



Savage Delight

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

-1-

3 Years

25 Weeks

5 Days

“Are you alright, sir?”

I look up at the voice. A bellboy smiles cheerily at me. He has no idea who I am, or what I’ve been through, yet he has the nerve to smile. It’s been nineteen days since Isis Blake forgot about me. And yet he has the nerve to ask if I’m alright.

I light another cigarette.

“Get out of my face.”

His expression falls, and he backs away. “S-Sure. Have a nice night.”

I scoff and lean against a pillar of the grand marble roundabout of the Hilton hotel. I watch ridiculously fancy black cars shuffle in and out, dropping off equally puffed-up old rich people. Bellboys and concierges scurry around, calling taxis and directing valets. Revolving glass doors with gold accents constantly whirr and hiss over the mindless chatter. Women shriek with laughter, men guffaw; all of them oblivious, happy idiots. I can see the truth in their clothes and posture – five of the men are cheating on their wives. Two of them with far younger women, one of them

exclusively with prostitutes. He not-so-subtly taps the ass of a passing blonde in a peacoat. She hides her grimace with an actress' grace. When she sees me, she clips over in her heels with a mildly happier smile.

"Jaden! Oh my god! It's been forever!"

"Three months, Lily." I correct.

"Three months, forever, same difference." She laughs. Perfume wafts off her - the expensive, strong kind. The kind you buy when you have to cover up the pervasive smell of sex.

"Finished with work?" I ask, and jerk my head at the man still watching her lecherously, his wife oblivious and clinging to his arm. Lily sighs.

"Yeah, for the night. I'm about to head back to my place. What about you?"

"Mayor's daughter." I motion to my tuxedo. "Winter ball."

"Bet you were the hottest guy there."

"It was a Catholic girls' school."

"And the hottest guy she'll ever have."

Lily is just a few years older than me, but she's been in the Rose Club far longer. Lily isn't her real name, just like Jaden isn't mine. I don't know her in real life, and she doesn't know me. But sometimes we work in the same hotels, and she's one of the few girls in the Rose Club who isn't annoyingly bland. So we talk.

"Seriously." Lily elbows me. "I've seen her. She looks like an inbred Pomeranian on

her best days.”

“Now now,” I blow smoke into the sky. “Let’s not be nasty. She paid good money. And I respect and appreciate money.”

Lily watches my face carefully as she waits for a taxi to cycle past. She furrows her thin brows.

“What about your own prom?” She asks.

“What about it?”

“Are you going to that? Do you have a girlfriend? Or a date?”

I took Sophia to my Junior prom. But it’s not Sophia who pops into my head. An image of Isis grows strong, dressed up in some silk dress. Red? Or blue? Purple, probably, to match her hair. She’d dance and drink and start at least four fights. It would be awful. It would be hilarious. I smirk at the thought, but it quickly fades.

“No. I’m not going to the Senior one. It’s pointless – I’m graduating in five months, anyway. High school barely matters anymore.”

She plucks the cigarette from my lips and grinds it under her heel. “When did you start smoking?”

“When did you start seeing fit to mother me?” I snarl.

“It’s not good for you.”

“Neither is whoring.”

Lily glowers. “We both have our reasons for doing that. You don’t have a reason to smoke. Unless you want to die early and painfully.”

“And if I did, it would be none of your business.”

Lily looks wounded. She hails a passing cab, and pauses in its open door to look back at me.

“You’re one of us, Jaden,” She murmurs. “Society looks down on us. Customers objectify us. All we have is each other. So it is my business.” She pulls out her Rose Club card – white with pale gold stripes – and hands it to me. “If you ever need anything, or if you wanna talk, call me.”

She’s gone before I can throw it back at her - gone before the gaping chasm in my chest has the chance to begin to bleed. I shake it off. I’m Jack Hunter. No one makes me bleed.

Except one girl, at a party, nearly five months ago.

I light another cigarette to cover the stench of weakness emanating off me. The women at the hotel’s entrance are eyeing me. If I so much as flinch in their direction, they’ll accost me, flirting with tired tactics and worn eagerness. They are just as bad as the men. They covet things that look nice. And when they can’t have what they covet, they squabble; quickly turning on each other in sickening displays of predatory possessiveness.

I consider throwing Lily’s card in a nearby puddle. She has no idea what I’m going through. I have no idea what I’m going through. She can’t help me. Besides, her help is offered solely because she has designs on me. Even an idiot can see that much.

‘Not everything with a vagina likes you, dipshit!’

I whirl around at the sound of the voice. It's so clear, so perfectly loud and obnoxious that it has to be her. But no purple streaks bob out of the crowd to greet me. No warm brown eyes crinkle with a smirk.

I fall against the pillar again and laugh, putting my head in my hands as reality slips through my fingers. Get it together, Jack Hunter. You're going to Harvard in seven months. Your mother is waiting for you to come home. Sophia is counting on you. Her surgery is imminent. You can't go crazy. Belina needs your help. People are depending on you. You have a life to live, and no matter how much you wish on stars, no matter how much you bargain with God, or with the doctors, that life does not include Isis Blake any longer. You're a stranger to her.

The hole she burned in the ice must be mended.

There is no warmth, anymore. You barely tasted it, barely felt it on your skin. It brushed against you for a single second. Something so small should not retain this much weight. It is illogical. You are illogical for letting it affect you so much.

There is no warmth, Jack Hunter. Not for the likes of you.

You have blood on your hands. You have duty, and guilt, and you can't escape that. No one can help you escape.

Not even her.

"Jaden!" A shrill voice makes me look up. Cynthia, the Mayor's daughter, waves me over to the limo. Her dark hair is over-curled and looks ridiculous. Her pink dress is too tight and low cut. Her circle of simpering friends have dropped their purses off and re-touched their makeup, and now they're on their way to an after-party. We're on our way. I'm being paid to be one of them, after all.

I stub my cigarette out and put on my best smile.

My life has become a series of people asking me if I'm better.

Except I'm sitting in a hospital bed with a massive bandage around my head like a turban. So no, I'm not better.

But people keep asking anyway because it's how you show concern for someone you care about, I guess, but frankly a giant box of chocolate truffles and reign over a small kingdom would be acceptable stand-ins.

No school. No home. All I do is sit in bed all day and watch crappy soap operas in which people faint dramatically all the time. Like, damn. That shit's an epidemic. I get so bored I try to mimic their faints except the nurses catch me and say stuff like 'you have a head injury' and 'contrary to popular belief, the floor is hard', or some nonsense, so nobody can blame me when I steal the nearest wheelchair and bolt down the hall at top speeds. NASCAR ain't got nothing on me. Except the backing of huge corporations who give them money to go fast. But still. I'm twice as cool and my ride is pimped as hell – a worn-out shit stain on the seat from somebody's dead someone and the stuffing pulled slightly out of the armrest.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“Good evening, chaps!” I nod at two interns. They shoot each other looks but before they can call security, I’m blazing around the corner at warp speed.

“Bloody good weather we’re having!” I smile at a man sitting in his bed as I pass his open room. He cheerily returns my greeting with a resounding “Go to hell!”.

I round the next corner and come face-to-face with Naomi, my nurse. Her hair’s back in a strict bun, her face angry and worried and tired all at the same time.

“Ello, love. Fancy a cuppa?”

“You’re not British, Isis,” Naomi says.

“I can be things,” I insist.

“Yes, well, unless those things include a person who is lying in bed recuperating, I don’t want to see them. And I especially don’t want to see them wheeling around the hospital like a madman.”

“The madman is back that way,” I jerk my thumb behind me. As if to prove it, a loud “FUCK!” reverberates. Naomi narrows her eyes and points at my room.

“Back in bed. Now.”

“Why you gotta be like that?” I sigh. “We can work this out. There can be bribes. Of the monetary kind. Or maybe not monetary. Do you like adventures? I’m full of those. I can give you at least nine adventures.”

“You’ve already given me one for the day. If you don’t get back in bed, I won’t let Sophia in after her check-up.”

I gasp. “You wouldn’t!”

“I would!”

I start to faint dramatically, but she catches me with her meaty arms and plops me in the wheelchair, pushing me back to my room. I grumble the entire way. In the doorway, I crawl out on my hands and knees and fake-sob, collapsing into bed.

“Oh, quiet, you drama queen.” Naomi chides, and closes the door behind her.

“Drama empress!” I yell. “I prefer the title empress!”

My room’s quiet. Too quiet. I huff and cross my arms and blow bangs out of my face. I need a haircut. And an escape plan. But looking fabulous while escaping is somewhat required, so I’m putting one before the other.

I grab my phone and text Sophia.

DEAD PROTEIN IS TRYING TO EAT MY EYES. BRING THE SHARP POINTY THING.

Her text comes seconds later;

You mean the thing you threatened that male nurse’s balls with?

I sigh contentedly at the reminder of my own past brilliance. I’m so lucky to be me.

Yes. That.

She sends one smiley face; :D

Sophia and I are the youngest people in this hospital, discounting the kid's ward, and they don't let you in there unless you're a doctor or a parent or you have permission, which is really hard to get. Which is why I use the windows. I hate jello and it's all they give you at meals so I hoard the jewel-like cups and give them to the kids like a gelatin-laden Santa and it's a big hit. Not so much with the nurses. And security officers. Regardless, Sophia and I make sense. Since the day we met at lunch a few weeks ago and I gave her my apple, I've felt like I've known her forever. Being with her is like a massive, run-on déjà vu. When she first told me her name, I blurted; "Oh! You're Sophia!" like it was a huge revelation. She asked me what I meant by that, and I searched long and hard in my own sizeable brain and couldn't find a reason. I'd just said it, without thinking, and I didn't really know why. I still don't know why.

Besides that tiny bump in the road, she and I have been getting along famously. You can tell because A. she hasn't run away crying yet and B. she always ends her texts to me with a smiley. Only people who like you do that. Or people who want to secretly murder you. But really, I don't think someone as delicate and beautiful as Sophia would want to murder someone, unless she wanted to be like, beautiful and delicate and bloodthirsty, which, I'm not gonna lie, would add to her considerable mystique –

"Isis," Sophia says from the doorway. "You're thinking out loud again."

I whirl to face her. She's in a floral sundress, with a thick, cozy-looking sweater. Her platinum, white-blonde hair is kept thin and long, like strands of silver. Her milk-white skin practically glows. To offset all her paleness, her eyes are ocean-deep and navy-dark. In one hand she carries a book, and in the other –

"Scissors!" I crow. "Okay, okay, deep breaths everyone. Because I'm about to say something mildly life-changing."

Sophia inhales and holds it. I point at her.

“You’re going to cut my bangs!”

She exhales and fist-pumps. “I’ll chop them all off.”

“Soph, soapy Soph soapbutt, we have only been together three weeks and I love you dearly, like a sister, like we are deer-sisters frolicking in the woods, but this is extremely vital to my well-being and I am trusting you with my life.”

“Ah, I see,” Sophia sits on my bed, giving me an understanding nod. “You keep all your vital organs in your bangs.”

“As well as all my future prospects with Johnny Depp. So you realize how important this is to me.”

“Obviously.”

“I am quite serious.”

“Deadly.”

“It’s not like you can make me look any less hot, since that is impossible, but generally speaking don’t f**k up.”

She runs her fingers through my wild bangs. “Straight across?”

“Uh, you’re the fashionable expert here. I just sort of throw on things that don’t have holes in them and hope for the best. I read a Cosmo once on the toilet. Does that count?”

“Depends on how long you were on the toilet.” Sophia brushes my bangs with her fingers experimentally.

“Years. They talked about face shapes. Like, do I have a square face? A heart-shaped face?”

“Definitely heart-shaped.”

“Really? Because I was thinking more that-one-unfortunately-misshapen-Skittle-in-the-bottom-of-the-box shape.”

Sophia laughs. “Just hold still, and close your eyes. I promise I won’t disfigure you for life.”

There are the soft sounds of snipping and Sophia’s gentle fingers, and then she tells me to open my eyes. I leap out of bed and dash into the bathroom. The age-stained hospital mirror reflects a short-banged girl, her slightly-faded purple streaks gracing her forehead. A single bandage wraps entirely around the base of her skull. She looks tired, old. Her face contains two volcanic eruptions on her chin, one on her nose, and bags under her eyes that’d make Coach jealous. And something’s wrong. Something deep inside the girl is wrong.

Ugly.

“What’s the matter? Don’t like it?” Sophia comes up behind me. In the mirror, she practically radiates pale, waifish beauty, and I’m...

“No, I love it. You did great. Fab. Baf. Nothing’s wrong! Absolutely zero. Absolute zero. It’s kind of chilly in here, isn’t it?”

I run back to the bed and burrito myself in the blankets. Sophia follows, sighing.

“If you don’t like it, you don’t have to lie.”

“No, I do! Shit, I really do. Sorry. It’s not that, it’s – other stuff. Stuff from before I came here.”

“Ah.” She settles on the foot of my bed. “The hard stuff. The stuff the hospitals can’t heal.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

I nod. Sophia's gaze isn't piercing, but something about it has weight, gravity, like she's decades older than she seems. I haven't told her about Nameless, mostly because she doesn't need to know when she already looks so sad all the time. She hasn't told me anything about her past, either, and it's better that way. I can tell she's had it worse than me.

"Was it a boy?" She asks, finally.

"Yeah."

She folds her hands over each other, like a dainty lady. The nurses gossip about her; the way she's been in the hospital for five years, the way she has no family – her mother and father died in a car accident, and her grandmother raised her, but she passed a few years ago, leaving Sophia all alone in the world. Mostly they gossip about the boy who comes to visit her – Jack, the same guy who happened to see our house door open and saved me and Mom from Leo. Infuriatingly good-looking, and an infuriatingly good Samaritan, he apparently visited her a lot. But since I came, he hasn't come at all. He's sent letters to Sophia (letters! In this day and age!), but he hasn't come personally. The nurses love to gossip about that, too. I scream politely from across the room correct them whenever I can; I don't know him! He barely knows me! I'm indebted to him, sure, but there's nothing going on and there never will be because duh – all boys who aren't Hollywood actors with prestigious pirate acting careers are gross!

"I'm sorry," I blurt.

"For what?"

“For your boyfriend. He’s...he’s stopped coming around since I came, and if it’s because of me, I’m sorry, and I know that’s arrogant to think, but the nurses blab and I can’t help but think –”

She pats my hand and smiles. “Shhh. It’s okay. They don’t know anything. He’s just busy is all. He works a lot, and he has school.”

“I have school,” I grumble.

She plops the book she brought down on my lap. “And you have seven chapters of *The Crucible* to read if you wanna catch up before you go back next week!”

I contemplate seppuku, but after remembering how big the medical bill for a cracked head is, I refrain. Mom’s having a hard enough time paying without me adding spilled organs and general death to the list. Besides, I can’t die yet. I still gotta thank Jack properly. Dying before you pay someone back is just plain rude.

“I don’t wanna go back to school,” I say.

“Yes you do.”

“I totally do. It’s a snoozefest in this place.”

“Then we better get reading.” Sophia smiles. I groan and roll over, and she starts reading aloud. She enjoys torturing me. Or she’s just happy to have someone here with her. I can’t decide which. We might get a long great, but she’s still a huge mystery to me. Me! The queen empress of deducing what people are all about! I study her face, her hands, her dress as she reads. Everyone in the hospital knows Sophia, but no one knows what she has, exactly. The nurses don’t like to talk about it. I asked Naomi and she glared and told me it was under doctor-patient confidentiality. Sometimes Sophia stays in her room for ‘treatments’, and those last for days. She

doesn't limp or cough or vomit, and no bandages or stitches are on her. Except for the fact she's so pale and thin and sometimes complains she has migraines, she's perfectly healthy as far as I can see.

"Soph," I interrupt. She looks up.

"Yeah?"

"I know this might be super invasive, and historically invading has been pretty bad overall, but I don't think I can physically contain my curiosity any longer. Or, I could. But I'd like, implode the star system from the stress. Why are you in the hospital?"

Sophia slowly closes the book. "You really don't remember, do you?"

"Remember what?"

Her eyes dampen with sorrow. She stares out the window for a long time before sighing.

"What?" I insist. "What is it?"

Sophia looks back at me. "Oh, nothing. It's just sad, is all. I'm sad for him. He was so happy, for a while."

I wrinkle my nose, and before I can explode with the demand for answers, Sophia starts talking again.

"I have the same thing you have." She taps her head with one finger. My mouth makes a little 'o'.

“You...split your head open like a melon, too?”

She laughs, the sound like bells made of crystal. “Something like that.”

I look over at the bag she brought. A bunch of romance books crowd it, various clones of Fabio flashing their brooding frowns on every cover as a scantily dressed female is in the inevitable process of fainting on a rock somewhere nearby, preferably directly beneath his crotch.

“Why do you even like those? Aren’t there just like, princesses and kissing and misogyny?” I wrinkle my nose. Sophia shrugs.

“I don’t know. I like the princesses.”

“They’ve got great dresses and fabulous hair and loads of money. Kind of hard not to.”

“I suppose I like the way the stories always end happily. Since...since I know my story won’t end as happily.”

My heart twists around in my chest. She sounds so sure of herself.

“H-Hey! Don’t talk like that. You...you’re the closest thing I’ve ever met to a princess. Like, a real life one. Minus the tuberculosis and intermarrying. And like, beheadings.”

Sophia laughs. “You’re a princess too, you know. Very brave. And noble.”

“Me? Pft.” I buzz my lips and a delightful spray of saliva mists the air. “I’m more like...more like...I guess if I was in one of those books I’d be like, a dragon.”

“Why?”

“It just makes more sense!” I smooth my hair. “Fabulous glowing scales. Beautiful jewel-like eyes.”

“Wings for arms?” Sophia smirks.

“That’s a wyvern! Dragons have wings independent of their limb system! But I forgive your transgressions. I’ve encountered a bit of heartburn today and am not in the mood to eat a maiden like you in the slightest.”

“What would you do as a dragon?”

I shrug. “You know. Fly around. Collect gold. Fart on some townspeople.”

Sophia is quiet for a moment.

“But I still don’t get it. Why does a dragon make sense for you?”

“Think about it. I’d just make a badass dragon. I mean...nobody really likes the dragon. You get to be alone, in a cool quiet place. As a princess everybody likes you and you gotta be in the middle of hot sweaty balls all the time.”

Sophia raises an eyebrow.

“Ballroom...balls. Dances. Uh.”

She laughs that chime-laugh, and I can’t help the laugh that bubbles up, too. I sound like a donkey.

“And I mean,” I add. “You know. Dragons never have to worry about. Um. What I

mean is, princes don't fall in love with dragons –"

Ugly.

" – they fall in love with princesses –"

Did you think that's what this was? Love? I don't date fat girls.

" - so it makes more sense, you know?"

"Isis?" Naomi pokes into the room. "Let's go. It's time for your session with Dr. Mernich. Hi Sophia."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“Hello,” Sophia says, and smiles at me. “You should go.”

“Ugh, no thank you. Mernich’s going to ask about my feelings and frankly I’d rather swallow a centipede than talk about those things. Or become a centipede and crawl away. Can I become a centipede? Do they allow that in America -”

“Isis,” Naomi says sternly.

“- you can become a certified lightsaber maintenance engineer in America, so I really think you should be allowed to become a bug - ”

“Arthropod,” Sophia corrects.

“ – arthropod, and Naomi! My, what big hands you have. The better to grab me with, am I right? ACK, gently, woman! I’m damaged goods!”

Naomi steers me out of the room, Sophia cheerily waving after us.

Dr. Mernich is the kind of woman who forgets to brush her hair but somehow makes the crazed lunatic look work for her, which is weird, because she works with crazies. Not that crazies are bad. I’ve met a few and am probably one of them. I just don’t know it. Or I do. But I refuse to let it get in the way of my fabulousness hard enough to require a shrink. Mernich is my way out of this place, in any case. She’s the one who’s keeping me here until she’s satisfied I’m alright in the head. Which is dumb, because mentally I am a diamond fortress of impenetrable logic and sexiness.

Dr. Mernich clears her throat. “Isis, you’re —”

“I will someday not think aloud, and that will be a sad day for humanity. Also, quieter.”

“How are you feeling today?”

“Parts of me are feeling lots of things! For instance, my intestines are feeling lots of things! That means I need to poop. Sometime in the next hour. In addition to this riveting prospect, I’m worried about my mom so if you could just write me a note so I can get out of here that’d be great.”

“What have we said about avoiding the subject with flippant jokes?”

I squirm. “Uh, it’s vaguely negative. I think.”

“And why is it vaguely negative?” She asks patiently and scribbles some more.

“Because I don’t confront anything, I just run away from it,” I recite.

“That’s right.”

“But to be clear I run away from it like a Baywatch babe, not a fat, sweaty kid in gym class. I mean, I am still fat as heckie but it’s an alluring sort of fat, you feel me?”

“Isis, do you really think you’re fat?”

“Duh. And unlovable. But you already know that.”

Her eyes spark. Of course she already knows that, she’s spent two weeks with me, talking about my life. I’d stalled around her with jokes for a good week until I

realized she was the one who gives the go-ahead to let me out. And then I had to start actually cooperating with an adult. Ugh.

“You already know everything about me, right?” I tilt my head. “So c’mon. Why don’t you just let me out of this – pardon my French – absolute shithole?”

She adjusts her glasses. “I’m afraid I can’t do that. I’m certain there are still some things we need to work on. You’re close, but not quite there.”

Even this shrink is obvious. Her self-satisfied little smile as she says that gives it all away. The trophies and awards lining her stuffy walls give it away.

“You like it. Knowing things about people. It makes you feel powerful.”

Dr. Mernich looks up from her scribbling, the faintest whiff of startled hanging around her.

“Excuse me?”

“You. Like. The. Ego. Trip. Shrinking. Gives. You,” I say slowly. “I understand. I see things about people and I just love knowing I know. It’s weird. It’s stupid. But mostly it’s fun and it makes me feel superior. Maybe I’ll turn it into a way to make money someday, too. I gotta think about that kind of stuff, you know, with college and everything a few months away.”

