's coming on an outing with us today."

Her heart squeezed so hard it ached.

God. This man.

This infuriating, sexy, thoughtful man.

She pressed a hand to her chest, as if she could hold the feeling there a moment longer. “You planned an outing with Nana?”

He shrugged like it was nothing.

She couldn’t speak for a second. She just nodded, smiled, and knew—without a shadow of doubt—that this was her forever.

“Put on a nice dress,” he said.

She blinked. “Dress? Where are we going?”

But he only smirked and swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

They dressed quickly, trading sleepy smiles and half-finished thoughts as they moved around each other. Neither bothered with breakfast—just shoes, coats, keys—and then they were out the door, climbing into the car with quiet anticipation.

They picked up Nana first, Quinten helping her into the back seat Nana was chatty, excited, clearly in on something.

Raisa tried to play it cool.

Failed.

By the time they were back on the road, she was fidgeting with the hem of her skirt, “So... this outing,” she said casually. “Where are we going?”

Quinten kept his eyes on the road. “You’ll see.”

“Is it far?”

“Nope.”

“Should I have packed snacks? Water? Emergency flare?”

From the back seat, Nana chuckled.

Quinten just smiled, maddeningly smug.

She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. “You are insufferable.”

“And you’re impatient.”

“Because I don’t like being surprised!”

He said nothing, and her suspicions grew.

And then the car turned.

She blinked as the familiar outline of the school appeared ahead. “Why are we?—”

“Just wait,” he said, his eyes on the road.

He pulled into the nearly empty parking lot and turned off the engine. A breeze ruffled the trees outside.

She frowned. “Just wait?” she asked, arching her eyebrow.

He only smirked.

Quinten stepped out, came around, and opened the back door. “Come on, Nana.”

Nana slid her legs out of the car like a queen dismounting from a carriage. Quinten

offered her an arm, and Raisa could've sworn the old woman winked at him. Wait—had they planned this together?

Then he turned to her and offered his other arm, that suspicious smirk still playing on his lips. “You, too.”

She narrowed her eyes. “The school is closed, you know?”

He leaned in, brushed a kiss over her nose, and said absolutely nothing.

Infuriating man.

She took his arm anyway, glaring at the pavement as they walked. She had no idea what he was dragging her into. If not for Nana, she would make him trip right now. But not today. Not when they were all dressed for a funeral and her heels already made her feet hurt.

The school loomed ahead, and something tight cinched around her chest. Inside, the halls were hushed and eerily. No bells, no teenage voices, no lockers slamming. Just silence and memory.

He opened the front doors and led them inside.

“You have a key?”

He winked and started walking down the corridor, adjusting his step so she and Nana could easily follow.

The gym doors were propped open.

She stepped inside... and froze.

The space smelled faintly of floor wax and teenagers' sweat. The overhead lights were dimmed, casting long shadows across the polished linoleum. Her breath caught.

This room. God, this room.

She'd spent years in here, sitting against the walls during dances, pretending she didn't mind not being asked.

It was where she'd given her first public speech for English class, heart pounding so hard she'd thought she'd faint.

Where she'd tucked herself behind the bleachers with her notebook, scribbling stories no one ever read.

Where I learned how to escape with words, because no one invited me into the world happening around me.

Quinten led her to the center of the floor and whispered, "Don't move."

She blinked at him, suspicious. "Why?"

"Humor me." He escorted her grandmother to the bleachers, before jogging toward the wall.

For a second, all she could see was the boy he used to be—lean, fast, full of untamed energy. But the man he'd become? Broader, more grounded, with strength etched into every movement. He'd always been sexy, but maturity had sharpened him, added a quiet power that made him flat-out irresistible.

She still couldn't believe he was hers.

He fiddled with something she couldn't quite see.

The lights went out.

Her heart stuttered. “What?—”

Then a soft spotlight flicked on, casting a warm circle of gold a few feet in front of her.

From the bleachers, a shuffle of fabric and heels echoed, and then—unexpectedly—Nana’s voice floated from the shadows. “Hush, child,” she muttered.

A phone’s screen lit up. Nana tapped it confidently, and music swelled through the gym.

Ed Sheeran. Shape of You. The acoustic version.

Raisa’s breath hitched.

Her mouth parted. “You didn’t?—”

Quinten stepped into the light. “I sometimes wonder what would’ve happened if I’d asked you to prom.