Mernich is completely frozen for point four seconds, and then she starts scribbling madly. She does that when I say something super interesting that she can dissect. So she scribbles a lot. Because I am, objectively, an insanely interesting person. I better be! I work hard to be interesting, dammit!

“Anyway what was I saying?” I scratch my chin. “Right, I feel really cooped up and

sort of tired of hospitals. Also I feel bad for Sophia. Did you know she has no parents? And her grandma died? How sucky is all that death? Majorly sucktastic.”

Mernich nods. “I’m her psychologist as well. She’s quite the strong girl, if a little tragic.”

“Wow. That’s sort of condescending? I said I feel bad for her but you went straight to giving her labels like tragic? Wow. That’s interesting. Wow.”

I can see Mernich start a glare behind her glasses, but she quickly cuts it off and resumes her usual passive face. Oh, she’s good. But not better than me. Not better than Jack.

I pause, my swinging legs stopping under the chair. Jack? Where did that come from? How would I know Jack is any good? I haven’t been around him for more than thirty seconds that first time when I woke up and he yelled at me.

“What about Jack, Isis?”

“Uh, I don’t know. It just...it just popped into my head. Which is weird. I mean, most things that pop into my head are really weird, like that one time when I thought about Shrek in Victoria’s Secret underwear, but I think this actually beats Shrek’s Secret.”

Mernich leans back. “What do you remember before the incident, Isis?”

“I was applying to colleges. Boring.”

“And before that?”

“I...I was at school. And I – I yelled. At someone. I don’t remember who. Kayla, maybe. Maybe Wren? Yeah, I think Wren.”

“What did you yell about?”

My palm suddenly stings, and I remember the sudden feeling of slapping someone.

“I slapped someone. I yelled and I slapped them. Wren must’ve done something stupid, I don’t know.”

“And before that? Do you remember any major events?”

“There was a party. A big one. Avery’s house. Halloween – I dressed up as Batgirl.”

“Did Kayla go?”

“Yeah, she was a mermaid. Her and her boyfriend – ugh, what’s his name? I don’t remember his name, but I know I slightly despised him.”

“Despise is an awfully strong feeling.”

“Yes well being alive is an awfully strong feeling.”

“Isis –”

“I didn’t like him. Or, something about him rubbed me the wrong way. I don’t know.”

“And can you recall what happened at the party?”

My head suddenly gives a massive throb, my spine tingling with pain. I squeeze my eyes shut and rub them.

“Isis? What can you remember?”

Leo's face comes back, leering at me from the doorway. Panic wells up in my throat. I'm not going to be able to save Mom.

"I – I don't know! Stuff!"

"Try to remember specifics. Did you drink anything? Did you dance? Who was wearing what costume?"

"Wren was...he was a green guy. Link! Link from Zelda. And I drank...coke. I think. With rum. Don't tell my Mom that. We joke about me drinking but she doesn't really know I drink. And I danced and there was someone –"

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

He's going to hurt her. He's hurt someone before. He hurt Sophia. Sophia? No, that's not right. Leo doesn't know her. Who, then, has hurt Sophia? A baseball bat. Avery came at me with a baseball bat, and someone grabbed it. I can see their broad, spidery hand wrapped around it, wrenching it from her, their low voice saying something with an amused tone to a startled, frozen Avery –

The pain ricochets through my head like a tennis ball on fire.

“Fuck!” I grab my forehead and put it between my knees.

“Take deep breaths, Isis,” Mernich says softly. “You’re doing well, but don’t give up now. What else happened there?”

A bed. A soft bed, someone’s soft lips, someone whispering my name –

The pain splinters, blossoming in my brain like a demented, evil flower. I can’t see anything – the world goes black and my ears ring.

That’s what you get for trusting someone.

Ugly.

Maybe I’ll love you. If you hold still.

Mernich says something but I can’t hear her. It hurts. It hurts and I want it all to stop.

You got guts. I like that.

Have f**king fun trusting nobody for the rest of your life!

I don't go out with ugly girls.

Ugly.

Ugly.

“Isis! Look at me!”

I look up. Mernich's face is pale.

“It's okay. You don't have to push yourself anymore. I'm sorry. Just breathe. In, and out. There you go. Slowly. Sit up.”

When I lean back into the chair, I realize my hands are shaking. My whole body is trembling, like a thread in the breeze.

“Why?” I murmur. “Why can't I remember what happened?”

She pulls her clipboard out again and clicks her pen. “Well, to find that out, we need to go to the beginning.”

“You mean like, biblical genesis? Because I have three rules for a happy, fulfilling life, and never time travelling ever is one of them. Because, you know. Dinosaurs kill things. And the black plague. And let's face it – with my supreme amounts of unnatural charm, I'd be burned as a witch.”

She chuckles. “No. Not that far. I just want you to tell me your story. The real one. The one about Will.”

I flinch, my skin crawling at the sound of his name.

“Pulling my own tongue out and setting it on fire would be preferable to talking about that guy.”

“I know. But I think it’s time to stop running. I think you know that, too.”

I hate her. I hate her so much. She’s the reason I can’t leave. I’m racking up more and more pricey bills the longer I stay here. She’s the reason Mom worries. But I can tell she really wants to know about Nameless. If I tell her the story, maybe she’ll let me go. Nothing else has worked so far. It’s worth a shot, even if that shot will pierce through my guts and leave them to bleed all over the floor.

“From the beginning?” I ask softly.

“From the beginning.” She nods.

I inhale, and let it out as a long sigh. Somewhere outside a bird chirps. I want its freedom more than anything.

“When I was in fifth grade, I developed a crush on a boy. This was my first mistake. He wasn’t a particularly attractive boy, he was sort of quiet and spit sometimes, but he had pretty, dark, silky hair. The female teachers complimented him on it. I wrote him a love note that said ‘I like your hair’ and he wiped his nose on it and gave it back to me at recess. I should’ve seen the warning signs in the mucus. But I was smitten. He’d paid attention to me! Me – the fat roly poly girl with frizzy hair and a constant cloud of B.O. surrounding her! He actually didn’t snub me, or push me in the mud, or call me a fat whale, he just wiped his nose on my declaration of love and gave it back to me. It was the most promising social signal I’d received in my short ten years of life on the planet Earth.

Thus began my descent into utter madness.

I did anything short of committing crimes to get his attention. Also, I committed actual crimes. Like riding my bike on the freeway shoulder lane to get to his house and stare at him through his window while he played video games. But then I found out it was illegal! You can't ride your bike on the freeway at all! So I started taking the bus to look at him through his window while he played videogames.

Anyway, so there I was, in the prime of my life, and by prime I mean not prime at all. Mom and Dad were going through the divorce, which involved a lot of shouting and money and guilt, so Aunt Beth offered her home for a few months so I wouldn't have to switch schools, which turned into nearly five years, but Aunt Beth was totally cool about it. We had grilled cheese almost every night and she let me watch R-rated movies. So basically I'd died and gone to heaven and neither of my parents gave a diddly-damn except Mom who sometimes got guilty and sent me lots of exceptional socks. I love her, but really, socks?

So while my loveable gene donors were off debating who owned what vase for sixty months, I grew up in the loudest ways possible. Well, I wasn't exactly loud back then, I was more an indoor-mouse-whisper kind of gal, but you get my drift. There were fights. One time, a girl tried to run me over with her scooter! Do you remember scooters? I remember scooters. My shinbone remembers scooters. One time that girl even gave me a frog! Because she was so nice! I found it in my locker! Actually I had tons of friends and by tons I mean everyone in the library who squeezed around my bulk to reach their books."

"And what were you doing in the library?"

"Hiding. I read a lot of Jane Austen and cried. It was a formative experience."

Mernich nods, motioning for me to continue. She's doing it. She's making me bring

out the big guns. I sigh.

“Alright. No more pu**yfooting around it. I met...Nameless...I can still call him that, right?”

“If you must.”

I take a deep breath.

“After stalking him for most of middle school, the first time I exchanged words with Nameless was at Jenna Monroe’s beach party in seventh grade. The girls were wearing pastel tankinis and swimming. I was wearing two sweatshirts and yoga pants and sitting with her Mom. I was still at a loss as to why Jenna Monroe invited me at all – Jenna was all legs and brown ponytails and glitter pens – the total opposite of my pudge and pencils. We’d been friends once, when we were still pooping ourselves and learning not to eat said poop, but judging by the way Jenna’s mom waved to me when I first came, I got the impression Jenna had no hand in inviting me at all.

Anyway, there I was, waist-deep in an element that sure as hell wasn’t mine. Girls were giggling, splashing water on each others’ boobs, and boys were around! Staring at the girls! Well, all the girls except me and Jenna’s mom. Will was there, so I hid behind the soda cans on the picnic table and tried to look like I wasn’t there. Being almost two hundred pounds is sort of counter-productive to invisibility, though. Everyone saw me. Even Will. It was like, two seconds of eye contact, and then he looked away. And I thought I was done for! Because, you know, when people look at you and you’re fat you think you’re done for.”

I look up, and I can see the faintest glaze coming over Mernich’s eyes. She’s skinnier than a beanpole. Probably has been her whole life. She has no idea what I’m talking about. No amount of college can teach her that. I laugh.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“You know what? Screw it. Just...I’ll just talk about the part you really wanna know. It’s what everyone wants to know. They don’t care about the how or the whys, just when and where and how quickly they can say ‘awww, I’m sorry’ or try to fix it.”

“That’s – that’s not what I meant at all, Isis –”

“No, you know what? It’s fine. It’s probably better this way. This way I don’t have to drag out my entire sordid history for you to pore over! Saves you time! I’m sure you’re a busy lady with a lot of crazy people to talk to and I’m, frankly, a total purveyor of common sense and not-time wasting, so. So you know what? Yeah. The day it happened it was raining. I was at his house. The frogs were outside and croaking because he lived near a marsh. That’s what Florida is. Marshes. Marshes and ass**les. His mom had made us popcorn. My hands were oily. His hands were oily. We’d been secretly going out for two months but he wouldn’t let me tell anyone and when I tried to talk to him at school he ignored me, laughed at me and told me to buzz off. But then he’d apologize. When we were alone he was nice. Nicer. Marginally. I was fourteen. Fourteen, okay? I was fourteen and I thought I was in love and I would have done anything to keep him from leaving me –”

Bile rises in my throat, but I swallow it back and clench my fists on the armrests.

“Do you know what it’s like? Never wanting to lose another someone? Everyone else leaves. Mom and Dad left. I didn’t want him to leave. If he left, I would’ve lost it. He was the only normal thing in my life. He made me feel...when he smiled at me, he made me feel pretty. Do you know what that’s like, either? Being fat, being huge and gross and feeling huge and gross and then finding someone who makes you feel pretty? Do you know what you’d do to keep that person? You’d do anything.

Anything in this world short of killing yourself.”

Mernich’s eyes are softer, now. But I don’t trust them anymore. This is what she wanted. She’s getting it. Her pen is scrabbling madly across the paper even as she opens her mouth to speak.

“I’m sorry, Isis. I didn’t mean to seem callous. But this is good. You, saying these things aloud, even if you hate me for bringing them out...it’s good. It’s helping.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

I’m shaking. My body trembles with a rage I can’t express. It’s not all anger at Mernich’s vapid, voracious curiosity, though. I’m not all mad at her. The anger is directed at someone else, too. Nameless. Myself. Mom and Dad.

Mernich pushes back in the chair. “We’ll stop here.”

She gets up and doubles around her desk, pulling out a familiar yellow slip.

“What are you doing?” I demand.

“Writing you a discharge.”

“Not gonna grill me more? Not gonna ask me to come right out and say it? You were the one who said I needed to confront it, not run away.”

“This isn’t running away,” she says calmly, and rips the paper off and hands it to me. “I’ve been doing this for fifteen years, Isis. Some people need me – a total stranger – to listen. However, some people are only further injured when a total stranger listens. As a doctor, and with you as my patient, I can’t ascribe you continue speaking to me on this matter with a good conscious. I’m not the one who should hear it. Someone

else – your mother, your father, maybe Kayla, or Sophia, or perhaps someone you haven't met yet – one of them will make you feel safe enough to say it. One of them will be the one you decide to tell. It's up to you."

I stand, and grab the paper warily, like it's a trap. But Mernich just smiles.

"Would you like your diagnosis?"

"I'm crazy."

"Not at all. Do you know what disassociation is?"

"Something crazy people have."

Mernich's smile turns patient. "It's what occurs when a person goes through a traumatic experience. It's a...think of it like a coping mechanism for the brain. Say someone throws a snowball, and it's going to hit your eye. Your eyelids react much faster than the snowball flies to protect the cornea. Disassociation is like an eyelid for the brain. A traumatic event can cause the brain to disassociate the event. Sometimes this manifests as a simple case of shock that quickly wears off. Other times, we see intense reactions, such as withdrawal, PTSD, and in your case -"

She looks up, and I dread the next words to fall from her mouth.

" – amnesia."

"What?" I scowl. "I don't –"

"You have periods of painful black outs when you try to recall a certain person in your life. Your brain has identified this person as the source of overstimulation, and perhaps pain. You have what's called lacunar amnesia – it's a very centralized and

rare thing.”

“So I’ve lost my brain? Part of my memories? I’ve totally forgotten them?”

“You haven’t really forgotten – the brain never truly forgets. I believe in your case, the memories are still there, but buried beneath layers. It might take months to get them back. But you may also never get them back at all.”

“Who...which person was it? The one I forgot?”

“Think back. What have your friends told you? Have they been acting strangely towards you, concerning a certain person?”

It filters in slowly – weeks of Kayla’s weird looks, of Wren’s concerned sighs, and Sophia, shaking her head and saying it’s sad. And then Jack’s fractured expression when I first woke up and said I didn’t know him. I stare, wide-eyed, at Mernich’s passive face.

“Jack. That Jack guy. Everything they say about him – doesn’t make sense. But why do I have this lactose amnesia thing? I mean, my head was bad, but - ”

“You suffered significant head trauma. I believe the lacunar amnesia is a combination of that and your own disassociation of the traumatic event of fighting off your mother’s attacker.”

“Did Jack – how do I know him?”

“You’d be better off asking Sophia that question, I believe. But you’re leaving the hospital with that discharge slip right away, aren’t you? You were quite eager to go.”

I look at the crumpled yellow note in my hand and close my fist around it.

“It can wait.”

Mernich smiles at me.

“Yes. Yes it can.”

-2-

3 Years

25 Weeks

5 Days

My mind is a white blank of confusion. I knew Jack. I know Jack. The underwear model-esque dude with the rude mouth knows me.

Before this extremely vexing realization, he'd just been a guy I was grateful to. But now he's a guy I know! I know guys! Guys who aren't harmless Wren! Why hadn't anyone told me? It's not like I'd hate them for telling the truth! In fact, I kind of actually encourage it for everyone on this planet! It fosters clear communication and ensures things mildly don't f**king suck!

I find Sophia in the common room, reading a romance novel. The heaving bosom on the cover distracts me for point two seconds before I realize I have better boobs than that and slam my hands on the table.

“Sophie! Soapy! Soapbutt!”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

She looks up calmly and puts a bookmark between the pages. “Yes ma’am?”

“Not to be rude or overly confrontational but why the f**king hell didn’t you tell me I had amnesia?”

She gasps. “You have amnesia?”

“Soapy!” I lament. She stands, putting her book under one arm and offering her other to me.

“Oh stop. I’m kidding. Come on. Let’s take a walk.”

I debate how effective screaming until I got my way would be and decide not very and then lace my arm in hers. She leads me down the white-washed, too-sterile halls. We weave around interns and gurneys. An old woman waves hello from her wheelchair, and Sophia waves back.

“Hello, Mrs. Anderson. How are you feeling?”

“I’m well, dear. What about yourself? I heard you have that surgery coming up. Dr. Fenwall is very excited about it.”

“Oh, you know him.” Sophia smiles wider. “He gets excited about everything. I’m not getting my hopes up.”

“Don’t talk like that, sweetie! I’m sure it’ll be a success and you’ll be out of here and on dates with that dashing young man of yours in no time.”

Sophia laughs, but once we've turned the corner her smiles fades rapidly, like a flower caught in a first frost.

"She seems, uh, nice," I try. "Also, dying. But nice."

"We're all dying, Isis," Sophia says. "Some of us just a little faster than others."

Feeling somehow chastised, I try to look around instead of at her.

"They really need to redecorate," I say. "Maybe paint some hearts on the walls. And puppies. Just strew puppies everywhere. Puppy bonanza. Pupanza."

She doesn't say anything, leading me to a stairwell. Maybe this is it. Maybe she's really going to murder me, right here and right now. Maybe she hates puppies. Maybe she hates painted hearts on walls! Maybe my big mouth has finally landed me in trouble I can't get out of, except I could totally get out of this stairwell by jumping over the railing and straight down –

"Isis, you're being silly. I'm not going to kill you."

I look up. Sophia holds open a door at the top of the stairs, sunlight streaming through. She ushers me through it with her hand. I burst onto the roof; fresh, crisp winter air lapping at my face. From here, you can see most of Northplains nestled in the rocky valley below. Thrushes swoop around the treetops, a massive flock of them sitting on the roof pecking at nothing. They look so calm. So small. So peaceful -

"AHHHH!" I scream, charging at them. They scatter with angry squawks, the noise deafening for a split second.

"That's what you get for being so damn cute!" I shout. Sophia walks up beside me, the wind toying with her beautiful silver hair.

“This is where I come when I’m sad, or feel alone.”

“It’s great!” I shout too close to her ear. “It’s great,” I whisper.

“I’m glad you like it. I’ve never shown anybody it. Well, except Jack. I’ve shown him. And Naomi knows I come up here.”

“Because she’s nosy as balls.”

“Because she’s nosy as balls,” Sophia agrees.

“Noisy as balls,” I try.

“Balls don’t really make noise, but if you pull –”

“Ah, lah lah lah lah!” I shout, covering my ears. Sophia laughs, and perches on the edge of the roof. Warily, I lower my hands and inch towards her. I look over the edge – it’s a long way down. As in, an extremely dead way down. But Sophia doesn’t seem worried at all. She just gently kicks her shoes against the building.

Not wanting her to feel left out, I sit next to her, and gingerly ease my feet over. She hums. The sun is thinking about going down – still bright and full but drooping tiredly. The world is at peace. Or, it’s ignoring us. It doesn’t know we exist. Sick and recovering people live in separate worlds. The regular world is focused on living, and ours is focused on not dying. And sitting up here – inches away from death? That’s another third world entirely. It’s the edge, the in-between. Everything is fragile, and could change at the slightest breeze, a single soft push.

“What are you thinking?” Sophia asks.

“Deep intense thoughts. So deep. At least two indie songs worth of deep.”

She laughs, and hums higher. A thrush starts chirping with her, or maybe at her.

“What’s that on your arm?” She asks. I pull my sleeve down over it instantly.

“Nothing.”

“If it was nothing you wouldn’t wear long sleeves all the time.”

“It’s nothing, honestly.”

“Did you try to kill yourself?”

There’s a beat. The thrush stops chirping.

“No,” I say finally. “I’m crazy. Not stupid.”

The silence returns with a vengeance. The weight of every world ever is on this roof, bearing down on the two girls sitting on the lip of it.

“Have you ever had sex?” She asks. I abruptly start wobbling for no discernible reason. She grabs my arm and I gasp for air.

“You really are trying to kill me!”

“It’s just a question.”

“But this isn’t answering my sort of direly important question about my amnesia and Jack!”

“I had sex.” Sophia picks at her dress. “With Jack.”

“That’s great!” I feel my throat tighten, and deep in the pit of my stomach something burbles. Perplexed at my sudden bodily reactions to her words, I do the smart thing and brush them off entirely. “I mean, good for you, really! I mean. Good! I hope it was good! You two are good! Together!”

“Jealousy doesn’t suit you,” she laughs.

“Jealous? Uh, did you miss the part where Jack is a giant black hole in my brain instead of an actual person?”

It hits me with the force of a dozen Godzillas breakdancing over the ruins of Tokyo.

“Did I....did I –”

“No! Oh no! Sorry, I didn’t mean to wind you up like that. I don’t think. Um. I don’t know what happened between you two for certain, but last I heard, you and Jack were engaged in a brutal, egotistic battle. Not sex.”

“Sounds rad.”

“He said you called it a war. Occasionally, ‘crusade’.”

“He must’ve done something really shitty if I pulled out the medieval terminology.”

“I don’t doubt he and you had some misunderstandings.” She nods. “He can be cold. Cruel, even. But he’s really not trying to be. He just ignores peoples’ feelings in favor of logic and rationality.”

“Ugh.” I stick my tongue out. “One of those.”

“He blackmailed you.”

“That’s standard issue in a war.”

“You planted weed in his locker and got him suspended.”

“Jolly good.”

“He kissed you.”

I feel the blood drain out of my face and down to my feet.

“Uh, yeah, no —”

“Uh yeah yes,” she corrects. “Avery told me. I forgot to thank you, by the way. Even if Jack doesn’t visit as much with you around, Wren and Avery do. And it’s so nice to see them again. It’s been years. They’re feeling very guilty, you see.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“Wait, wait, hold on one flaming-ass second!” I get off the edge. “You’re telling me your boyfriend kissed me?”

“I don’t know, did he?” She cocks her head to the side. “I trust Avery’s word, even if she is unforgiveable, but I trust your memory more. You should try to get it back. Then we’d both know the truth.”

“If he kissed me, you should...you should just break up with him! He’s a scumbag! And don’t even talk to me again. I’m even more of a scumbag.”

Sophia laughs, and gets off the edge, putting a hand on my shoulder. “It’s okay. How could you know he had me? You were new, and he doesn’t talk about me a lot.”

My skull suddenly throbs, the pain imploding along my forehead. I gasp and massage my temples as a jumble of memories come flooding back. Jack’s face, going soft when he talked about Sophia. A cigar box. A letter with her signature. His anger at me for snooping and trying to get to know Sophia - so palpable and cold I felt frozen down to my lungs. Something that happened in middle school. A baseball bat. A kiss. Someone kissing me (Jack?), and the realization he had Sophia ringing through my head the entire time.

“Are you okay, Isis?” Sophia asks gently. I grip her hand and clasp its slender frailness between one of my own.

“He talked about you,” I say. “I remember now. Jesus, he didn’t talk a lot about you, but when he did...he was so overprotective. So thorny. He wanted to make sure no one hurt you. He wanted to – he wanted to keep you safe. Once, I tried to read a letter

by you, I mean, I broke into his house to do it, but it was with good intentions, I promise. He keeps them all in his Dad's cigar box in the dresser. They're all neat and you can tell he – he cares for those letters more than his life. And he found me reading one, and he was so mad, I thought he was going to literally axe me. Axe me a question. And that question was 'do you want to die quickly or slowly'."

Sophia's face flares pink, and she looks at the ground.

"He loves you, Sophia," I say slowly. "Don't ever doubt that. I mean, I can't remember most of him, but there's a sliver of him I remember now, and my gut tells me he loves you, without a single fucking doubt. My gut isn't wrong. Except when it has diarrhea. Then it is very, very wrong."

Sophia looks up, her deep blue eyes welling with the softest of tears. She chokes back a laugh.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to accuse you – or anyone. I just...sometimes I've been with him for so long, it feels like I can't tell anymore. And ever since you transferred to his school, his letters –"

She looks my face over, like she's searching for something in my expression. Then she shakes her head.

"I'm sorry. Nevermind. Thank you."

Before I can say anything more stupid, she walks through the door and takes the steps two at a time, leaving me to the wind and the birds.

I look down at my hands. The memories were so vivid. The smell of stir-fry Jack made. His mother's face, his mother's painting. Their dog, Darth Vader. Jack's room – the smell of sleep and boy and honey and mint, a smell so familiar it comforts me.

Comforts?

I make a face and throw that trash-thought in the brain-trash. The dude is clearly an ass**le. He kissed me when he had a girlfriend! Me! I'm not even kiss-worthy! Not compared to someone like Sophia. He had Sophia and he kissed me, so he clearly must be a blind idiot as well as an ass**le.

I take the stairs two at a time. I don't see Sophia anywhere in the lobby, so I go back to my room, turning over the semi-what-the-fuckery I'd just encountered. The memory of that Jack-smell hits me again when I turn a corner for no reason. I furiously shake my head. Nu-uh. Whatever I had with him is over. As soon as I find out the details, the past is going in a vault and never coming out again. Sophia is too nice. And she's my friend. Sort of.

And Jack is the only thing she has left.

"Besides, I don't even like him. I don't even know him. How can you like a carbon-based cootie-machine?"

"Who's a carbon-based what?"

I look up to see Wren standing by my bedside, holding a stack of papers. His green eyes shine behind his horn-rimmed glasses, his floppy hair even floppier. The second I register it's him I open my arms and run towards him, but when I spot the papers are math worksheets, I back up to the wall.

"What are those?" I whisper accusingly. He blinks.

"Your make-up work for Algebra II?"

I hiss and arch my back. Wren sighs and puts the papers on my bedside table next to a

vase of wilted sunflowers my mom got me.

“You have to do them sometime if you wanna graduate with the rest of us.”

“Yes well, in case you haven’t been paying attention I’m not one to follow the conventional traditions of the masses. Also, there are roughly four hundred people in our graduating class and I like maybe three. You being one. Kayla being the other.”

Wren looks expectantly at me.

“And Knife-guy.”

He exhales. “Still not fully recovered, I see.”

“Actually! I am. So now I can ask you!” I grab his collar. “Why didn’t you tell me about Jack?”

Shock paralyzes his face for a second.

“You seemed sort of traumatized, Isis! How could I tell you when you were lying in bed with that huge blood-stained bandage around your head? I was just happy you were alive! We all were!”

“Yes, I appreciate being alive and well and all, except you forgot the I-love-my-brain-and-would-like-to-know-what’s-going-on-with-it-at-all-times-jerkwad part!”

“Look, I’m sorry, alright?”

I back up. Wren takes his glasses off and rubs his eyes.

“It’s my fault. I’m...wary of girls in fragile states. I don’t know how to help them.

I've never known how to help them. All I do is hurt them. And with Sophia here in this hospital too, I've just been on eggshells. I'm sorry. I was wrapped up in my own head, and I forgot about you."

I feel the anger drain out of my body when Wren grins sheepishly.

"You've really...I haven't told you how much you've helped me. But you have. You really have. Before you came, I just stayed friends with people on the surface. I didn't feel comfortable getting to know people for who they really were. I was fine with them just liking me superficially. But then you – I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you. So I didn't tell you. I should've. I'm sorry."

There's a terse quiet. Finally, I lightly punch him. In the ear.

"C'mere, you piece of shit!" I yank his head under my arm and noogie him. "You think you're so cool, worrying about everyone else like a dumb worry warty ass. I'll show you –"

"Ahem."

I look up. Sophia stands there. Wren goes white down to his roots and pulls out of my headlock all in a split second.

"S-Sophia," He stammers.

"Wren." She smiles. "It's good to see you. Tallie misses you. So do I. But Tallie misses you the most."

Wren's white face gets green-tinged as he struggles to speak.

"I've been...busy."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“Too busy for Tallie and I?” Sophia cocks her head. “Busy for three whole years? Jack and Avery visit her, but you don’t, anymore.”

The tension in here is hells thick and no attention is on me, so obviously I have to rectify this situation by asking annoying questions.

“Who’s Tallie?”

Wren won’t look at me, or Sophia, his eyes riveted on the floor instead. Sophia just keeps smiling.

“A good friend of ours. Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry I barged in. I’ll come back later.”

When she’s gone, Wren lets the breath he’d been holding out.

“I thought you two were talking while you were here?” I ask. “Why are you so shook up?”

“If you can call it ‘talking’,” Wren whispers. “She just stares at me from across the room, or the hall, and smiles. We don’t actually talk. That was the first time in...years.”

“Is Tallie someone important?”

Wren knits his lips shut, and I know I won’t be able to wheedle it out of him.

“Ah, look, nevermind. It’s cool. You got some secrets, I got some secrets. Our secrets should get married and have babies.”

Wren looks shocked.

“Platonically,” I add. “Entirely platonic baby-making.”

“Is that...a thing?”

“Everything is technically a thing!”

I turn and hop in my bed, smoothing the covers to feign a modicum of decency like a proper lady would. Wren looks like he’s having some internal battle with himself – his mouth’s all screwed up and his shoulders are shaking.

“Hey? Are you okay?”

“I told you before. I had the camera,” he blurts.

“Camera?”

“Avery gave me the camera that night in middle school. She wanted the whole thing on tape.”

The thing. I remember it vaguely, but the second he says it in his own words it comes flooding back – Jack, with a baseball bat. Middle school. Avery, Wren, and Sophia were all there. Two? Three men? Avery said she hired those men to get back at Sophia, because she was jealous.

“She bullied me. No. Back then I let myself be bullied,” Wren spits the sentence. “We hid in the bushes. It was up by the lake – Lake Galonagah. The nature preserve.

Avery's parents had a cabin up there. She invited us all, and then lured Jack and Sophia to the woods, where the men were waiting."

My heart beats in my ears. Wren clenches his fist.

"I got it all on the tape, Isis. It was horrible. I should've stopped – I should've put it down and saved Sophia. But I didn't. I was a coward. I was frozen. All I could do was stare at that screen, and as long as I stared at it, I could pretend it wasn't happening, that it was a movie instead of real life –"

He gives a shuddering gasp. I leap out of bed and put my arms around him.

"Hey, hey, shhhh. It's alright."

"It's not." Wren chokes. "It's not alright. Jack saved her. I couldn't do anything, but he saved her."

I pet circles on his back. "What about the men? What happened to them?"

Wren looks up, eyes red on the edges. The fear takes over again. Reality seeps in - I can see it in the way his expression fixes itself. He rearranges his face, his body, so that he's standing straight.

"I'm sorry," he says, his voice much firmer. "It's been a rough day. I need to get home. Try to do some of that math work, okay? Text me if you have questions."

"Wren, I –"

"Don't, Isis. I'm still...you're recovering. And I'm recovering. Just – just don't. Not right now."

I take a step back. “Alright. Get home before it’s dark, okay? And don’t forget to eat something.”

He smiles. “I won’t.”

I watch him pull out of the hospital parking lot from my window. After a half hour, I text him; EAT SOMETHING YOU MASSIVE DOOF. He responds with a picture of a grilled cheese sandwich. It’s not nearly enough, but it’ll do for now.

Mom comes to visit after dinner. I’m picking at rehydrated saltwater crocodile slash Frankenstien’s butt jerky slash chicken, so when she holds up a bag of fast food I run into her arms imagining roses all around us.

“I love you,” I say. “Truly, my love for you has never been larger than this moment. Except that moment you pushed me out into the world screaming and covered in goo.”

She laughs. Her trenchcoat is still chilly from the air outside, and her hands are cold. I rub them with mine to make them warm. She sits at my bedside, and we quietly eat French fries and burgers, enjoying each others’ silence. The hard stuff doesn’t get talked about until we’ve had a good laugh or two. Some normalcy has to be put between the darkness and us. That’s how you get enough strength to face it.

I wave the yellow slip Mernich gave me. Mom’s eyes go wide, and she dabs the corner of her mouth with a napkin.

“How did you get that?”

“Blackmailed a few congressmen. Bribed some drug lords. The usual.”

“Isis!”

“I got it from Mernich, how else?” I laugh. “You need to sign off on it, and give it to the front desk. And like, I guess they’ll do one last CAT sign of my head or whatever, and take the bandages off.”

“I wouldn’t let you leave unless they did,” Mom says sternly. “I’ll give it to them when I leave tonight. I’m surprised – Mernich said you wouldn’t be ready for another week.”

“I managed to win her over with my svelte charm and palaces full of money and boys. Mostly boys.”

Mom barely hears me, her focus all on the slip. She looks up and grins. “Are you ready to go home?”

I can practically see the relief on her face. The bills always stick out of her purse when she comes to visit. I’d taken a peek at some when she went to the bathroom – the amount of money is ridiculous. Now she won’t have to worry about it as much, though. Praise the J-man.

“Are you kidding? I’m ready to bellyflop into the driveway of home! I’m ready to smear my soulful existence all over the roof of home. I’m ready to corporeally merge into the walls of home. I’m ready to graft the windows of home onto the skin of my butt.”

Mom tactfully ignores my superlative theatrics and nibbles a tomato. But I know the look in her eyes. She’s nervous.

“Something wrong?” I ask.

“The trial,” she swallows. “Leo’s trial is this Friday.”

“You told me.” I nod. “I’ll be there with you, okay? If I could just testify, if your lawyer would just let me testify –”

“You remember what he said.” Mom shakes her head. “Even if you did, the defense would argue your head injury and rule it as inadmissible.”

I snort and down a pickle. “What about Jack?”

Mom looks startled. “Jack? What about him?”

“Is he testifying?”

“Yes, of course. You’ve never mentioned him before. Why now?”

“I remember him. My session with Mernich made me remember him.”

“Oh, that’s fantastic!” Mom smiles.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“Why didn’t you tell me I’d forgotten him?”

“Honey, I’d been meaning to. But Mernich advised me not to. She wanted you to come to the realization on your own. She said it’d be healthier.”

“It’s not healthier, it’s just more fricking confusing!”

“I wanted to tell you so bad,” Mom says. “Believe me. But I was so scared for you. I did everything the doctors told me to so nothing would go wrong. I didn’t want to take the chance I would mess up your healing process.”

When I don’t say anything, Mom sighs.

“He’s a nice boy, you know – ”

“I don’t know what he is, Mom. Because I can’t remember him.”

My voice is sharper than I meant it. Mom flinches. I eat a fry and exhale.

“Sorry. Today has been so weird.”

She gets up and kisses my head. “I know, sweetie. Try to get some rest. You’ll be out by tomorrow, and at home, where I can take care of you.”

Mom leaves, and Naomi comes in for her final night check a few hours later. I pick at the last stubby French fry and let the mindless cartoons on the TV lull me to sleep.

“I heard you’re leaving,” Naomi says.

“Yeah.”

She quirks an eyebrow. “No cartwheels? No screaming?” She crosses the room and feels my forehead. “Are you feeling alright?”

I lean back. “Everyone lied to me.”

“Yeah? Why’d they do that?”

“You did too.”

“I most certainly did not!” Naomi looks offended.

“You could’ve told me I had amnesia.”

“I had no idea! I’m in charge of your basic health. That head stuff is up to Dr. Fenwall and Dr. Mernich.”

“Oh.” I frown. “Sorry.”

Naomi sits on the bed and crumples my hamburger trash into her palm.

“Why do you think they lied?” She asks quietly.

“Because they wanna see me squirm.”

“Nonsense. They wanted to protect you. They wanted to see you get better.”

“Even Sophia knew.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised – that girl knows everything. Sometimes it’s like she can see right through people.” Naomi shivers slightly, but the room isn’t cold. “Now, promise me you won’t sneak into the kids’ ward tonight, alright?”

“But...I gotta say goodbye to them.”

“I’ll take you in the morning to say goodbye. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“Be specific.”

I huff. “I promise I won’t scale the wall and pull myself up over a precarious windowsill ledge into the kids’ ward.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

She readjusts my IV, and taps the monitor. After a quick check of my chart, she closes my blinds and turns the light off.

“Goodnight, Isis.”

“Night.”

The hospital bed is comfortable enough, but too much comfort nags at you after a while. Makes you feel useless and lumpy. But I’m leaving. Tomorrow is the last day I’m here. The real world is out there waiting for me. My real memories are out there, waiting for me.

Isis' front porch is as run-down as ever.

The windchime clinks pathetically in the night air. The lights are on; warm squares of golden light fighting off the darkness. I pull my keys from the ignition and grab the still-warm lasagna from the backseat. Mrs. Blake's decorated the front door with a Christmas wreath and a string of white lights. I smooth my hair and knock twice. The mottled glass on either side of the door has been repaired since that bastard broke it, but seeing it still makes my throat twist unpleasantly.

Mrs. Blake answers, in a sweater and yoga pants. But she looks happier and more clear-eyed than my previous visits.

"Jack!" She opens the door. "Come in, quick! You must be freezing."

I step into the warmth of the hall, and she takes my coat and fusses over the lasagna.

"Did you make this yourself? It smells lovely. It must've been time-consuming!"

"Not extremely difficult. Just some meat and sauce."

"Nonsense. I can't make a good lasagna to save my life. Thank you so much."

"Eat it while it's still warm."

She laughs. "I will. Let's sit in the kitchen. Do you want a piece?"

I ignore the gnawing in my stomach. "I already ate."

"Well, have some juice at least. Or do you want soda? I could make you some heated eggnog!"

“Water would be fine.”

She makes a ‘tsk’ noise that sounds so familiar. Isis does the same thing, in the same tone, when she’s disappointed in something. She fills a glass and slides it to me, and dishes herself a portion of the lasagna. We sit at the table and I watch her eat – her wrists are thinner than I remember last time.

“Have you been eating?” I ask softly. Mrs. Blake shrugs.

“Oh, you know. Things at the museum are so hectic lately, I don’t cook as much as I should.”

“You forget.”

She smiles sheepishly. “Yes. Isis is so good about that – she always packs me lunches, and puts them in the car so I won’t forget them in the morning.”

Her eyes light up as she takes another bite.

“You really are a wonderful cook, Jack. This is amazing. Thank you.”

“It’s the least I could do.”

“No, no. You didn’t have to do this at all. The visits, the food, all of it. I’m...I’m very grateful. You’ve helped us so much.”

I clench my fist under the table. “I haven’t helped at all.”

“Without you –” Mrs. Blake inhales, like what she’s about to say requires more air, more life force. “Without you, Leo would have –”

“I didn’t do anything. I couldn’t save Isis in time,” I snap. “She got hurt because I wasn’t fast enough. I failed.”

The last two words ring in the near-empty, dim kitchen.

“I failed,” I say, stronger this time. “And she forgot me because of my failure.”

“She didn’t - Jack, no. That’s not it at all.”

Yes. It is. It’s my punishment. And I’ll take it. It has been a long time coming, after all.

I stand and go into the hall, pulling on my coat. Mrs. Blake nervously follows.

“I didn’t mean – I’m sorry. You don’t have to leave,” she says.

“I have work.”

She doesn’t know what work. She just knows I have to leave. And she knows it’s an excuse as much as I do.

“Alright then. Drive safely.”

Before I get a foot out the door, Mrs. Blake grabs my coat sleeve. I turn my head over my shoulder, and she murmurs softly, sympathy glowing from her eyes with near-uncomfortable warmth.

“You’re always welcome in this house, Jack.”

I’m quiet. Mrs. Blake reaches up and hugs me. I quell the urge to push her away. Her arms are gentle. For a moment, she feels like my own mother. I’m the first to step

away. I always am.

“I should go,” I say. She nods.

“Will you be there? At the trial?”

“I’ll try. I don’t know if they’ll let me in the courthouse. I’ll ask my mother’s lawyer.”

Mrs. Blake watches me go from her doorway. There’s no fear in her eyes – not anymore. Not like the fear I saw that day. She didn’t try to stop me, or the bat. She let it happen. Maybe she feels guilty she let me beat Leo nearly to death. It’s useless to tell her she couldn’t have stopped me anyway. The thing in me – the thing that’s lusted for blood and anguish and justice since that night in middle school - could not have been stopped. It had been starved for too long, and the bars of its ice cage melted too thin by an idiotic, annoying girl.

It will not happen again.

I get in the car and start it, pulling away from the curb.

The beast will not come out again. I will restrain it next time. That’s what I’ve told myself since that night in middle school. I promised it would never happen. But it did. And I couldn’t control it. I’d nearly beaten a man to death because of it.

He deserved it.

I was as terrified as he was.

I shake my head and merge onto the highway. The beast will have to wait. The fear will have to wait.

Blanche Morailles, on the other hand, cannot be kept waiting.

Few women on this earth are as intimidating as Blanche Morailles. She's a frightening combination of chilly poise, svelte cheekbones, and a wickedly sharp smile. It combines to make her a disarming presence, always cloaked in dramatic, floor-sweeping velvet coats. No one knows her real age – countless beauticians she no doubt pays by the bucket keep her looking younger than she really is. Blanche is the daughter of a French ambassador. She isn't low-class enough to resort to botox, so the fine lines around her eyes tell the story of a woman in her late forties. Perhaps fifty-two. But that's pushing it.

I spot her perfect dark-haired coif over a dozen typical heads of Ohio dishwater blonde, and weave around the tables. Du L'ange is a prestigious restaurant, and the one I used to work in before it was bought out and taken over by a new staff and crew.

I slide into the seat opposite Blanche. She sips icewater and twists her amethyst ring around her finger, raising one eyebrow to indicate she acknowledges my presence.

"Feels familiar, doesn't it?" She asks, her voice rich and strong.

"The opposite," I correct. "I'm an alien in this place, now."

"You've only been away a year. Less than that."

"A year and one month."

She sips her water again, pauses as if thinking, calculating, and nods. "So it has. I should've known better than to test your memory."

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Blanche smiles. For all her upkeep on her face, she’s rarely touched her teeth – they remain tea-stained and slightly crooked.

“It means I know you’re far smarter than the average man, Jack. And the above-average man. In fact, you are smarter than most men. This is a compliment, I assure you. Almost every man I’ve met is an idiot in some way. But not you.”

“Does my intelligence concern you?” I ask. The waiter offers me bread, but I refuse it.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Blanche tries to change the subject.

“No. Does my intelligence concern you?”

She sighs. “Yes. It concerns me. Every personality of a working member of the Rose Club concerns me. I have not gotten this far - I have not become the best simply by ignoring the strengths and weaknesses of those I hire. I use them appropriately.”

There’s a long pause. The waiters bustle about and bring Blanche a lobster dish. She thanks them in French and begins picking at the red shellfish delicately.

“I’m sure you already know what I’m going to say, Jack. In fact, we both know what I’m about to say. And you also know I’m going to say this thing only because I know what you’re going to ask. That’s why you set up a meeting with me, is it not? To ask me something.”

I nod. She smiles and folds her hands over one another.

“Then ask.”

“But I already know the answer.”

“Ask anyway.”

It's a command, not a request. My eyes dart around the room. Blanche doesn't have bodyguards, but her manservant Frasier is constantly at her side, and in his own quiet way he is every bit as protective as a bodyguard. I spot him eating at a table to our left by himself. His tailored, dark suit hides his slight yet powerful frame. I've seen Frasier deal with the more unsavory clients of the Rose Club when Blanche feels the need to send a message to the escort community at large. It isn't pretty. I don't know their story. No one does. All we know is Frasier handles the business Blanche is too ladylike to touch.

I turn back to Blanche. I'm not afraid of Frasier, but now that I know his eyes are on me, I feel less brave.

“I only need two more weeks of payment. Then I want out.”

Blanche looks down into her lobster and smiles. “This is what I was afraid of. The smart ones always know when to leave. Usually they are not as handsome as you, my dear, and thus earn less. So I feel more inclined to let them go.”

“You aren't ‘letting’ me go. I am leaving of my own volition in two weeks.”

Blanche's expression turns steely, a frown carving her face. I see Frasier straighten in his seat out of the corner of my eye.

“You seem to have forgotten our agreement, Jack,” she says.

“Our agreement was you get me the clients to earn myself thirty thousand dollars. And I did. I earned more than double that, considering you take sixty percent.”

“And you’d earn a lot more, if you stayed. You turned eighteen recently, right? You could start making enough for yourself. Real money.”