If I could’ve been the guy who made you feel seen back then.

” He took a slow step closer. “I can’t change the past. I can’t undo the way we treated you.

But I can do better now. I can love you the way you always deserved.

” He paused, lifted his hand. “Dance with me?”

She stared at him, at the light gilding his cheekbones, at the nervous edge to his smile. At the absolute absurdity of dancing in the school gym almost twenty years after leaving school—with her Nana in the bleachers working the music.

She kicked off her heels.

Barefoot, she stepped into the circle of light and took his hand.

His palm was warm and callused. He pulled her close, slipping one arm around her back, the other holding her hand like it was something precious. They swayed gently at first, her cheek brushing the lapel of his suit, the music settling into the hollow of her bones.

“You should have been my queen back then,” he murmured in her ear, “but I can’t change the past.”

The lump in her throat pressed harder.

He pulled back just enough to meet her gaze. The lights, the music, the softness in his eyes—it was too much.

“What I can change”—he withdrew enough to look into her eyes—“is the future.”

And then he dropped to one knee.

Her hands flew to her mouth as he pulled a small velvet box from his pocket.

“Nana helped me pick it out,” he said, flipping the box open. “Which is how I know it’s perfect for you.”

The ring shimmered under the spotlight—simple, elegant, exactly her.



“Raisa Winslow,” he said, his voice steady and reverent, “marry me?”

For a moment, the air left her lungs. The lights, the music, the man in front of her—everything inside her tilted and fell into place. Emotion flooded her chest in one unstoppable wave.

“Yes,” she whispered. Then louder, steadier. “Yes. Yes, a thousand times yes.”

Quinten surged to his feet just in time to catch her, as she threw her arms around his neck, nearly knocking them both off balance.

Their mouths met halfway, and the kiss that followed hit her like a jolt—hungry, breath-stealing, real.

Her fingers curled into his jacket, needing the press of him, the solid warmth, the way his hand gripped her waist like he wasn’t letting go.

She kissed him harder. Because how else could she say what she felt? That she couldn’t picture a life without him. That she didn’t want to.

The world narrowed to his lips, his scent, the faint rasp of stubble against her cheek. Music still played somewhere behind her, but it felt far away. All she could feel was the heat pooling low in her belly and the dizzying rush of this is mine, finally mine.

When they broke apart, she was breathless, blinking up at him with a shaky grin. Then she turned, heart thudding, toward the bleachers.

Nana sat there like a smug little queen, with her hands folded over her handbag and a knowing gleam in her eye.

Raisa let out a helpless laugh and reached back to grab Quinten’s hand. “Come on,” she said, tugging him with her. “Let’s include her in this moment.”

Nana rose from the bleachers with surprising grace and held out her arms to them as they approached. She didn't speak, just pulled them both into a hug that spoke volumes.

The three of them shared a hug for a long moment, and when they broke apart, Nana dabbed at her eyes with her embroidered handkerchief before declaring it was time to celebrate properly.

Quinten offered her his arm like a gentleman, and on his other side Raisa slipped her hand into his as they walked out into the bright late-morning sun.

The school doors closed behind them, shutting out the weight of the past and letting something lighter settle in its place.

As they drove through town, storefronts busy and sidewalks thawing, Raisa leaned her head against Quinten's shoulder and let herself believe, really believe, that this new beginning was hers.

They found an open diner and tucked into a booth with pancakes, eggs, and strong coffee. Raisa couldn't stop smiling. Every time she glanced at Quinten's ring on her finger, her heart fluttered.

Afterward, while Quinten was paying the bill, Nana leaned in with a sly smile. "I think I'll go home now. Let these old bones rest... and give you two time to start working on those great-grandbabies."

Raisa's cheeks flamed searing hot. Her hand instinctively drifted to her belly.

She hadn't told anyone. Not yet. She wasn't even sure. But if Nana's wish came true, it might be more than a sweet joke—it might be real in less than nine months.

After they helped Nana into the car, Raisa leaned close to Quinten and murmured,

“Can we stop by the pharmacy on the way back?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Something wrong?”

She smiled—wide and secret and impossibly full of love. “Hopefully not.”

And as they drove off into the soft morning light, Raisa placed a hand over her belly and got a glint from the ring. Whether she was pregnant now or not, there would be love and family in her future.

THE END