“I don’t need the money.” I can barely contain my sneer.

“Oh, I know. Full scholarship to Harvard. Read all about it in the local newspaper. You certainly are going places. With or without me.”

I’m quiet. Blanche flicks some hair away from her face, expectant.

“Thank you,” I say finally. “For working with me. I learned a lot.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“On the fourteenth, our agreement is over. I’m hoping you’ll be amicable about this.”

“Of course I will, Jack. I’m a businesswoman. I’m simply lamenting the fact you and I won’t be able to build more together.”

She looks down at her phone as it buzzes. A shadow crosses her face for a moment, but a faint smile replaces it as she looks back up at me.

“You know, you’re right. It is time you left. You’re much too good to be stuck in little old Ohio forever. You’ll do well in Harvard, I’m sure.”

She extends a hand to me. Everything in me screams not to trust it. It’s too sudden. The shift in her mood was instantaneous – something in that text message must have said something about me. Or maybe I’m paranoid. Maybe it wasn’t about me at all. Maybe it was another Rose Club business deal going smoothly and netting her a lot of money. That’s much more likely.

“Why the sudden pleasantries?” I ask. Blanche laughs.

“Oh, Jack. Always so suspicious. Don’t worry. Honestly, don’t. I know you won’t be an escort for much longer with me. That’s bittersweet, assuredly. But I did mention, didn’t I? When we first met? What did I say again? You have that stellar memory, surely you can tell me my exact words.”

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

The moment comes flooding back. I'd just turned seventeen. We were sitting in Blanche's car, a silver Rolls Royce or something else stupidly showy. I'd just gotten off shift at Du L'ange when Blanche stopped me in the alley as I was throwing away the day's trash and asked to give me a ride home. I don't know why I went with her – but she reeked of money, and money was all that was on my mind since I'd found out how much Sophia's surgery would cost just a few days before. I went hoping some of her wealth would rub off on me, maybe. I was desperate. And she could smell that like a fox downwind of a rabbit's den.

We talked. She proposed I join her Rose Club. She told me what it meant, and what I'd have to do. There was no trickery or secrets. She was very honest and up front, and I was prepared to do whatever it took to get the money for Sophia. And when we were done, when I'd agreed to it and signed the contract, she'd snapped her Louis Vuitton handbag closed and smiled at me.

“This club isn't just a way to provide people with luxury experiences, Jack. You benefit from it with more than just money. You meet politicians. Their daughters. Their wives. You meet stock brokers and dot com billionaires who have daughters. You meet the movers and the shakers of the world. You become connected. It's a web that spreads far and wide, and you've just become a single string of it.”

Coming back to the present, I recite the words to Blanche. She claps her hands softly.

“Very good. A single string. That's what you are. Even if you leave the web, the web will never truly leave you.”

I narrow my eyes. “What does that mean?”

“You’re smart enough to know what it means.”

She makes a motion for Frasier, and he gets up and pulls her chair out. She stands, and he smoothly puts her coat over her shoulders. Blanche pulls her gloves on one at a time.

“In two weeks, our contract is over,” she says. “The payments will proceed as usual until that time.”

“I suppose this is goodbye, then?” I ask. Blanche flashes one last smile at me.

“No, Jack. I’m certain you and I will meet again.”

I watch her go. My phone buzzing tears my attention away from her figure. It’s a call from a blocked number. I answer.

“Jack? It’s Naomi – ”

She doesn’t have to say anything more.

“I’ll be there in ten,” I say, and hang up.

-4-

3 Years

25 Weeks

6 Days

One time I had this really sweet dream where I had wings made of crystal feathers

and I was slender and beautiful like an elf queen made of light and purity and also maybe I farted rainbows to propel myself forward but that isn't the point – the point is it was a wonderful coolio dream, like probably the best of my life. Most importantly I am not having it right now, because right now I'm having a dream about a giant spider.

It's chasing me through a forest of some kind, and I'm sort of pooping my pants whilst hoping I'm not actually pooping the bed in real life. It's a weird mix of lucid dreaming and lucid terror, so I can't get scared enough to wake myself up but I'm awake enough to be scared.

And then all of a sudden, the dream changes.

The spider disappears, the forest disappears, and I'm suddenly in the shower of my old house at Aunt Beth's in Florida. The tiny one, with green tiles and mold in the cracks, and the windchime hung over the bathroom window. I'm three years younger and naked and my fat is obvious to the world – hanging in great chunks off my belly, my thighs, my chin. I'm crouched in the shower, curled up in a not-so-little ball, my flesh pressing against the enamel and the water trickling down from the shower head. It's cold water. I don't know how I remember that, but I do. Aunt Beth had a solar heater. I stayed in the shower that day until the water got cold.

And I'm crying.

That isn't anything new, really. But seeing myself like this, in a third-person bizarro out-of-body-experience, is a first. I know this moment. I'd know it anywhere.

The girl in the shower clutches herself – her stomach, her face. But her hand keeps wandering back to one place; her right wrist. I know what she's feeling. That wrist burns. No amount of cold water can douse the pain coming from it. She'll put a bandage on it later. But it takes her four hours to sit up. Five hours to stop crying with

no sound. Six hours to dry off and get dressed. Six hours to stop staring at herself in the mirror as she makes a decision.

It takes six hours for the girl to decide to change herself.

It takes three years for his voice to stop ringing in her ears every time she walks out the door. And even then, it doesn't fade. It still hasn't.

Two weeks from the day in the shower, she stops eating. The girl loses five pounds. Then three more. A month later she's ten pounds lighter. She puts on layers of sweatpants and sweatshirts and runs in the eighty degree Florida summer for hours. Aunt Beth thinks she's at Gina's house sleeping over when in reality she's on the side of the road behind a hibiscus bush, passed out from heat exhaustion. When the sun sets and it cools down, she wakes up and starts running again. She runs because she can't stand the thought of who she was a step behind. One step. A new Isis. Another step. A newer Isis. She recreates and leaves herself behind over and over because she can't stand any of them – because she can't stand the girl who thought the boy who destroyed her could be her everything. He was the only one in the world who looked at her like she was human, treated her like she was more than a sack of too-much skin. She rarely eats, and if she does it's only in front of Aunt Beth, to convince her she's alright. But Aunt Beth is smarter than she lets on. One day, she and Isis talk, and it's the sort of talk aunts are supposed to give – boy talk. I remember her every word as clear as day, and that reflects straight into the dream.

“You haven't been eating much, Isis.” Aunt Beth, with her gentle smile and bright red hair held back by a head scarf, treats me every bit like her daughter. I was the kid she could never have.

“I'm not hungry,” I say lamely. And then my stomach gurgles and my charade is thrown headfirst over a cliff. Aunt Beth sighs.

“It’s about that Will kid, isn’t it?”

My stomach goes from gurgly to vomity. I flinch. But that flinch is important. It’s the first flinch I made when I heard his name. The first of hundreds.

“Did you two break up?” She asks softly. I shrug like it doesn’t matter but it does, it does, it’s the only thing that matters -

“I didn’t break up with him. He broke up with me. I sort of just broke down. You know how it goes.”

“Oh.” She puts her arm around my shoulder. “I do know how it goes.”

There’s a massive silence. The ocean laps just a half-mile away from our tiny, kitschy beach shack. The sun slants through the window, throwing turquoise and emerald shadows around the kitchen as it passes through a collection of seaglass on the sill.

“Whenever someone would break up with me,” she starts. “I’d sit myself down and make a list.”

“Of what? Ways to kill yourself?”

“No. I’d make a list of traits my dream man would have. And by the end of it, I’d always feel better.”

“That sounds stupid.”

“Of course it’s stupid. That’s the point. It’s supposed to make you laugh with all its stupid!”

I knit my lips together. Aunt Beth nudges me.

“Well? Go on. Describe your dream man.”

I mull it over for an agonizing few seconds.

“I want him to know the alphabet backwards, and fast. He’ll make perfect cinnamon sugar doughnuts. He can jump rope a million times in a row. He’ll have bright green eyes and be left-handed and be a master of the obscure lost art of ocarina playing.”

“He sounds impossible.”

“That’s the point!” I insist. “He’s my dream man, right? So, if my dream man is someone who can never really exist, then he can’t hurt me. He can’t come up and make me fall in love and smash my heart.”

“Oh, Isis.” Aunt Beth pats my knee. “You don’t have to think like that. Not everyone is out to hurt you.”

“He’ll be really kind.” I smile down at my hands. “He’ll call me the prettiest girl he’s ever seen. Those things are even more impossible. So. So there. That’s him. And he doesn’t exist and he never will. So I’m safe.”

The dream shifts. The kitchen table disappears. Aunt Beth disappears. And then it's suddenly four months later. Four months of passing out and stumbling through classes on nothing more than a piece of bread and celery. I didn't need food. The word ugly reverberating through my head sustained me better than any calorie could.

By the time Aunt Beth notices, everyone else is noticing.

Jealous, Gina disappears to Costa Rica for one weekend and comes back fifteen pounds lighter. But no one notices. Not when Isis Blake goes from two hundred pounds to one twenty in the span of six months. Nameless notices. And now, instead of ignoring me, he laughs with his friends whenever I walk by. Smirks. Scoffs. He thinks I did it for him.

I did(n't).

I never get the chance to work up the courage to get angry at him. I feel it brewing in my stomach, like still-warm embers of resentment. But then my mother arrives. I walk in the house one day to see Aunt Beth and Mom drinking tea and discussing my future. I get a say, of course. And I say I want to leave. Ohio is the perfect place to start over. Anywhere no one knows me is the perfect place to start over. Anywhere that isn't where Nameless is.

It's my dream, but it's more like my life. It's not quite true to life – the colors are too bright and the faces wobble. But it's exactly what happened.

I wake up to the white-washed hospital room. I wake up realizing I ran away like a little coward.

I haven't changed at all.

I'm safe. My counter is safe. Three years, twenty five weeks, six days. I am still safe.

But I haven't changed at all.

Isis Blake of Northplains, Ohio, is the same fat, cowardly fourteen-year-old girl curled up in the shower. Just a little older. A little lighter. And a little stupider.

It's dark – probably the middle of the night. I get out of the hospital bed and pull my jacket on. Stepping outside in Ohio in the winter is like suicide without all the flashy brain bits, but I'm doing it anyway. I can't stand this tiny room. It's trying to suffocate me with all the beeps and smiling posters of kids getting shot up with flu vaccines. Who smiles when they see a five inch needle? Sociopaths, that's who.

I promised Naomi I wouldn't use the window to sneak into the kids ward. But last time I checked a hall is not a window and there is a hall that goes right by the kids' ward. I just never use it because it's near Sophia's room, and that's the one place Naomi would think to look for me if she found me missing from my bed. I pile pillows under the blankets of my cot, reach under it and grab four leftover jello cups I'd been hoarding under the mattress, and ease out the door. The hallways are quiet. I readjust the jello cups by stuffing them into my bra. I take a moment to admire my considerable multicolored br**sts and feel a single tear spring to my eye. Beautiful.

But back to business. I've got some gelatin to shove down the throats of several grubs. I just need to make it around the corner, and I'll –

I hiss and flatten myself against the wall. A group of interns pass, all carrying coffees. I quell the urge to become fleetingly radical. I definitely want to slide across the floor behind them on my slippers like James Bond, silent and suave, but I also want to see the kids no matter what. Too much is riding on this. So like a lame super normal spy I tiptoe behind them. And pirouette.

And that's when I hear it. It sounds like a dying cat far off, but as I get closer and closer to the kids' ward, I realize it's a person. Someone is screaming like they're

being ripped apart. In the empty hallway it's eerie, and I start to consider maybe my life has turned into a horror movie and a girl with long black hair will hiking up my phone bill as she calls to tell me I'll die in seven days, but then there's the shuffling of feet behind me, and I duck behind a gurney. Naomi, with a few other nurses, charge towards the scream with winded urgency.

"Who forgot to up her cc's?" One of the nurses asks.

"No one forgot, Fenwall said to ignore the change entirely," Naomi pants. "But someone was supposed to give her Paxtal instead. Trisha?"

"It wasn't me!" Trisha insists. The first nurse sighs.

"Jesus Trisha, not again –"

"Do you know how hard it is to get her to take them? When she's like that?" Trisha hisses.

"Did you call him at least?"

"Of course! He's the only one who can calm her down –"

They run past, out of my earshot. They must be talking about another Sophia. The Soapy I know always listens to nurses. They love her. She'd definitely never refuse to take her pills.

I inch closer to the door the screaming is coming from. The nurses closed it, but you can hear it through the walls.

"Why does she get to go?" The scream reverberates. "Why does she get to go and I don't? I want to leave! Let me go! Let me go! Get your hands off me, you filthy

bitch!”

I recognize that voice. Sophia. But that can’t be right. Sophia wouldn’t sound so harsh, so feral –

“I hate her, I hate you all! I f**king hate you! Get away from me! Leave me alone!”

The words are all wrong. I slowly peer around the corner and into a tiny slit of window unprotected by the curtain. I can’t see much, but I see Sophia’s legs flailing on the bed as the nurses try to restrain her. I see Naomi walk by with a syringe in her hand. Sophia fights, the bed shuddering as she beats her legs harder. And then her feet move slower. Her screaming becomes softer, hoarse shouts I can barely hear anymore through the glass.

“Please,” Sophia sobs. “Please. I want Tallie back. Please, just give me Tallie back.”

One of the nurses starts towards the door. I pull back, around the corner. As much as the curiosity is burning me up inside, I can’t hang around much longer, or I’ll be in deeper shit than the elephant keeper at a circus. I take the stairs to the kids’ ward without looking back. The commotion Sophia made was the perfect cover – the guard isn’t even at the door. The sleeping room is lined with beds; stickers and colorful sponge art pressed onto each headboard. Toys and books stack on the ground, and the gently beeping monitors glow in the darkness.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

James is the first to notice I've come in. He sits up and whispers groggily.

"Isis? Is that you?"

"Yeah," I hiss. "Hey."

He points at my chest, his bald head shining in the faint lights of the monitor. "Why are you jiggling?"

"I've always been this stacked."

James rolls his eyes. I laugh and I shove a jello cup at him. He rips the top off, slurping it down in one gulp. I inch over to Mira's bed and carefully place her jello cup on her forehead. She sleepily opens her eyes and groans.

"Isisssss. It's cold."

"Hurry up and eat it, then."

They eagerly stuff sugar down their throats, and I clear mine trying to find the words to say goodbye.

"Listen," I say. "I'm getting out of here tomorrow."

"You're leaving?" Mira sniffs.

"Yeah. I got better." I smile. "Just like you will."

“I won’t.”

“You will. You will and don’t you dare let me catch you saying you won’t.”

“Will you come back to see us?”

“Is the sky mildly blue? Duh I will!” I give him a noogie. “Also, toys. I’m gonna bring some cool new ones for your birthday, and James’ birthday, and Martin Luther King’s birthday, and my own birthday, because frankly these dinky little hand me downs do not suit your highness.”

Mira grins. A light flashes out in the hall and I duck behind her bed.

“The guard!” I exclaim. “Shit. Take mushrooms. Shiitake mushrooms.”

“Shiitake,” James echoes. I bop his head.

“Hey! That’s a bad word.”

“But it’s a mushroom! Nothing’s wrong with mushrooms!”

“Haven’t you played Mario? Everything is wrong with mushrooms.”

“He’s coming this way to check,” Mira hisses at me. The guard’s so close I can hear the jangling of his keys.

“Okay, everyone calm down. Don’t panic. OhmygodwhatamIdoingwithmylife. Don’t panic!”

“We’re not!” They insist together.

“Right! Okay!” I breathe out my nose and charge towards the window. I always have a harder time climbing down than up, but it’s the only place in the room to hide; every piece of furniture in here is kid-sized and too small. I open the window and leap over, clinging by my fingertips on the sill. My converse scrabble on the cement of the wall, the cold winter air nipping at my butt, which hangs fourteen feet above certain death, or at the very least a broken kneecap. The door to the ward creaks open into utter silence. The grubs are good at pretending to be asleep.

“Who left the window open?” I hear the guard murmur. My heart rockets into my throat. He strides over and I pray to whatever god is listening that he won’t see my fingers. I must be praying right for once! He doesn’t see my fingers at all! He just kindly closes the window and shoves them off the sill instead. My hands jump to the ledge on the outside, but it’s so tiny and slippery, and I fight, my hands aching -

All I can think about is how to fall elegantly so my dead body doesn’t look stupid, because I’ve seen a million crime shows and honestly existentialist panic is no reason to not try, in your last moments, to contort your body as you fall so you strike a dramatic pose. It’s your last pose ever! You have a moral obligation to make it fabulous! Or at the very least not-disgusting.

I could pose like Beyonce, but one thing is still for certain.

I’m going to die.

Which is a whole lot of very not good.

My last fingers slip off the ledge. And then there’s weight all at once on my wrist as someone grabs it. Whiplash rocks my body and hard cement collides with my belly, scrapes my elbows. I look up into icy blue eyes shaded by wild tawny hair.

“Y-You!” I sputter.

Jack pulls me back up through the window, Mira and James on either side of him, wide-eyed and ecstatic.

“You almost died,” Mira whispers shakily.

“You were all like ‘WHOA’ and the guard was all like ‘BYE’ and Jack came in and was like ‘GRAB’!” James shrieks.

Jack straightens. I stand up on shaky legs and contemplate life and the refreshing fact I still have a life to contemplate at all. Jack freezes when our eyes meet, and turns on his heel abruptly. I run and put myself between him and the door. He stares at me and I stare at him, some unsaid pressure bearing down on my lungs. Adrenaline sears my veins, and a twisted pain tears through my chest. I can’t look away. He’s not even that good-looking. He just looks so...sad? And that sadness is condensed in an arrow that he’s shot right into me with his dumbo Antarctic eyes.

“How –”

“I was walking behind you in the hall. I followed you. I have a knack for knowing when you’re about to do something stupid.” Jack answers in clipped tones.

“Why –”

“Sophia. I came to the hospital for her. Now move.”

Jack tries to maneuver around me but I stop him at each turn.

“I’ve had years of practice being fat. We are good at blocking things. Also, floating in saltwater.”

“Let me through.”

The smell of mint and honey floats towards me – that same disconcerting smell of him I found in my memories earlier today.

“See, I think I should not let you through, since you are a really bad boyfriend, and logic dictates a bad thing should not be near a good thing, so essentially, Sophia doesn’t need you around.”

He scoffs. “You have no idea what you’re talking abo –”

“You kissed me,” I say. “Sophia told me you kissed me. And I remembered it. A bit. And even if you saved me, and Mom, and pulled me up from the ledge or whatever, I can’t forgive you for hurting Sophia like that. I can’t forgive you for kissing someone you didn’t like. That probably hurt me, too. You’ve hurt a lot of people, haven’t you?”

Mira and James watch us, our words like pingpong balls their heads inevitably follow. Jack is expressionless, wordless, like a recently-wiped chalkboard. I can’t read him. But tiny wisps of incredulousness give way to shock, and then his face sets in an icy mask of irritation.

“Get out of my way,” He repeats, a deadly quality in his voice.

“No. See, I’m a good dragon. Does your small-yet-somehow-still-functioning brain know what a dragon is?”

“Scaly!” James chirps.

“Breathes fire!” Mira adds.

“I’m the dragon,” I say. “And Sophia is the princess. And it’s my job to guard her from the likes of you.”

Jack raises a brow. “Likes of me?”

“A bad prince. The kind that ruins princesses forever.”

The ice-blue splinters of his eyes darken, shading over. His eyes are easier to read than his face, but not by much. Is it anger? Guilt? Frustration? No. It’s none of those. It’s helplessness.

“You’re too late. I’ve already ruined her forever,” he says, and pushes past me with such force I don’t have time to brace. He’s long gone by the time Mira decides to speak up.

“They call him sometimes. Naomi does. When Sophia gets really mad.”

“What do you mean?”

James shuffles, staring at his feet. “Sometimes...sometimes she gets weird. And mad. And when we ask about it Naomi says it’s someone else yelling, not Sophia. But it’s her voice. And then they call Jack, and he always comes no matter what time it is and she calms down and gets quiet again.”

I watch Jack’s figure grow smaller down the hall.

She remembers.

Isis Blake remembers me.

The world doesn’t move for me. It stopped that night in middle school. It trembled when Isis first punched me, and grew to a roil with every day I fought the war against her. And then it went still for weeks. For weeks that felt longer than years.

Today the world shakes and it shakes with her name and her set, determined face as she looked me in the eyes and told me I was a bad prince. Today it shakes because she might think I’m terrible (you are terrible. Your hands are bloody and you are terrible), but she remembers me. A small fragment of the old Isis - the one who recognized me and despised me months ago - shone through in her eyes. She hates me. But she remembers me.

She remembers a kiss (which kiss which kiss which kiss the fake one from the

beginning or the true one in Avery's house?).

Today my world shakes. Not hard. But it moves under my feet and reminds me that yes -yes. I'm really alive. I am not ice. I am not a freak, or a monster. I am not something people are afraid of, or avoid. I am human and I have done bad things, but the world shakes and I am human. I am not untouchable. I can be shaken.

By Isis Blake.

As I walk into the hospital room more familiar to me than home, Naomi walks out of it, her hair frazzled and her nurse scrubs wrinkled. A scratch mark mars her arm from her elbow to her wrist. It isn't deep, but it's red and angry and very noticeable.

"That bad?" I ask.

Naomi shakes her head. "I have no idea why she....she hasn't done this for an entire month, and now —"

"Something must have triggered her," I say, and try to push past her into the room.

"Let me talk to her."

"She's sleeping. Trisha administered a tranq."

The elation from knowing Isis remembers me drains away. I feel a dark fury start to broil over me, but Naomi backtracks.

"Jack, listen. Listen to me. It was the only thing we could do. She was threatening to hurt herself with a pair of scissors."

"How did she get —" My own anger chokes me off. "Why did you let her have those?"

“I didn’t! You know me better than that, for christ’s sake! I don’t know where she got them, or how, but she had them and all we could do was stop her before she could do any real harm to herself.”

Dread replaces the anger, layering over it like a sickening cake. I can barely open my mouth to speak, but the words somehow escape.

“She must have been triggered. She’s gotten so much better. You know she wouldn’t do this unless someone said something that upset her.”

Naomi waves a tired hand towards the sleeping Sophia in the bed, tucked under the white covers too-perfectly. Too peacefully.

“You’re welcome to talk to her when she wakes up. But my shift is over in five minutes.”

I instantly spot the fine wrinkles under her eyes, the weary bags that all nurses get sometime in their long and stress-ridden careers. She’s so tired. She’s been Sophia’s best nurse, the only one she really likes and trusts.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter.

Naomi’s eyebrows shoot up into her hairline. “Excuse me? What was that strange word I just heard you say?”

“Don’t make me say it twice.”

I push into the room and close the door behind me. I watch Naomi leave through the frosted glass of the room’s divider, her smirk evident even through the opacity.

The room is dim and quiet, save for the beeping of the monitors that staccato out her

vital signs in too-cheery chirps. Every bouquet I've given her this year is still in the room – wilted and browning and not enticing in the slightest. But she keeps them all. She keeps each vase full of water, and all the vases in chronological order.

It's then the guilt hits me like a steel maul to my chest. I haven't visited for two weeks. There's a two-week gap she's carefully left in the line of flowers, two empty vases waiting for me to bring them the blooms they need to serve their purpose.

I let my guilt at not being able to save Isis override my duty to Sophia. And that's unforgivable.

How can I be so excited about a girl remembering a kiss when the girl who needs me is suffering?

Selfish bastard.

I sit on the end of her bed gingerly. The white blankets fold like snow under my weight, and contour gently around her outline. She's so much thinner than I remember. Her every bone sticks out like a bird's – frail and hollow-looking. Her cheekbones are sharp and evident. There's no trace of the rosy bloom I'd gotten so used to seeing growing up. That went away after that night long ago.

"I really am a bad prince," I murmur.

I smooth hair away from her forehead. She mumbles softly and rolls over.

"Tallie..."

My fists clench in the sheets, and the molten spike of feverish regret bakes my insides, starting in my heart, working its way to my lungs and stomach and everything in-between.

Tallie.

Our Tallie.

‘You’ve hurt a lot of people, haven’t you?’

-5-

3 Years

26 Weeks

0 Days

Dr. Fenwall is Santa. If Santa went on a slimfast diet and wore corduroy pants every day of his life and used words like ‘endometrial tissue’.

“Now, Isis, if you could just lie back –”

I slump on the CAT scan bed and huff. “I’ve done this before, doc! I’ve done lie backs every freaking day since I’ve been here! At least seventy billion lie backs!”

Fenwall’s eyes crinkle and his white mustache curls with his smile. “You should be a little used to it.”

“You never get used to being slotted into a giant doughnut’s vagina.” I motion at the CAT machine. It beeps excitedly. I plot its demise.

“Well, this is your last time doing it. Come on now, lie back.”

I shout UGH and flop back and bang my head.

“And be careful, will you? We spent a lot of hours sewing that cranium back together.” Fenwall chides. He presses a button and the CAT bed slides in, a tunnel engulfing me in dimness.

“You okay in there?” He asks.

“Everything’s cramped and smells like cotton balls.”

“Perfectly fine, then. Start it up, Cleo!”

A woman at the control panel in the next room waves through the window and the machine starts to whirr. I hear Fenwall leave, and then it’s just me and Big Bertha. And her vagina.

“How’s...how’s the weather up there in...robot land?” I try. The machine gurgles.

“Good. That’s good. And the kids?”

Big Bertha bleeps enthusiastically and a blue light blinds me.

“Ahh!” I shield my eyes. “Th-They must going through teenage rebellion!”

The machine blips sadly and the light goes out.

“It’s okay,” I assure her. “When they’re in their twenties they’ll think you’re smart and worth listening to again.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“Tilt your head to the left, Isis.” Fenwall’s intercom blasts in my ear.

“Rude! I’m having! A discussion! Here!”

“Are you talking to inanimate objects again? Mernich would love to hear about that.”
I can hear his grin.

“No! No, I’m not talking to anything! Nothing at all! Just...myself! Which is basically nothing. Nothing special. Except my butt. My butt is definitely something hells special –”

“Left, Isis.” Fenwall doesn’t take my shit. In a friendly grandpa-y way. I tilt my head and Bertha beeps once, twice, and there’s a pause. The regular white lights come back on and the bed slides out slowly.

“Phew!” I leap up and shake off the claustrophobia. I hate small spaces. Almost as much as I hate soy milk. And furbies. Fenwall comes in.

“Feeling alright?” He asks.

“Well, I need to spend five therapeutic years on the open plains of Mongolia, but other than I’m good.”

“Fantastic. Your results will be done in just a second. Let’s go get your mother.”

I follow him out to the hall. It feels so good to walk around in my real clothes, not a hospital gown anymore. And the absence of a stinky bandage turban clinging to my

head is a mild plus. I practice shaking my hair out like a majestic lion but almost hit an intern and stop. They have enough problems without fabulous hair in their eyes. Mom's waiting in the lobby. She smiles and gets up and hugs me.

"So? What are the results?"

Fenwall looks at the papers in his hands. "Everything looks fine. The hemorrhaged tissue has cleared up remarkably well."

"What about this?" I point at the scar just to the side of my hairline, and above my forehead. "The hair isn't growing back. I'll never get married!"

"The scar will shrink and fade, but that will take time. Years," Fenwall says.

Mom pats my head. "It's not too big, sweetie. Unless they're seven feet tall and can look straight down on your head, no one will ever see it."

She's right. What's one more scar on an ugly girl, anyway?

"Do I get any meds?" I ask. Fenwall smiles.

"Nope. You're free to go. We'd like to set up a check-up appointment in a few weeks _"

He motions to Mom, and the two of them go to the counter and speak to the nurse. There isn't a big crowd, but there's more people than normal on a Saturday. But that doesn't stop me from noticing the bright red hair walking through the lobby.

"Avery-bobavery!"

The flame-haired girl turns, perfect porcelain skin freckled as ever. But her eyes are

all wrong – tired, bloodshot. Her clothes are perilously unfashionable. And the way her expression stays the same instead of a grimace or sneer forming when she recognizes me? Something is really off.

“You,” Her voice is tinny.

“Yes, me! I am alive! But that can be easily fixed.”

“Get out of my way.”

“How’ve you been? Busy? Beautiful bitch duties as usual?”

Avery’s mouth remains straight, not even the faintest of frowns appearing. “If you don’t move, I’ll make you move.”

“You can try! Push me a little, maybe? Throw me around? Don’t get too drastic, though. If you cut me in half, nothing but rainbow sparkles and Bacardi would spill out. Also you would be a murderer.”

“I should cut you in half,” Avery finally snarls, her emotionless mask breaking. “You f**ked her over.”

“What?”

“You,” Avery jabs her finger at my chest. “Sophia finally started talking to me, and then you ruined everything.”

“How did I ruin it?”

Avery’s expression is a cruel, twisted thing. “How f**king fair is it? I was her friend for years. And then you come, for two weeks, and she likes you already? And now

you're leaving her. And she won't talk to anyone. Not the nurses. Not me."

"I'm – I'm not leaving forever –"

"It doesn't matter. She thinks you are. She thinks everyone leaves her."

There's a long pause. I nervously pick at my sweatshirt. Avery scoffs.

"But I can't be all mad at you. When you came, she told me I could visit for once. So I did. And I got to tell her I was sorry."

She looks off into the distance wistfully.

"I got to apologize. So. Thanks. I guess."

"You're welcome? But also I'm going to see her before I leave? And I'll come visit her? So I'm not actually, uh, leaving."

"She's having her surgery soon." Avery doesn't seem to hear me. "And now I can't even say goodbye to her."

"You can. I mean, you can say it. She might not be talking to you, but she's listening. I'm sure of it."

Avery shrugs, her face becoming blank and despondent again as she shoves past me.

That's not Avery. That's a shell of the glorious bitch she used to be.

Mom and Fenwall come back, talking amicably. Mom says something about my check-up in February, but I barely hear her.

“When is Sophia’s operation, doc?” I ask. Fenwall looks alarmed.

“She told you about that? It’s in April. April 20th.”

“Can I come see her before it?”

“Of course. You’re always welcome to visit. Sophia needs more visitors, in my opinion.”

She needs more friends. Not visitors. But I don’t say that. People always complain about me saying things. I say too much. Too fast. Too loud. But not anymore. I hold things back, now. Does that mean I’m getting smarter? More mature?

No.

It just means I’m getting stupider. Quieter. Older. Old and stupid like every other person who doesn’t say what they feel, who stays quiet when they’re angry or sad.

I’m getting older. And it’s terrifying.

Sophia’s room and the hall leading to it look different in the day. Less The Ring and more Scrubs. Naomi came and said goodbye earlier, and took me to say ‘goodbye’ to Mira and James for the last time. But somehow, this goodbye is the hardest. Standing outside this door and trying to knock is the hardest thing I’ve done in a while. What I saw last night, her screaming – the way Jack looked when I mentioned her – all of it is confusing and stops my throat up like a shitty cork. How am I supposed to look her in the eyes and say goodbye when I heard her screaming that she hates me just a few hours ago?

How do I say goodbye to Sophia when she isn’t the Sophia I thought I knew? It’s hard.

But I'm Isis Blake. I've done harder things. Like live.

I knock twice, and Sophia's voice emanates faintly.

"Come in."

She's sitting up in bed. Her platinum hair fans all around her on the pillow, her skin milk-white and glowing. She looks like a princess of starlight and snow. She smiles.

"Hey. You're leaving, huh?"

Her voice is so soft, so Soapy-like. Normal. She's normal right now, not the screaming girl I heard last night. This is the real Sophia.

Before I can open my mouth, Sophia motions for me to come over.

"Come here. I have something I wanna show you before you go."

Page 17

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

I inch over, and sit on the chair by her bed. She pulls open a drawer and brings out a stack of letters bound with pink ribbon. She unties it slowly, and rifles through them before settling on a single letter and handing it to me.

“Read that, will you?”

“Out-Outloud?”

“If you want.”

I glance down at it and clear my throat.

“Dear Sophia - ”

It suddenly hits me – these are the letters she and Jack send each other. This is Jack’s wide, impeccably even handwriting. I glance up at her nervously, but she just smiles and waves me on. Is this some kind of sick trick? Why does she want me to read her boyfriend’s letters to her? I search for any resentment in her eyes, but there is none, just a cool, sweet passivity.

Does she really hate me?

I only knew her for two weeks. And we were only ‘friends’ because we were the only teenagers in the hospital. We hung out – texted each other and showed each other stupid cat pictures from the internet and talked about music but do I really know her? I don’t. I don’t know who Tallie is. I don’t know why she screamed like that last night. I don’t know what her disease is. I don’t know anything about her.

I look back down at the letter.

“I’m sorry I haven’t written to you in a week. There is no excuse, and I don’t expect you to forgive me, but I hope this longer letter gives you more comfort than two shorter ones would’ve.

I’m doing well. Mom has been painting again – horses, mostly. She loves them. She said she was painting one for you, for your birthday. July is so far. But she says a masterpiece will take time. I can only hope she doesn’t paint you an entire hospital wall worth of ponies.

I snort, and instantly regret it. Sophia’s eyes are locked on me, and the pressure they exert is crushing. Gently crushing. Crushing like a quaint spring breeze. From a typhoon. I read again.

“By then, you’ll be done with your surgery. You can choose – I’ll take you anywhere you want to go. The sea? My grandfather’s beach house in California is empty for most of the year. We could go there for the summer. Just you and I. The warmth would be good for you, I think.”

It’s so bizarre – this isn’t the Jack I know. I mean, I barely know him, but a cold, sneering douchebag with a savior complex and a penchant for cheating on his girlfriend shouldn’t sound this...gentle. This kind. It doesn’t make any sense. It does, though, because he loves Sophia, but if he loved her this much, why would he kiss me?

“There’s a new student in my class; an annoying gnat that constantly buzzes around my skull. Can’t keep her mouth shut. She annoys the teachers, the principal, practically everyone with functioning eardrums finds themselves instantly repelled by her idiocy. I’d tell you her name, but it’s a plant - Ivy or Iris or some nonsense like that. I can’t be bothered to remember. She spread some stupid rumor because I

politely let her friend know I wasn't interested at a party last week. She punched me. It didn't hurt. Much. Anyway, she spread the rumor we kissed in juvenile retaliation."

My voice wavers. I did? I don't even remember –

The party. The smell of spilled pepsi and the sound of drunken laughter. Avery's house. A grand chandelier with cocktail wieners stuck in it. Kayla. Kayla and I talking for the first time, Jack walking in for the first time and the crowd parting around him and Kayla working up all her meager courage to talk to him, his jaded, bored words as he ripped into her, and my punch – straight, true, blood coming from his nose –

The memories dart up like sprouts after a long winter. I read frantically. This is my past. These are the things I can't remember, here, in this letter.

"It was so annoying, Sophia. God, I wanted to strangle every idiot that kept asking me about it. Finally I debunked it. I had to kiss her in front of the entire school. I'm sorry. You understand, I hope. It was disgusting and sloppy and she's –"

My voice catches as I process what the next words are. They don't sting. They just ache. Ache like everything does when I see people who are better than me at love, who know more, who've had more real, soft, true experiences.

"- inexperienced to the extreme."

I look up, and Sophia smiles wanly and rubs my back.

"I'm sorry he's so mean about this, Isis. I just wanted you to know the truth."

"Like I care what he thinks," I scoff. "This is the truth. I gotta know it. Let me keep reading."

Sophia nods. “If you’re sure.”

“I nearly threw up in my mouth. No more rumors about kissing though. I’m telling you this for honesty’s sake – I apologize. It won’t happen again. Some idiots just need to be silenced before they become worse.”

I snort. He’s the idiot. The king of ‘em, actually. Someone should inform him he’s won the crown. I read the next few lines to myself and feel my cheeks start to warm.

‘I want to kiss you, Sophia. Every day. You and only you.

I’ll come visit soon.

Yours,

Jack.’

“Uh, nevermind. I think I got the gist. That last part is, uh, private.”

Sophia giggles and takes the letter back. “He is quite the silly romantic.”

“Yeah. So. Thanks. Now I know.”

“Now you know,” she agrees.

“He kissed me to get me to shut up.” I nod. “Not bad. It’s the one thing that would probably shock me into silence.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, you know. Guy like that kissing a girl like me. Unnatural. Not right. Unequal,

really. Hell, any guy standing my close-up face long enough to kiss me just plain goes against the laws of nature. I mean, there are lots of other girls out there. Like you! And Kayla! And like, everyone! Choosing me to mack on? That's like choosing plain yogurt over a bunch of awesome cakes for dessert!"

I laugh. Sophia is quiet, her hair shading half her face. I can't see the other half. She doesn't speak for a good minute, and I nervously shuffle. Me? Nervous? I shake it off and put my hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, Soapy, are you –"

"You're disgusting."

The contempt in her voice freezes my insides. It's the voice I heard last night. The other Sophia. She tilts her head, the hair sliding off her face and her eyes heavy-lidded.

"Do you really think anyone is falling for that?"

"What do you –"

"Those depressive little comparisons you make. The way you pan off any worth of yours. You're a sick, masochistic bitch who likes playing 'modest' to make people like her. To make people feel sorry for her."

The words hit hard. Harder than the impact when Leo threw me against the wall.

"Is that what you really think of me?" I ask. "You think I – you think I say these things so people will like me?"

Sophia laughs, full and rich and downright dark.

“Don’t play innocent. I’ve done the same thing countless times. You and I are exactly alike, Isis. That’s why I understand you. Neither of us are our real selves around other people. Because that would scare them. So we pretend. We don’t say what we mean. We don’t say what we really think, and everyone else believes us normal. Harmless. But that’s far from the truth.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

She seems so different – her posture is totally relaxed in a luxurious, satisfied way. Her eyes are slits and her lips form a savage, subtle smile.

“I get it, now. That’s why Jack is so fascinated with you. That’s why he kissed you. That’s why he even bothered getting to know you. Because you’re exactly like me. Hopeless like me.”

“Sophia, this is crazy –”

“Is it? Am I crazy? Am I just an insane girl cooped up in a hospital, taking my frustrations out on you? Am I seeing things that aren’t really there? How can I know what’s going on, when I’m trapped in here?”

She throws her head back and laughs that intimidating laugh again. Her head snaps down all of a sudden and her eyes blaze, two stony sapphires exerting their full pressure on me.

“You and I are alike, Isis. But you and I are also different. You get to leave. You’re healthy. You get to be normal, to run and jump and have sleepovers and have dreams and go to school, and go to college, and all the things normal girls get to do, you do. Because you’re normal. Or are you special? Do only special girls get to do those things, and I’m the normal one? No. Don’t answer that. I’m not normal at all. I’m defective. You pretend to be defective, but I really am. So go ahead. Give me your fake-modest bullshit one more time. Do it.”

For once, I’m silent. No comebacks run through my head. No quips. All I can do is ball my fists and tremble. Sophia smiles.

“That’s what I thought. Now leave. Before I throw up on you.”

I get to the door before I turn. Sophia’s watching my every step, her sickening smile never fading. But I can’t just leave it like this. I liked her. Like her. Genuinely.

“When the surgery is over, you’ll be normal, too. And we should...if you don’t hate me still, we should go...shopping. Drinking. Or something. Something normal girls do. Because I think...I think we could be friends.”

“I don’t,” Sophia says lightly. “Now get out, and never come back here.”

“This is what you always do,” I say, my voice getting stronger. “You push people away first before they can leave you. You did it to Avery, and with good reason, probably. But you still did it. And now you’re doing it to me. And that’s fine, but I know what it’s like. I know what it’s like to be lonely, and scared. I know what it’s like to not want someone to leave you.”

Sophia’s smile just hangs there, but it’s like a painting now, instead of something with real feelings behind it. A façade.

“Thirty-eight percent,” she says.

“What?”

“That’s the likelihood I will survive the surgery. Thirty-eight percent. And if I don’t go through with the surgery, I only have two months left.”

I’m quiet. Sophia folds her hands over one another and leans back, her smile fading.

“No, Isis. You don’t know what it’s like. You have no idea what it’s like to wait to die. Now get out. And leave me alone.”

I've never been happier to see home in my life.

Except that one time Kayla let me have her burrito and then Wren let me have his burrito so I ate three cafeteria burritos and then sat through Algebra thinking intensely about toilets and I've never driven home faster in my life.

Hellspawn is the first to greet me when I get home. He comes bounding around the corner and I run towards him ready to smother him in a hug of pure love and friendship. He gnaws my ankles.

"Ow! Ow, that hurts, you little shit!" I hiss. Hellspawn hisses back.

"Aw, look at that. He missed you so much," Mom says as she comes in behind me.

"He missed me, or the ability to eat my shoelaces?"

Mom chuckles. I drop my backpack off upstairs – my room feels so foreign. It smells so weird compared to the faint scent of anesthesia and bleach I'd gotten used to. I flop on my bed and stare up at the ceiling. Who knew I could miss a hunk of plaster so much?

Mrs. Muffin the stuffed panda droops sleepily. I put her on my chest and hug the Chinese stuffing out of her.

"I'm back."

I laugh at my own words.

"I'm really back."

The smell of something delicious wafts up and yanks me out of bed. It's saucy? And cheesy? Downstairs, Mom pulls a lasagna out of the oven.

"You made that? For me?"

Mom smiles sheepishly. "I bought a cake. But no, I didn't make this. Someone...someone very nice did. They brought it around."

She serves me a plate and urges me to eat. I take a bite, and the flavors explode in my mouth. It's the best thing I've tasted in a while – hospital food doesn't have shit on this. Hell, an actual Italian restaurant would be hard-pressed to beat this.

"This is...who made this?"

"Do you like it?" Mom takes a bite. "I think it's very good."

"Uhm, I'm kind of the master of avoidance, Mom, and you smell like five whole avoidings! Who brought you this?"

Mom frowns. "Jack."

I look down at the lasagna, then back up at her, then down at the lasagna before I run to the bathroom and attempt to stick my fingers down my throat.

"Honey!" Mom bangs on the door. "What are you doing?"

"He poisoned it!" I yell around my fingers. "Eat some bread and pepto bismol to slow the spread of it in your blood!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Isis!"

“Uh?” I throw open the door. “Have I not updated you on how evil he is? He cheated on his girlfriend, he practically abandoned her these last two weeks, he hates me -”

Mom’s frown turns absolutely deadly. She grabs my ear like she used to do when I was little and twists, pulling me back to the table.

“Ow ow ow ow I NEED THOSE TO DIFFERENTIATE SOUND.”

“You will sit down, and you will eat this meal, and you will finish every last bite of it, so help me.”

“He’s poisoned –”

“He has not poisoned anything!” Mom exclaims, banging her fork. “He’s been nothing but kind and considerate since you went to the hospital. He’s been bringing me meals nearly every night, and checking in on me, and may I remind you he was the one who saved you, Isis. So you will be respectful and you will eat it and I will not hear you complain again about it again.”

I wince. After a long staring contest with a bit of cheese I take a slow bite. Only then does Mom relax marginally, and starts eating her own. Something like resentment takes root in my heart, but I quickly prune that shit. She has no idea who Jack really is. I barely know who he really is. So it’s understandable that she’d defend him.

Halfway between our slices of slightly stale store cake, Mom breaks her stony silence with a single tear that plops onto the tablecloth. She buries her face in her hands.

“I’m sorry, Isis. God, I’m so sorry.”

I get up and go behind her and lace my arms around her neck, resting my cheek on her shoulder blades. I can see the court papers and police statements piled on the

coffee table in the living room, my medical bills among them.

“It’s okay,” I whisper. “It’ll be okay. I promise.”

-6-

3 Years

26 Weeks

3 Days

East Summit High could take a nuke and nothing about it would change. Except the P.E. field. And maybe a bit of architecture. But the food would survive the blast because I'm ninety-nine percent sure it's cockroach flesh, and Mrs. Borsche would remain standing because let's get serious, everyone knows she's an undercover Cold War agent genetically engineered to survive minor things like rapid atomic decompression.

When I pull into the parking lot, Kayla is standing there on the curb, waiting for me. She dashes over whilst someone almost runs her over and we smash into each other hug.

“You're alive!”

“Marginally,” I laugh. She smells like coconut and the tears of every boy who will never have a chance with her. It's like coming home. Hugging her is the best feeling next to the feeling I got sleeping in my own bed last night. And then I see Wren walking towards us. And Kayla sees him too. She darts to his side and drags him over, his glasses nearly falling off but a small half-smile on his face.

“Isis!” He exclaims.

“Yes, it is I. Alive in the flesh. Temporarily. In roughly seventy years I gotta die again.”

Wren laughs, and one-arm hugs me in that awkward way boys sometimes do. “It’s good to have you back.”

“Things have been totally boring around here,” Kayla laments. “Avery’s been quiet and weird and Jack’s been quiet and weird, like even more quiet than his iceberg days. It’s so weird!”

“Global warming,” I offer.

“ – And no one’s tried to escape out the science lab window –”

“Cowards!”

“- and Principal Evans won’t shut up about Jack –”

“A crime worthy of execution!”

“ – and someone wrote ‘Isis Blake is a crazy fat bitch’ on the bathroom stall in F building -”

“Let us give them a standing ovation for originality.”

Wren laughs, and Kayla frowns, but it doesn’t take her long to start laughing, too. And unlike five months ago when I first started here, I walk under the brick arch that reads; East Summit High. But this time I’m not alone. This time, I walk under it with two people who are my friends. I have friends. I have friends. Do you hear that, past

me? You have friends. Ones who care about you, who laugh with you. You get them, someday.

So don't cry.

You have friends.

I bite my lip and walk faster so they can't see the unsightly water oozing from my ducts.

"Hey! Isis! Slow down!" Wren calls.

"What's the rush? It's just Benson's class! All he's gonna talk about are plant vaginas!" Kayla shouts. I laugh and walk faster. A familiar shaved head passes me, and I back up and explode.

"Knife-kid! How're you doing, old pal?"

"We've known each other five months," He corrects. I sling an arm around his shoulder.

"Five months in dog years is like, ten years. We're practically family."

"Are you crying?"

I sniff. "What, this? Nah, just a piece of teen angst stuck in my eye. Nirvana would be proud."

Knife-guy grunts. "It's good. That you're back."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah. Jack was a pain without you to take him down a peg. Or nine.”

He grumpily stares at nothing. I ruffle his almost-forming mohawk.

“Stop touching me. People might think I’m normal.”

“God forbid that,” I laugh.

“And Jack will kill me.”

“Jack?” I buzz my lips. “Jack doesn’t give a jackshit about me. No, wait, I got that backwards. I don’t give a jackshit about Jack the Shit.”

Knife-guy ducks out of my arm. When I give him a quizzical ‘why spurn my beautiful friendship arm’ look, he nods behind me.

“I’m smart enough not to get between you two.”

I turn around, and there he is. Jack’s less than six feet away, scowling like he’s sucked an entire lemon farm. His ruffled, tawny hair and ice-blue eyes look different in the light of day versus the pale sickly light of the hospital.

“Ah! If it isn’t Jack. Jack the Ripper of female self-esteem everywhere. Jack Sparrow who flies around and shits on heads. Jackoff into everyone’s punchbowl and ruin their day.”

“The head injury’s certainly made you more creative. And fortunately, less coherent,” He drones, and looks at Knife-guy. “And who is this charming young man? An admirer?”

Jack waves a hand in front of his face.

“Is he blind? Or just stupid?”

Something in me draws taut and snaps in a split second. I can't remember much of Jack, but I sure as hell remember Knife-guy, and the way he was nice to me. Small, disturbing ways, but ways nonetheless!

“Why do I have the sudden urge to perform violence on your face?” I c**k my head. I could be imagining it, but his chest swells slightly. Anger? Of course it's anger.

“That would be your body remembering the time you socked me so hard I saw through time and space,” he says.

“Did you like what you saw? Goopy aliens? Supernovas? Mantorok, God of Corpses?”

“I saw an alternate universe without you. It was like paradise.”

Knife-kid suddenly chuckles. Jack sneers at him.

“Something funny?”

“You haven't talked to anybody in school in two weeks, and now she's back, and you're –” Knife-kid shakes his head. “Whatever.”

I watch him leave. Jack's quiet, his lips drawn. I take a deep breath and rock on the balls of my feet.

“You really hate me, huh?” I ask. Jack's ice-blue eyes snap up to lock with mine.

“What?”

“Like Knife-kid said. You don’t talk when I’m gone, and I come back and you’re slinging the insults. So you must really hate me to bother breaking your silence. I get it.”

I read the letter you sent Sophia. I know how much you despise me.

Knife-guy has no idea how much it means.

Isis slung her arm around his neck like it meant nothing. She’s only ever done that to Wren, and that’s because he’s less intimidating than a puppy. But Knife-guy is different. He’s intimidating, he’s angry-looking, he’s tall, and he has muscles beneath those Black Sabbath shirts. He’s not Wren. He’s a man. A month ago, my touch reduced her to panic and tears. It was a memory so painful she blocked it out, and now here she is, touching him like it’s easy for her.

My heart beats so hard I can feel it in my fingertips. I’m hot all over, a heat wave sweeping through me like wildfire. I should control it. I should turn on my heel and walk away. I buried my hope. I thought it was dead. But then she revived it that night in the hospital, like a skilled necromancer. Like I hadn’t buried it at all. And now I can’t possibly control myself. Not when she’s there, not when she’s touching –

I’m behind her. Knife-kid glances warily at me, and she turns. Her purple streaks are a little more faded. She’s not as pale as she was in the hospital – a rosy bloom on both cheeks. A little smile plays on her lips, and like the moron I am, I let that smile fuel the heat wave in me hotter and higher.

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“Ah! If it isn’t Jack. Jack the Ripper of female self-esteems everywhere. Jack Sparrow who flies around and shits on heads. Jackoff into everyone’s punchbowl and ruin their day.”

The insult brings me back to five months ago. To when the war first started. It’s like nothing’s changed at all. She still dislikes me. But it’s better. I can settle for being disliked, as long as she notices me. Remembers me. Considers me worth knowing. I have to be normal. I have to show her who I used to be. If I’m lucky, it might spark her memory. I can’t be slow, or gentle. I have to be the old Jack.

“The head injury’s certainly made you more creative. And fortunately, less coherent,” I say. I look at Knife-guy. “And who is this charming young man? An admirer?” I wave a hand in front of his face. “Is he blind? Or just stupid?”

Isis’ smile fades. A twisted little grimace forms on her lips.

“Why do I have the sudden urge to perform violence on your face?” She cocks her head to the side, like a little angry bird. That one motion reminds me so much of the night at Avery’s. I inhale sharply as the memories flood back – her bare collarbone, her smile as she told me she could feel my pulse, her soft sighs –

Control, Jack. Control yourself. You’re the old Jack. The one who thought her an annoying nuisance. I clear my throat.

“That would be your body remembering the time you socked me so hard I saw through time and space,” I say.

“Did you like what you saw? Goopy aliens? Supernovas? Mantorok, God of Corpses?”

“I saw an alternate universe without you. It was like paradise.”

Knife-kid suddenly chuckles. I throw a glare at him.

“Something funny?”

“You haven’t talked to anybody in school in two weeks, and now she’s back, and you’re –” Knife-kid shakes his head. “Whatever.”

He turns and leaves just as I consider ripping into him. He’s right, and that’s the part Isis doesn’t need to know. Ever.

“You really hate me, huh?” She asks.

“What?”

“Like Knife-kid said. You don’t talk when I’m gone, and I come back and you’re slinging the insults. So you must really hate me to bother breaking your silence. I get it.”

“No –” I blurt, and stop myself. No, Jesus, that’s not it at all. But how can I tell her that? How can I tell her how I –

“Look, it’s fine.” She smiles. “I’m still grateful you saved Mom. That’s the only reason I didn’t hit you just then. Also, I’m becoming a beautiful mature butterfly. But mostly it’s for Mom. We clearly rubbed each other the wrong way back then. You stay away from me, I’ll stay away from you. We both go on with our lives. Sound good?”

My stomach drops. No. No, it doesn't sound good at all. It's the last thing I want.

"So you're running away? That's your solution?" I snap. "I'm part of your past, Isis. You ran from Will Cavanaugh, but you can't run again. Nothing will be solved that way, and you won't get any peace."

At the mention of his name, she recoils, curling in on herself before straightening and glowering at me.

"What the hell do you think you know about me?"

"You can't just write me out of your life like you did that scumbag. I'm not him. So don't treat me like him."

"You hate me," she says dully. "He hates me. I find it better to cut the people who hate me out of my life."

Everything in me screams to move to hold her. To hug her. To show her I don't hate her. But that's not something the Jack she can barely remember would do.

"You annoy me," I say coldly. "I don't hate you. There's a difference."

She laughs. "Not much of one."

"I respect you. I don't agree with you on most things, but I respect you."

She scoffs.

"Believe it or don't, I don't care. It's the truth. Before Leo attacked you, we respected each other. I hope someday you can remember that much."

“All I can remember is that dumb kiss.”

“Which one?” I blurt it before I can stop myself. I’ve longed to know which one since she talked about it in the hospital. Her eyes widen, slowly, until they’re the size of amber coins.

“Which one? What are you talking –”

The bell rings shrilly just above it. She winces at the noise, and I take the opportunity to duck into a stairwell and leave her behind. Calculus can’t even penetrate my haze of disbelief. I nervously jiggle my leg the entire lesson, tapping my pencil on my paper. What the hell did I just do? I can’t control myself around her. I thought I could. I promised I would. But the idea of her presence and her actual presence are two very, very different things. I blurt things. I let slip betraying body language.

I’m not in control when she is around me physically.

And it terrifies me. Because what she needs the most from me – no, from any man – is for them to control themselves.

After Calculus is over, I glance out the window. She walks by just under me, with Kayla. She’s happier – a smile on her face in place of the frown I caused earlier. And that’s when I see it. There, on her scalp, is a pale white scar. It isn’t big, but it isn’t small. It’s jagged, and pink on the edges. Just healing. Just barely healing. The sight of it sends a surge of anger into my throat, my lungs.

She got hurt because I wasn’t fast enough.

It is Sophia, all over again.

I grab my books and push out the door. I need air. I need not-air. I need silence and

not-her. The wall behind the cafeteria is the only place in school people can smoke without being seen. A few other people are here, too, laughing. I lean against the wall and light one. The smoke spirals up and the burn in my throat finally matches the burning guilt in my chest.

“Hey,” A voice next to me. Knife-guy.

“What do you want?” I grunt. He shrugs.

“You don’t look so good. Thought I’d ask if you were gonna throw up. You know, just so I know not to stand too close.”

“You’re standing close now.”

“If you can talk, you aren’t gonna throw up. So I can stand here.”

He’s irritating, but not untrue.

“When did you start smoking?” He asks. “Thought you were all clean-cut and going to Harvard, or some shit.”

“When did you?” I fire back.

“When my old man told me I was too wussy to smoke. Out of spite, I guess.”

“Where’s he now?” I ask.

“Jail.”

There’s a long quiet. Knife-guy puts his cigarette out.

“You’ve seen it, right?” He looks at me.

“Seen what?”

“That thing on Isis’ arm.”

“What thing?”

He chuckles. “For someone so smart and observant, you sure are slow.”

I don’t have the energy to do much more than curl my lip in his general direction.

“It’s been fun,” he finally speaks again. “Watching you two. Most fun I’ve had in a long time in this shithole. So I’ll give you some advice; don’t smoke around Isis.”

“What makes you think –”

“She won’t like it. Trust me.”

“Did she tell you that she hates it?”

“She didn’t have to.”

Knife-guy squints, and before I can interrogate him further, he’s gone around the wall. I mull it over for minutes, wracking my brain to put the pieces together. And then it clicks. Just as the bell rings for next period, it all clicks together.

My insides start to boil.

If I ever come face-to-face with Will Cavanaugh, it will be his death sentence.

Principal Evans is thrilled to see me. And by that, I mean he’s pacing around his office popping aspirin like candy.

“Evans!” I throw my arms out and yell. “Long time no see, buddy!”

“Isis, please, I have a headache –”

“HOW’RE THE WIFE AND KIDS?”

He groans. “You like tormenting me.”

“I like everything that isn’t boring.” I flop in the armchair across from his desk. “So? To what do I owe this illustrious summons?”

He gingerly removes his hands from his ears and reaches into his desk, pulling out an envelope with stately ink words on it, and a logo of a building of some kind.

“Is that what I think it is?” I ask.

“Stanford,” Evans says calmly. “Came for you today.”

“And you practiced enough self-restraint to not open it! You’re amazing, Evans. Really. You’ve grown up from the little boy who pasted my fat pictures everywhere.”

He flinches. “How about you open it?”

“How about I switch your apple juice with piss?”

“Isis —”

“Look, Evans,” I inhale. “My mom’s got a trial coming up. Dunno if you heard. She’s gonna need me. Probably for a long time. And I mean, I can do your catch-up homework thing and graduate or whatever, but the truth is, I’m not the best student. Obviously. Obviously you know that. I’m fine on paper, but I cause trouble and I’m immature and I say stupid stuff. So I didn’t really earn this. I mean, I did, but I don’t belong in college. Especially not a big huge Ivy League or whatever. They’d be better off giving the place to like, someone from China? Someone really dedicated and mature. Someone not-me.”

I push the letter back at him.

“So, you know. You can open that. Or trash it. I don’t care. But I’m not going.”

Evans is quiet. When he finally looks up at me, he somehow seems so much older. The wrinkles under his eyes are deeper, and his forehead creases with dozens of years of being tired.

“You’re doing the same thing Jack did.”

“What?”

“Refusing to go because of the people you love. Refusing to – to become amazing. You have so much potential, Isis. And you’re throwing it away.”

“What do you mean, refuse? Did he?”

“You don’t remember? He wanted to stay here, in Ohio, to take care of that girl, Sophia. He had offers from every Ivy League in the country, practically.”

“But he’s going to Harvard now. People won’t shut up about it.”

“Yes. But he only changed his mind after – I don’t know what changed his mind, actually. But I can’t let you do the same thing. Please. I know I said it would be your decision, but please. Open the letter, read it, and think it over. And if you still don’t want to go, I’ll respect your decision.”

I snort. I stare at the envelope for a few moments before snatching it back.

“Fine. Fine. But don’t expect a happy ending.”

Evans smiles, wanly. “I never do.”

I get up to leave, and he calls out to me.

“Oh, and Isis? Good luck with the trial. I hope he gets the justice he deserves.”

I clench my fists, and slam the door behind me. What does Evans know about justice? He was the scumbag who pasted my pictures everywhere, and then tried to make up for it when he found out I’m decent at grades by shoving me into the gaping, greedy maw of every snooty college in the world.

I push out the doors and into the quad. Chilly February air bites at my ankles, but the sun is out, and warms my face. It’s a calming contrast. I see Kayla sitting on a low brick wall and staring off into the distance.

“You look like you’re thinking,” I say. “Should I take a picture to commemorate the moment?”

She rolls her eyes. “Very funny. Hilarious, even.”

“I try.” I sit next to her. She furrows her eyebrows and goes back to staring at nothing. Before I think up a quip to jolt her out of her gloomy mood, she turns to me and suddenly says;

“Why does Wren act weird when he sees Jack?”

“Good question. I can’t be sure, since half my brain leaked out onto my hall floor a while ago, but I’m pretty sure it’s because he did something bad. At least, that’s what Wren and my foggy memories say.”

“Jack did something bad? Like...like what?”

“I don’t know.” I stare at the grass. “I honestly don’t know and it kills me on a daily

basis but I somehow manage to revive and shuffle around in a mockery of living.”

“I remember they were friends,” Kayla says. “I came here in, like, fourth grade. They were friends. Wren and Jack and Avery and that Sophia girl were all friends. Really tight. Like a circle no one could get into. I was jealous of them. I didn’t have good friends – just people who liked the snacks in my house and my makeup kit.”

It sounds lonely. I don’t say that, though.

“Why are you down about Wren? You told me he’s a nerd.”

Kayla flushes. “W-Well, yeah. He’s the nerd king. But – I don’t know! He just gets so...so freaked when he sees Jack. It’s weird.”

“All I know is something happened in middle school. Avery did something to hurt Sophia, and Jack stopped it. And Wren was there, with a camera, because Avery bullied him into filming it.”

Kayla’s eyes go wide. “Do you think there’s a tape of it? If Wren filmed it –”

“I doubt he’d keep it. He’s so guilty, he probably destroyed it. You can ask him about it. But it really stresses him out. And he’s kind of always on the edge already. Never relaxes. It might not be the best thing to talk about.”

“Yeah,” she says softly.

“Why all the sudden concernicus, Copernicus? Do you...do you like him or something?”

Kayla’s face engulfs with a red-hot blush and she stands instantly.

“W-What? No! Don’t be stupid! He’s not my type!”

I laugh and follow her as she strides through the crisp grass.

“You’re a bad liar,” I say.

“You’re a bad...a bad...eyeliner-put-on-er!” She snaps. I smother my laughter and mildly fail.

“Look, I’m curious too. I’ve been curious for a while about this. Wren said something to me in the hospital about Lake Galonagah. Avery has a –”

“- family cabin up there,” Kayla finishes. “Yeah. I’ve been to it every summer for the last four years. It’s beautiful, and huge, and the lake is like, five steps from the door and the hammock is silk and the chandelier used to be Michael Jackson’s I think –”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“MJ’s table lamp aside, we should visit. Maybe not her actual house. Because that would be trespassing. So instead we’re going to lightly trespass around her house. Do you think you can remember the way to her cabin?”

“Did Chanel’s spring/summer 1991 collection redefine post-modern feminism in the fashion world?”

There’s a pause.

“Translation?” I try.

Kayla throws her arms up. “It means yes!”

“Awesome. Saturday, ten am, my place. I’ll drive. You provide the atmosphere. And Gatorade.”

“Saturday? I’m going with my mom to get her haircut. Why not Friday?”

“Trial,” I grunt. Kayla’s eyes widen.

“Oh. Right. I forgot about that.”

“I didn’t.” I singsong.

“Do you...do you want me to come? I could – I don’t know. Provide moral support? And Gatorade?”

I chuckle. “Yeah. I’d like that. A lot.”

Kayla laces her arm in mine, and smiles. There’s a nice quiet as we walk, the quiet that settles between two people who’ve said everything they’d been burning to say, only cool ashes floating to the ground. It’s peaceful, and comforting, and it helps calm my first-day-back nerves like a soothing balm.

And then Kayla promptly starts lecturing me on the fine points of Chanel’s spring/summer 1991 collection, and why I should care about extended shoulder pads and Technicolor peacoats.

And somehow, that’s even more comforting.

The world changes, and I change.

But some things always stay the same.

Mom isn’t home after school, so I take my pants off the second I walk in the door and sigh with relief. Hellspawn glares up at me with his big yellow eyes.

“Don’t give me that look. I know where you poop. And sleep. Sometimes both at once.”

He slinks upstairs to vomit in my dirty clothes basket or something equally elegant. I chuck my jeans after him and they land on the railing with a sad thunk, and then I plop down on the sofa and stare at the envelope Evans gave me. The Stanford logo peers up at me in red and white. It reeks of pretentious and I haven’t even opened it yet. I can smell the pretense gunk oozing up from the crack in the envelope.

It's taunting me. So I get up and throw it in the fireplace.

The cold fireplace. With no actual fire in it. But in all fairness, if I was made of paper the mere presence of old coal ash rubbing up against my white butt would make me poop ink for days.

"Scared yet?" I ask. The envelope remains cheeky. By the time I work up the courage to open it, I've spent a half-hour staring at it. Just staring, and watching a bunch of terrifyingly important life choices flash before my eyes. Mom needs me more than Stanford does. But it's Stanford. Stan-freaking-ford. Stan-is-so-loaded-his-last-name-might-be-Ford-like-the-guy-who-invented-that-one-car-Ford. They've got money out the butt and they've contacted me early. It's a rejection. It has to be. A place like Stanford would never want a regular, boring mid-western white girl like me. I get good grades – so what? I don't do a million charity after school things like Wren, I'm not Mensa-status like Jack, and I'm not loaded like Avery. There is literally nothing to set me apart from everyone else.

But if they accepted me – just if – then Evans is right. I hate the taste of those words on my tongue, but he's right. Stanford would transform me. I'd go there, and learn so much, and become so much more. Or less. Or maybe I'd flunk. I'd fail, probably. But if I didn't, places like Europe and things I've always wanted to do, like learn Spanish fluently or dive into Women's Studies or peruse the mysteries of microorganisms – all that would be in my grubby little hands.

The sight of the bills piled on the table hits me like a ton of lead bricks. Who am I kidding? Even if this is an acceptance letter, there's no way Mom could afford it. I'd be working my ass off 24/7 just to make tuition. I'd probably be miserable. It'd be smarter to just stay home, here, with Mom, and get a job and attend the local community college. It'd save both of us money.

I grab the envelope and make a mad dash for my room. I belly flop onto my bed and

pull Mrs. Muffin to my side.

“Okay, you open it.”

I manipulate her little paws, my hands shaking, and she opens the envelope and extracts the letter. It flops open on the bedspread. I choke on my own saliva.

There’s more than just a letter. There’s a form of some kind.

‘Don’t be such a wuss!’ Mrs. Muffin seems to chime. ‘But don’t get hasty! Read the letter first!’

“Dear Ms. Blake. Congratulations! We are pleased to inform you you’ve been accepted to Stanford University for the Fall 2012 semesterOHMYGODOHMYGODOHMYGOD.”

‘Breathe!’ Mrs. Muffin wails. ‘Don’t forget to breathe! It is kind of required!’

My mind is blank – all thoughts of Jack, and what he said about ‘which kiss’ flying out the window. I temporarily forget about Lake Galonagah, and Sophia’s anger. I just have a minor coronary and collapse in on myself like a dying star. The peach tree outside my window is summarily impressed.

“I got in! I got into Stanford!” I shout at the ceiling. The letter shakes in my hand as I eagerly devour the rest of it. There’s something about a housing form, and a financial aid form, and at the very bottom is a mention of a grant. Grant? I never applied for a grant. Did Evans...?

And then my eyes widen at the amount on the attached paper. Thirty thousand dollars, for four years or until I get my bachelors, on the terms I keep a 4.0 average. It’s not a lot to Stanford, but it’ll put a huge dent in the tuition costs for me. I could

actually keep afloat, if I got some more scholarships and worked. It's doable. My heart squeezes and unsqueezes rapidly. I can do it. I can do something different, something wild and massive and incredible –

“Isis?” Mom’s voice filters up from downstairs. “Isis, are you home?”

I jump up and rush down the stairs, slipping on the bottom one but catching myself gracefully and launching into her chest.

“I got in!” I scream. “I got into Stanford!”

Mom’s eyes widen. “W-What? Stanford? How –”

I shove the letter in her hands and quiver on the edge of a knife for an entire ten seconds as she reads it. Her face lights up from the inside, like a candle through a frosted pane, glowing in all directions at once. She hugs me, harder than when I woke up in the hospital, harder than when I came home from the hospital, harder than when I arrived at the airport in Ohio from Florida.

“Oh sweetheart. I’m – I’m so proud. This is amazing! When did you apply to Stanford? And without telling me?”

“I just...I just put it in for kicks. I didn’t expect anything to actually happen,” I lie. Mom’s joy is overshadowed by worry lines, but she’s trying hard to hide them for me. It’s then I notice her coat, and the new prescription pills sticking out of her purse.

“Let’s talk about this after dinner, alright? Call your father and tell him!” Mom insists.

Dad’s just as thrilled. He offers to help me with some of the costs, the pride in his voice unmistakable.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“Kelly! Kelly!” I hear him call to my stepmom. “Isis got into Stanford!”

“Stanford!” Kelly’s saccharine voice pierces through the phone. “Quick, give me the phone.”

I suck in a breath and brace myself for the inevitable showdown.

“Isis!” Kelly exclaims.

“Kelly!” I imitate. “It’s so nice to talk to you again. Once every two years isn’t enough.”

“I agree! Stanford...wow. That’s incredible. I hope Charlotte and Marissa can be as smart as you when they get older.”

“They can try,” I say sweetly. She laughs, but under that laugh is the obvious – we dislike each other. We’ve just never said it out loud.

“You should really come visit us this summer,” Kelly presses. “Your father and I are taking the kids –” She puts emphasis on kids, rubbing it in my face that I’m not included in that category. “- to Hawaii. We should all go together before you head off.”

“Aw, but I like you so much more when you are a generally enormous distance away from me.”

She laughs, short and biting. “Well, I’ll give the phone back to your father now.

Congratulations again!”

Dad comes back on. “So, what’s the plan? Do we fill out the FAFSA? I’m coming to your graduation – I could drive you down there. A road trip, for just you and me! How would you like that?”

I smile at the floor. Yeah. That’d be great. If I was five years old. He’s trying to make up for lost time. It’s so obvious, and so ridiculous. I’m not a kid anymore. He missed out on his chance to raise me. At least Mom tried, even if it was at the very end of my time as a kid.

“I dunno, Dad. I’ll think about it.”

“Okay! Keep up the good grades, and we’ll talk more about it later. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

The words are hollow. But that’s okay. Most things are, these days.

Mom bustles around the kitchen making a celebratory dinner. She’s forcing herself to be happy for me, but I know something’s wrong, and it’s not just the looming trial this time. She’s so wrapped up in her BLT making I can’t get a serious answer out of her, so I go upstairs and turn on my laptop and stare at pictures of Stanford. I do more research; there are amazing overseas programs. England, France, Italy, Belgium. The campus is something straight out of a magazine – perfect green lawns and white-washed buildings and the California sunshine turning everything golden. Their math program is incredible, with really famous professors I’d only read about in scientific journals. Not that I read that nerd shit. I just, uh, look at them while I’m pooping.

But still.

It's everything I've never known I wanted.

I rifle through my email, to thank them for my scholarship, and to tell Evans, and pause at one particular message. It's new – sent just four hours ago, from a weird address. At first I think it's spam, but then I read the title;

Isis, I know you're there

Creepy-possible-serial-killer title aside, I click on it. What's the worst that could happen? My firewalls are tight, and if it's a phishing email I just won't click on anything inside it. There's a single line in the body;

Jack Hunter is evil.

It's a joke. It has to be a crappy joke email from someone at school. I've heard these exact words from people at school – but in an email like this, it's creepy. It's somehow more threatening, and real. I try to trace the email by putting it in Google, but nothing comes up. It's a jumble of letters and numbers that might as well be a spambot, but it's not. It's someone who knows my name, and someone who thinks Jack Hunter is evil. I'm conflicted about him for sure, but I don't think he's evil. He's cruel, and callous. But evil? Really, truly evil? That's going a little far.

And that's when I see it.

There's an image attached to the email.

I open it. It's blurry, but I see trees, and the pine needles covering the ground. I see the dark lump that looks like it has limbs (a person?) lying on the ground, and I see the hand carrying a bat in the corner. A bat stained with something dark on the tip.

My mouth goes dry. I know that hand. Memories surge up like a rapid tide. I grabbed

that hand, with its slight veins and long fingers. I held it, both of us sitting on a bed, and I confessed something. Something that meant a lot to me. Thumping music. The taste of booze. Dancing. A bed.

I know whose hand is holding that stained baseball bat.

It's Jack's.

Jack is looming over what looks like a dead body.

-5-

3 Years

26 Weeks

5 Days

Welcome to Hell. Population; me, some idiots, and my mother.

Justice is basically a costumed farce. You learn that when you're three and your parents tell you sharing is caring when quite clearly sharing is terrible, and there is no caring at all involved because no matter how loud you cry no one seems to have sympathy for you and your doll which must not touch anybody else's hands because everybody else is grimy and dumb.

A courthouse is essentially the same principal; a bunch of stuck-up, weary adults telling each other to share and care. With the added bonus of jailtime.

I sigh and re-button my hideous white blouse all the way up to my chin. At least Mom let me keep my jeans. I can't morally support her when my butt is hanging out

of tight black slacks for the world to see. I try to fix my hair – some big bun Mom made for me, but Kayla slaps my hands away.

“Stop it. You look good. For once.”

I smirk and look over at her. She sits beside me in the courtroom, a similar white blouse barely restraining her considerable chest. She wears a skirt and pearl earrings and actual pearls and looks totally the part of First Lady. If the First Lady was seventeen and Latina. The court isn't exactly what I pictured – I was expecting CSI levels of crowded rooms and scowling judges and apprehensive jurors. But instead I get a room that looks straight out of the 80's – weird geometric-patterned carpets and a flickering fluorescent bulb in one corner and a judge who looks like a smiley grandma with purpleish hair and bright red nails. The jury doesn't even look serious – they talk and laugh among themselves. Mom sits two rows in front of us, her lawyer at her side. Leo, the scumbag, sits at the left table, his lawyer whispering to him. He's got a cast on his arm and a bandaged nose.

“Ass,” I whisper to Kayla. “Leo's nose is fine. He's just wearing it for show.”

She sneers. “He's so nasty. I hope he gets all that nasty delivered right back at him! Via FedEx! Express shipping!”

I keep my eyes on Mom as people filter in. I slept on the air mattress by her bed last night, because she wouldn't stop crying. After the Stanford hullabaloo deflated, all that was left was a sad remnant of reality. Her shoulders are shaking under her two-piece suit, but she keeps her head high.

“Is Jack coming?” Kayla asks. I nod.

“Yeah. Why?”

She shrugs. “Just...it might be hard for you. You know.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Kayla’s quiet, before she says; “It was hard for him, too.”

“What? Who?”

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“Jack. When you were gone, he was so different. I know I said that the day you came back, but – but he really, really changed. I’ve never seen him look that bored. It was almost like he was dead.”

“No one to call you names does that to people.”

She shakes her head and sighs. Leo’s eyes catch mine once, and I mime cutting my own throat to get the point across. He doesn’t look at me again.

“For once, your threats are deserved.”

The voice belongs to Jack, who slides into the seat next to me. He’s wearing a midnight suit – crisp, with a porcelain blue tie that matches his eyes. His hair’s slicked back with gel, cheekbones defiant and profile haughty and regal as ever.

Kayla gives him a cursory glance. “Hey, Jack.”

“Kayla.” He nods at her. Their exchange two months ago would’ve been so different, but now it’s almost...mature? I shudder. Gross.

The image of his hand in the email picture won’t fade from my mind. He might’ve killed someone! Like, dead! Like, not-breathing or eating! Not-eating sucks because A. food is fantastic and B. food is fantastic! And here I am talking normally to a guy who made people unable to eat. He could be a regular Ted Bundy for all I know, because I don’t know. I don’t know anything about him, except what my fragmented memories tell me. And it makes me feel like screaming. Or puking. Preferably not both at the same time.

“Your mother looks better,” Jack leans in and murmurs. “She was wasting away when you were gone.”

“From the sound of things, so were you.”

He tenses minutely, his suit straining in the corners. Before he can open his mouth, the guard calls out “All rise”, and everyone in the courtroom stands. The grandma-y judge settles in her chair, and tells us to be seated.

“The honorable judge Violet Diego will be presiding over case 109487, Blake vs. Cassidy, on this Friday the 7th of February, 2012,” The guard reads from a clipboard. “Mr. Gregory Pearson and Mrs. Hannah Roth will be representing their respective clients. Mr. William Fitzgerald is acting court stenographer. Your honor.”

The guard nods to Judge Diego, and retreats to the corner. Diego clears her throat.

“It is my understanding this trial is to address Mr. Leo Cassidy’s alleged breaking and entering and assault and battery of Mrs. Patricia Blake and her daughter Isis Blake, on the 4th of January, 2011. Prosecutor, if you’d like to make your opening statement now.”

Mom’s lawyer, a pretty blonde lady, stands and takes the center of the room. She makes a speech about Leo’s ruthlessness, about Mom’s history with him and how she left Florida to escape him. She presents the restraining order Mom got against him before she left, my cranial x-rays, and the photos the police took of the ransacked house. Our house. Shattered glass and a blood smear on the wall and –

I flinch. A metal baseball bat. Kayla grabs my hand and squeezes.

The defense attorney argues Leo was in a fugue state, and suffering from the effects of PTSD from his time in Vietnam as a medic. I lean into Jack.

“You’re a nerd, right? You know big words.”

He snorts. “Verily, forsooth.”

“What’s a fugue state?”

“It’s similar to the dissociative amnesia you have for me,” he murmurs.

“Aw, stalking my medical records? You shouldn’t have.”

“I don’t stalk, I understand basic psychiatric indications. Regardless, the argument of a fugue state in his defense is idiotic. It’s a rare occurrence, and he showed no symptoms of another outward personality. If the judge buys it, I’ll be very surprised.”

“Aren’t you a witness?”

He nods. “They’ll call for me shortly.”

The defense suddenly asks for Mom to take the stand. She looks back at me, once, and I smile as encouragingly as I can and give her a thumbs up. She grins, wanly, and walks to the stand. The guard swears her in on the bible, and the defense attorney starts to grill her – where she was that night, what she was wearing, where I was, what Leo looked like, what he sounded like. Mom’s resolve wavers – her hands shaking and her lip bitten – but she doesn’t break. She keeps talking even though she looks like glass is ripping up her stomach from the inside out. When the defense is done, her own lawyer comes up, and Mom gives a full account of the story with the lawyer’s urging. I gnaw my mouth to stay calm and think about unicorns, but even rainbow-pooping horned horses can’t distract me from the way Mom’s voice trembles as she describes the attack. I want to clap my hands over my ears, or leave, but she needs me. She’s looking at me the entire time she’s talking, so I keep eye contact with her. I’m her anchor.

“And then Jack —” Mom inhales. “Isis’ friend from school, Jack, came in. I saw him over Leo’s shoulder.”

“Did Jack have a weapon on him that you could see?” The lawyer asks.

“Objection, your honor, visual confirmation of the weapon at the moment isn’t relevant —” The defense starts. Judge Diego shoots him a sharp look.

“Overruled. Continue, Ms. Roth.”

“Thank you, your honor.” Mom’s lawyer nods. “Mrs. Blake, did he have a weapon you could see?”

“Yes. A baseball bat, the one we keep in the closet downstairs.”

“And then what happened?”

“Jack hit him, and Leo tumbled off me and onto the floor,” Mom’s voice gets stronger. She looks at Jack, and he nods, staring back at her with those icy eyes. “And Leo got furious, and swung at him. He tried to punch him, but Jack hit him again.”

“How many times would you say Jack hit him?”

“Four. Five, maybe. Each time Leo tried to get up, Jack would keep him down, on the floor.”

“And then what happened?”

“Jack held me. I was crying, and shaking, and Jack held me and told me it was going to be alright.” She smiles. “And I believed it.”

I look over at Jack. He's looking at Mom, his gaze fixed, but something about it is softer than normal.

"And then he went downstairs, to where Isis was, and I went with him, and I started crying again when I saw her body so still. I was afraid. Terrified. You don't know how – oh god –" Mom cuts off, and the lawyer looks to Judge Diego.

"That's all, your honor."

I get up to help Mom to her chair, but Kayla pulls me back down and I watch the guard do it instead. Mom smiles a watery smile at me once she's seated at the table, and gives me a thumbs up. She's isn't okay. But she's not afraid. I can see that much.

They call Jack to the stand next. The defense attorney is startled at his lack of expression – it unnerves him. I smother a laugh. Welcome to the club, bucko.

"Did you, or did you not, break into the Blake's house without permission?" The attorney asks.

"Yes," Jack says in a monotone. "I broke in. Through the open door your client left."

A murmur goes around the courtroom. Kayla pumps her fist and squeals.

"Oh, he's gonna kill this guy so bad."

I twist my mouth shut. She has no idea.

"And what did you witness when you walked in?"

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“I saw Isis Blake collapsed on the floor. There was a bloody smear on the wall, and blood on the back of her head.”

“Did you see my client anywhere in the room?”

Jack narrows his eyes. “No. But I could hear him thumping around upstairs.”

“So you did not witness my client ‘assaulting’ Isis Blake?”

“No.”

The attorney smirks, and paces. “And did you, or did you not, grab an aluminum baseball bat and head upstairs to confront my client?”

“I did.”

“And was my client armed?”

“No. But that didn’t seem to stop him from trying to rape a terrified woman.”

I flinch. Mom is completely still, focused on Jack. The court rustles again, and the judge bangs her gavel.

“Order! Order in the court.”

When the murmurs die down, the defense attorney straightens.

“How do you know the Blake family, Jack?”

“Isis is an –” There’s the briefest pause as Jack thinks. “ – acquaintance. From school.”

“I’d like to present exhibit A,” The attorney walks up, holding a tape recorder and placing it on the table. “A recorded conversation with your Principal, Mr. Evans, who confirms you and Isis were antagonizing each other at school with outlandish pranks months prior to this event. You weren’t friends. According to Evans, you were quite the opposite. So why were you at her house? Was it to do her harm?”

“Objection!” Mom’s lawyer shouts. “Your honor, what does this have to do with the case?”

Judge Diego sighs. “Dismissed. Pearson, try to stay on topic.”

The attorney nods. “No need. The defense rests, your honor.”

Jack looks to me. If I strain hard enough to poop myself, I can barely discern the tiniest sliver of worry in his eyes. The jury is looking at Jack like they’re suddenly suspicious.

Mom’s lawyer grills Jack in a more positive direction – highlighting how Jack called 911 immediately when he found me, and how brave he had to be to face down a full-grown, furious man. Jack shrugs it off, but I can see what she’s trying to do – paint him in a sympathetic, hero light. And it’s working. Mildly. The jury isn’t staring at him like he has three heads anymore, anyway.

Jack comes back. His fists are tight on his knees, and he looks paler.

“You...you alright?” I try. “I mean, other than the fact you have a fat arrogant tumor

on your neck you call a head.”

“I’m fine,” He says softly. There’s a beat.

“I didn’t, uh, mean it. The tumor thing. It’s my instinct to be mean to you.”

A wisp of a crooked smile pulls on his mouth.

“I know.”

And then they call for Leo. The defense attorney builds his case up – that he fought in Vietnam thirty years ago, that he got a head injury there, that the army shrink had diagnosed him with PTSD. And with every little half-baked story, the fury in my guts burns hotter, and hotter. It makes my stomach want to evacuate lunch onto his shoes. But I can’t do anything about it. They won’t even let me testify because of my head. I’m helpless. And being helpless is the worst thing in the known universe.

“Is it correct that you received a call from Mrs. Blake earlier that day, asking you to visit her at her home?” The attorney asks. Leo adjusts his cast and with a mock-serious face, nods.

“Yes.”

“That’s f**king bullshit!” I shout, standing and jabbing my finger at him. “That’s bullshit and you know it!”

“Order!” The judge bangs her gavel. “Miss Blake, be seated!”

“He’s lying, your honor! He’s a lying scumbag who ruined my Mom’s life –”

“Order!” She shouts. “You either sit down right now young lady, or I’ll have you

escorted out.”

I’m breathing heavy, and my blood sings hot in my veins. I’m ready to punch, to fight, to kick and bite and scream. But I can’t do that here. Mom’s counting on me, on this trial, to give her some peace of mind. I push through the row and storm out the door. The marble halls of the courtroom are too pristine. They mock me, clean and shiny when my insides are dirty and filled with caked hate.

“Hey!”

I ignore the voice and stride down the hall.

“Hey!”

“AGHH!” I kick a bench with the flat of my sole. “Pathetic shithead! Fucking lying monkey-anus-faced bastard –”

“Isis –”

“If I ever get within five feet of him, there will be blood. Of the not-fake kind.”

“Isis, listen –”

“I’m sure they make pitchforks that can fit inside a human mouth. And down the throat.”

“Isis!”

Someone grabs my hand. I whirl around and pull it away. Jack stands there, slightly panting.

“Listen to me; you need to calm down.”

“Calm!” I laugh. “I’m perfectly calm!”

“What are you doing with your hands?”

“Practicing.” I wiggle my fingers.

“For what?”

“For when I get my hands inside his guts.”

“He’s not going to get away with it. Even a moron Freshman in law school could see that. So don’t get worked up like this. It’s not helping anyone, and it’s certainly not helping you.”

“Oh, you wanna help me now? That’s weird, because last time we talked you basically told me you’re going to make my life hell.”

“Do I? Make your life hell?”

His voice pitches down, low and deep and cracked through. The sudden change startles me.

“No,” I inhale. “You just make it a little harder.”

“Your mom needs you,” he presses.

“I can’t – can’t go back in there. Not for a while. If I see that Neanderthal’s face again, I’ll –”

Jack quirks a brow. “A word more than four letters long. I’m impressed.”

“You should be. I spent an entire year of middle school studying them. And their hairy crotches. But mostly them.”

“Would punching me again help ease your fury?”

I scoff. “Maybe. Probably not. It’s him I want to hurt, not you.”

Jack looks outside the courthouse window, to the playground across the street.

“There’s two things that calm you down – violence, and sugar. Ice cream.” He points to an ice cream cart on the sidewalk. “C’mon. My treat.”

“Ohhh no. I know how this works. First it’s ice cream, then it’s marriage.”

“Marriage, huh? Tell me,” he says coolly as we both walk towards the cart anyway.

“Who’s the lucky sea slug?”

“Why sea slug? Why not, like, a sea dragon?”

“Because a sea slug doesn’t have eyes. Or a nose. Or any discernible intelligence beyond eating and shitting. You’d make the perfect match.”

I snort. The sun and clear blue sky are a sign Febuary landed on its head when it got out of bed this morning. I pick a strawberry cone and Jack gets mint chocolate chip. There’s a bench, but I sit on the grass under the tree instead. Jack sits with me.

“You don’t have to,” I say.

“It’s shady here,” He counters.

“Some butts are better off miles apart.”

“No.”

With that clarifying sentence, we enjoy our ice creams in the relative peace shared only between two people who are complete opposites. Jack looks ridiculous in the sunlight. Ridiculous and handsome and puke-worthy.

“Can you go back to Abercrombie?”

“What?” Jack looks at me.

“Just, you know. Crawl back into the magazine you came from. So I can hide it under my bed between two National Geographic issues on recycling elephant waste and never read it again.”

“You’re insane.”

“You know how people talk about being beautiful on the inside and stuff,” I start.

“Yes. And?”

“I just realized people don’t have x-ray vision,” I whisper in awe. “They can’t see

your insides.”

He rubs his forehead tiredly.

“My zodiac sign is Cancer,” I insist.

Jack licks his ice cream.

“One time, when I was seven, I cried so hard I rehydrated a raisin.”

My babbling doesn’t scare him off like the other 99% of the population with dangly bits between their legs. He just grunts.

“Do you know the alphabet backwards?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Fast?”

“ZYXWVUTSRQPONML –”

“Can you make cinnamon sugar doughnuts?”

“I can make cinnamon rolls.”

“Can you jump rope?”

“Yes.”

“A million times?”

“If you gave me cybernetic knees, there’s a slight possibility.”

I stare into his face. “You don’t have bright green eyes.”

“No.”

“And you’re not left-handed.”

“No.”

“And you probably can’t play an ocarina.”

“Unfortunately, no.”

I lean back and elegantly smash my ice cream into my mouth hole. “Good.”

“Those were awfully specific,” he says. He bites his cone down to the last and lies on the grass, hands behind his head.

“Requirements of my dream man. Sea slug. Whatever. Are you even supposed to leave the courtroom if you’re a witness?”

“I already gave my testimony don’t change the subject you have a dream man?” He says it all in one breath and has to gulp air. I laugh.

“Didn’t think Ice Princes ran out of breath.”

“Your dream man is impossible.”

“Bingo.” I point at him. He narrows his eyes.

“So that’s what you do when you get hurt? You construct a dream man who can’t possibly exist so no one will ever live up to your standards and you won’t have to look their way twice?”

“Yup.”

“You don’t face the pain? You put up a wall between it and you and pretend it doesn’t exist?”

The sun filters through the leaves. A dull ache forms above my stomach.

“Yeah.”

“You’re torturing yourself.”

I know. “I’m fine, bro.”

He snorts. “You’re the farthest thing from fine, and you keep it that way.”

“What about you?” I snap. “What about Sophia?”

“What about her?”

“She’s dying, Jackass. She’s dying and you’re here with me, buying me ice cream and asking me about my dream man! She’s dying and you kissed me, more than once apparently! How f**king selfish are you? Are you just setting me up so you have someone to pity-fuck you when she dies?”

His eyes flash with an Arctic chill. “Shut up.”

“All we do is argue. Sure, respect or whatever, but respect isn’t enough. What’s

enough is tenderness, and love, and you have that with Sophia,” I feel something hot prickling in the corners of my eyes. “So f**k you, actually. Fuck you. Don’t try to get close to me. Don’t try to f**king fix me. I’m not the princess, I’m the goddamn dragon, and you can’t seem to see that. So stop! Stop being nice to me! Stop being not-nice to me! Just stay out of my f**king life!”

She comes like a storm, and she leaves like one, heavy steps and hands clenched and hair whipping behind her in the bare spring breeze, amber eyes molten with fire and resentment.

Something in me grows heavy, and wilts.

I don’t go back into the courtroom. I wait in the park and listen to the chatter from across the street as people leave. Leo gets three years jail time for assault and battery and breaking and entering. Mrs. Blake waves to me. Isis ignores me and walks to her comically misshapen VW Beetle.

She ignores me. Completely. No sneers, no wicked little smiles, no flipping birds. Nothing. Just complete emptiness.

-7-

3 Years

26 Weeks

6 Days

Principal Evans is a nice guy. By Disney villain standards. By every other standard,

he's a more or less a horrible jerk. And I know this, but I've spent so much time with him now I barely see it anymore. It just is, like the stupid watercolor of the school's main building on his wall, or the fluorescent light above his desk that flickers sometimes because, hello, public school funding. Summer is hot and I am hot and the sky is blue and Evans is just a straight-up jerk with a continual mid-life crisis he likes to take out on me.

I put my feet up on his desk anyway.

"What's up, man?" I ask. I know exactly what's up. But I'm gonna make him beg for it. Evans runs his hand over his balding head.

"I was concerned about my favorite student."

"Oh, you've gotten so much better at lying!" I clap my hands. "You could just say you wanna know what was in Stanford's envelope. You know, be a little more honest with your feelings. I'm sure it'd save you from buying that inevitable red convertible or a couple years of therapy in the long run."

Evans frowns. "I have been trying to make up for my mistakes. How much longer are you going to treat me like the bad guy?"

"As long as you're alive," I say cheerily. "You just want me to tell you I got in early, so you can brag to your other bald principal friends."

"You did? Congratulations."

"Ah ah," I wag my finger. "Don't assume, and don't try to get me to say it. I know how you work."

"And how do I work, Isis? Please tell me."

“Underhanded tactics and simpering lead-ons. You’d have done well in 1800’s France. Except everybody there got beheaded for that stuff.” I pause and stroke my chin thoughtfully, then smile. “Yup! You would’ve done well.”

Evans is quiet. His eyes are set and hard, for once, instead of soft and evasive.

“Let me guess,” I lean forward. “You want me to tell you I got in, so that you can feel better, feel redeemed, that you entered me in their applications process, like getting me into an Ivy will make up for the pictures and the bullshit.”

He doesn’t move, or blink. I lean back.

“Newsflash, Evans – it’s called bullshit because it’s shit. Because it’s already been pooped out, and nothing can be done about it. It can’t be cleaned up. It’ll always be there. The stink will linger. It’ll always be something you’ve done. So no, I’m not going to tell you.”

Page 27

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

Evans smiles. “You already have.”

I scoff. “Yeah?”

“You wouldn’t be nearly as arrogant if you didn’t hold the knowledge that you got in. If you didn’t get in, you’d have nothing to lord over me. You wouldn’t be dragging it out like this.”

I inhale sharply. He’s right. He’s f**king right. I learned how he works, but he’s been learning how I work all along. Clever little rat.

“For what it’s worth, I’m glad.” He smiles a softer smile. “I am glad you have the opportunity. I can rest easy knowing one of my brightest students has the opportunity to become brighter.”

I’m quiet. He gets up and stands at the window, watching the people at recess below.

“Because you are, you know. Bright. When you first came, I looked at your records and dismissed you as a troublemaker. But you’ve taught me otherwise. You’ve taught me a student’s potential is not solely in their test scores. I’d forgotten that. Years of being principal, instead of a teacher, distanced me from that truth. I became wrapped up in the statistics, and keeping up appearances.”

He turns back to me, and smiles.

“Thank you, Isis. And I’m sorry for everything. You may go, if you wish.”

I stand and put my backpack on. At the door, I turn.

“I got in.”

Evans nods, faint smile still in place. Just nods, doesn’t say anything preachy or high-handed, and turns back to the window.

I leave, feeling a little stranger. A little sadder.

A little better.

There are approximately nine trillion cells in my body and every single one of them hates hiking. And walking. Just moving for extended periods of time in general, really. All nine trillion of us would rather be in bed. In the shade. With a parfait.

“I can’t believe I ran myself skinny,” I pant and lean on a tree. Kayla is yards ahead of me, pushing over the hill of the hiking trail leading to Avery’s cabin.

“We’ve all done things we regret!” Kayla calls back.

“Like living.”

“Or not keeping up with a healthy exercise regimen!” She singsongs.

I stare at an oak’s trunk, and it seems to share my incredulousness. Regimen? I mouth. The tree shifts in the sunlight – a planty shrug.

“Have you actually been...studying?” I call.

“We’re adults now. Adults have to know words.”

“And here I thought the only words they knew were ‘booze’ and ‘meaningless sex’.”

Kayla laughs, and waits for me at the top of the hill.

“Don’t forget ‘bills’,” she adds when I catch up.

“H-How could I?” I pant.

“I think that’s what I’m most afraid of.”

“Bills?”

She nods. “Bills are scary. College doesn’t scare me. It’s just like high school, probably, except you live there.”

“People drink a lot in college.”

“We drink a lot now.”

“There’s lots of STDs.”

“What do you think Marina keeps itching her crotch in gym for?”

“And your dreams of being a rockstar get crushed.”

“I’m thinking more of a rock-et-star.” She points up into the sky.

I sputter a laugh. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” she grabs her boobs. “These guys would appreciate the zero G. Also there’s like, neat-o space rocks and stuff. And aliens.”

“There’s no Cosmo in space,” I warn.

“Yeah but there’s the cosmos!”

I smirk. I’m rubbing off on her.

We walk for a bit. Or, Kayla walks, and I wheeze. But even through my burning lungs and running nose the woods are beautiful – dappled with light and fresh air – and the sound of the lake lapping close by is a lullaby only the birds get to hear every night. Kayla stops on another hill, and points to the cottage. It’s huge, with French windows and marble terracing, but at least there are no cars in the driveway. We’re free to snoop around, and as long as we don’t get too close to the house itself, we won’t trip any alarms.

“Welcome to Chateau Avery.”

“Thanks, ass-tronaut.” I tap her butt. She squeals and chucks a pinecone at my head. It sticks to my hair and I don’t bother taking it out because she gave it to me. She’s given me loads of stuff – cake pops and lattes and smiles – but somehow this pinecone means more to me than any of those things. It’s a little scratchy; a little uncomfortable sometimes. But it’s still with me, and it looks fabulous. Just like Kayla.

“So where do we start looking?” She asks.

“Wren said it happened in the woods.” I look around wildly. “Avery asked them to come outside, so it couldn’t have been too far from the cottage. It couldn’t have been too close to the road though, otherwise she’d run the risk of being seen. We gotta

think like Avery.”

Kayla makes a disgusted face. I thump her on the back.

“Sacrifices have to be made. The brain cells will regenerate in ten hours. No one will ever have to know.” I whirl around and point south. “That patch of woods looks perfect. Far from the road, but not too far from the cottage.”

“Okay I know you’re like, really smart or whatever, but I knew Avery way before you even got here. I know how she thinks and she would not go that way.”

“Pray tell why not?”

“Because there’s tons of mud. Ew.”

“Newsflash – mud dries up! There might not have been mud ten years ago!”

“Newsflash - there’s always mud over there.” She looks around. “If I was Avery, and I wanted to lure people to do something bad to them, I’d do it that way. That’s where she and her brother went to let off fireworks when they were kids. You can’t see it from the cottage, so they never got busted by their parents.”

“I would kiss you right now, but currently it is six months too early to become a college lesbian.”

Kayla smirks, and we start towards the patch of forest. The trees get thicker as we go in, the trunks so huge they block out the view of the cottage and the lake. It’s a perfect, insulated border around a half-mile of dastardly evil-has-been-done-here ground.

“So what are we looking for?” Kayla asks. “Bullet shells? Blood? Human bones? Or -

” She shudders and whispers; “- Ruined clothes?”

“Anything that doesn’t look right. Anything that doesn’t look like it belongs in the forest.”

She nods, and we split up. My hands shake. I’m breathing shallow. This is it. This is the place it happened. I’m standing where it took place. Jack became a cold, unfeeling husk on the outside here. Sophia got hurt here. Wren’s guilt was born here, and Avery’s started burning here.

Now’s my chance.

I kneel on the forest floor, the layers of pine needles squishy. I dig. I turn over rocks. I look between roots and mushroom clumps and massive, rotting stumps. Kayla huffs and daintily inspects tree trunks and moves pine needles with her foot, but I can’t blame her. We’re not exactly CSI. She’s right. What the hell are we looking for?

After a half-hour of silent concentration, my hands are smeared in dirt and blood around my nails where I dug too hard. Oops. It doesn’t hurt, but it will later. It’s then I feel something cold and wet on my ankle, and summarily expire. Loudly.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“Get it off get it off GETITOFF! KAYLA! KAYLA! KAYLAGETITOFF!”

“What are you screaming –”

“GET IT OFF!”

“It’s a piece of moss, Isis!”

I stop flailing and look down. The slimy green offender peeks out of my jeans innocently. I pull it off and Kayla rolls her eyes and goes back to searching.

“Y-Yeah?” I adjust my jeans as I stand. “Well, next time a flesh-eating zombie crawls out to eat you, I will just sit back and watch. From a safe distance. Which slightly impairs my ability to hear you screaming for mercy.”

“It was moss.”

“Well it felt like a zombie, and who do we have to blame for that, hm? Mother nature?” I look up and shout at the trees. “Thanks, M-dawg! Next round can you maybe tone down the moss-that-feels-like-a-zombie-hand thing? Thanks, love ya, big fan otherwise!”

“Aren’t we supposed to be sneaky?” She hisses.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t matter! There’s nothing here. I f**ked up, okay? My big plan that was supposed to answer all the questions backfired and here we are, scrabbling around in the dirt like Cro-Magnons who haven’t learned about fire! Or gloves!”

Kayla's eyes are glazed, and she's staring off into the distance. I wave a hand frantically in front of her face.

"Hello? Don't go to space yet, dumbo, you've got work to do and degrees to earn and boys to break the hearts of."

She grabs my wrist and looks at me slowly.

"I remember."

"Remember what?"

Kayla looks over my shoulder. "One summer, tenth grade I'm pretty sure, because I had my orange tankini and that was, like, SO cute and in-style –"

"Kayla!"

"Right, um. So that summer, we went way far down on the lake, like, took a walk in this direction, which was weird because it's really rocky this way and we usually went the other way, but that day we decided to go this way, and we got about this far, maybe a little farther, and Avery told us –"

Kayla inhales.

"Avery told us to stop. She got really freaked out. Weirdly freaked. She was almost panicking, and she told us we had to go back, and we all asked her why but she just kept saying, 'because I said so' and 'it's my cottage you morons, so we go back when I say'."

My heart soars. Maybe this wasn't useless after all.

“And that was this way?” I ask. Kayla nods and points over my shoulder.

“If we keep going, I can look over the edge of the cliff and down to the lake and tell you where she told us to go back.”

I follow her. She’s faster than ever, but adrenaline pumps my legs just as fast, and I can keep up easy. The sun’s still high, and glints off the massive Lake Galonagah. Kayla peers over the edge of the forest, where the woods and dirt crumble into rocks and shoreline. She shakes her head each time and keeps going, until finally, finally, she stops.

“Right here. This is where she freaked out.”

I look around. There’s nothing here that stands out – just more woods. But if Avery got scared as they walked this way, that meant she was afraid they’d see something they weren’t supposed to. Something she’d hid way out here. Something that could definitely be seen from the lake shore.

“Let’s keep going. Keep your peepers peeled for anything weird.”

Kayla nods, and follows me. We walk slowly, taking in everything. Kayla sees it first and grabs my elbow.

“Isis.”

I look to where she’s pointing, and my heart sinks. No, sinks isn’t the right word for it. It falls out through my butt. It’s gone, a heavy leaden thing in its place.

There, against a tree and planted in the ground, is a wooden cross, and at the foot of the cross is a small pile of stones.

“Is that –” Kayla swallows, hard. “Is that a –”

“A grave.” I finish. “Yeah.”

She stays, frozen in place, but I move towards it with careful steps. I kneel at the graveside. The wooden cross is shoddy – somebody just put two thick sticks together with twine – but it’s withstood the test of time. The bark’s eroded off; white, bleached wood all that’s left. You could easily see the white color through the trees and from the lakeside, if you caught the right angle. Whoever made the grave knew their stuff, though. The stones probably kept scavengers from digging the body up and eating it.

The grave is so small.

I already know what’s inside. But that’s not enough. I have to see it, with my own two eyes. I start moving the rocks.

“Isis! What are you doing? Stop it!”

“Go back to the car and wait for me.”

“You can’t just – you can’t just dig that up –”

I look over my shoulder at her. “The truth is in here, Kayla. And I have to know. So go back to the car and wait for me. Pretend I’m not doing it.”

Kayla squeezes her eyes shut, but she doesn’t move. I pull the rocks off, one by one, and use a flat one to start digging into the soft square of earth. As I get deeper, I can hear Kayla start to sob. Her cries echo in the forest, and somehow I know they aren’t the first human tears the trees have seen. My arms ache, my fingers burn, and the blood from my torn cuticles flows over and mixes with the dirt, but I can’t stop. I

couldn't stop if I wanted to. It's feet down. Two feet, three feet, and then –

And then the dirt comes apart, and there's a tiny piece of pink blanket sticking out of the ground. I bleed on it. I dig faster, but more gently, just around the bundle that's starting to form. I dig until it comes loose, and pull it out slowly. Brush the dirt off. Put it on the pine needle ground and open it. It's pinned, but the safety pin is long rusted and snaps easily, and the edges of the blanket falls apart like a crusted, ancient flower to reveal the center.

I feel Kayla's heat to my left, her curiosity obviously overcoming her reluctance. But the second the blanket falls apart, she starts crying harder than ever, and pulls away like she's been burned.

"No. No no no," she cries. "No. No no!"

A tiny skeleton looks up at me, with eyes too small and too black to see anything. It never got to see anything. That much I'm sure of. Five months? Maybe six, but that's pushing it. And next to the skeleton is a miniscule bracelet, with letter-beads. My shaking fingers pick it up.

Tallulah

I stare at the name for what feels like hours. Days. Tallulah.

Tallie, for short.

The sounds of the basement deafen me the second I walk in. Bull's Tail isn't a nice bar, or even a tolerable one – sawdust and piss and vomit crusting in the corners – but it's exactly what I'm looking for.

It's exactly the place people's hopes go to die.

On a Saturday night, it's as packed as it can be. Men swagger and guffaw into their beer and whiskey, the smell of B.O and stale peanuts overpowering. Rock music blares from the creaky jukebox in the corner and the flickering LED TV above the bar shows a game only a fraction of the patrons seem to care about. The bartender is an older woman with once-bright blonde hair and beauty to spare, but years of wolf-whistles and ass-grabbing has worn her to a pale mockery of that.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

“What are you having?” She flicks a half-second, strained smile in my direction.

“Two shots of your strongest. And Gin and tonic. On the rocks.”

“ID?” She asks. I fish it out and she nods. “Alright, one sec.”

I wait. I’m the only one here without a pot-belly, and the women are starting to notice. Good. That’ll make this much easier.

The bartender comes back with my drinks, and I down them as quick as I can.

“Whoa there,” A man to my left says. “You’re awfully young to be drinking that hard.”

“You’re awfully nosy for someone that old.”

He laughs, but it’s not an offended laugh. It’s amused. I look over at him – a tweed suit covers a considerably hefty frame. I recall him walking behind me on the sidewalk. He isn’t fat - in fact quite the contrary. He has broad shoulders and muscles gone slightly to pasture. He sits perfectly straight, but with an easy demeanor to it. His right index finger and the tendon attaching to it in his arm are very well-defined; classic indications of trigger-finger. Military, without a doubt. His hair is white and sparse, and his mustache faint. Dark eyes glitter over at me.

“People only drink like that for two reasons – to remember something, or to forget something,” he says.

“Aren’t you just full of tautologies,” I scoff. The gin and vodka burns on my tongue. The women are moving, and I’m picking my target carefully. It has to be someone stupid enough to assume the worst of me. And that means any drunk man will do.

“It’s a girl, isn’t it?” The military man asks. I don’t dignify him with a response. “Is she pretty?”

I swirl the leftover ice in my glass and remain silent.

“So she’s ugly. Must be absolutely hideous.”

“No,” I snap. “Not that it matters, but no.”

“‘Not that it matters’?” He presses. I pause. He’s goading me into talking, but the alcohol is hitting me fast and I have nothing left to lose.

“She’s pretty. I suppose.” I wince. “It’s not that she’s pretty. She’s pretty but that isn’t all she is.”

“Of course not. Otherwise she wouldn’t have you here, drinking and tongue-tied.”

I slide my glass back to the bartender and face the man. He’s faintly smiling, hands wrapped around a bourbon ice. His silence is somehow more irritating than his words, so I break it.

“Men like to categorize women.” I curl my lip. “Into convenient little boxes like ‘hot’, or ‘cute’, or ‘beautiful’. It’s easy for them. It’s never been easy for me.”

“So this particular girl,” the man leads. “She’s none of those?”

“She’s all of those,” I say, a little too quickly for my own liking. “And more than

those, and at the same time she's none of those. She is exactly herself, no more and no less. But saying that now is pointless."

"Did she dump you?"

"She told me to stay out of her life."

"And so here you are, stumbling into a backwater bar to start a fight with someone just to vent all that out."

I narrow my eyes at him. His smile remains.

"I've been alive long enough to know the face of someone looking for a fight. And I know the face of someone who knows what it's like to fight."

The man's dark eyes suddenly become unreadable.

"And most of all, I know the face of someone who, deep down in a part of themselves they won't admit to, enjoys fighting."

I glare at the bartop, the shined wood reflecting my face. The man stops smiling at me, and takes a sip from his brandy before speaking again.

"You see it sometimes, in the guys. Most of us in the army don't like what we do, believe it or not. We join for the camaraderie, the sense of belonging, of order. Not for the blood. But every once in a while, you see a real piece of work come through. And they like the blood. Some of them are better at hiding it than others, but it always comes out."

"What are you saying?" I snarl.

“I’m saying, son, that you’re a monster,” he says evenly. “And you hate what you are.”

My fist connects with his jaw before I can stop it. The ice is gone. The poise and calm, rational demeanor I’d kept myself leashed with vaporizes in an instant and he’s pushing back, shoving me by the shoulders outside, and the bartender is yelling something, and the drunk idiots are hooting and hollering, taking bets, following us as we stumble into the night air. I step in a puddle as I duck under the man’s right hook. It’s so powerful the air trailing behind it makes an audible ‘thump’ noise. He’s huge. He is taller and wider than Leo, and I don’t have a bat. He lunges for me, and I throw a trashcan between our path. He kicks it aside, and it crumples against the wall like a tin can.

And for the first time since I saw Isis on the floor with blood around her head, I feel fear. Real, true, cold fear that reaches into my lungs and pulls them up through my throat.

I put my fists up and step around another right hook, but he slams his knee into my chest and I can’t breathe, the world reduced to flashes of white and red and pain. I can barely hear the crowd whooping over the sound of my own surging heartbeat. Someone tries to break us up, but the man shoves them away and lunges for me, and suddenly my feet aren’t touching the ground, his fist in my collar as he lifts me above the cement. Our eyes meet for a split second, his curiously empty of emotion, and he throws me aside. Stars pop in my eyes, and my back hits the brick wall with a sickening thud. I try to scrabble to my feet, but my legs are pained jelly.

The man leans in.

“No one can tame the monster for you, son. Not your parents, not a girl. Not a college or an institution. Only you can do that.”

I spit at his feet, the saliva bloody.

“What do you know about me?”

“Blanche told me a lot about you.”

“Should’ve figured you were one of her goons.”

“Don’t mistake me. I’m not one of hers, and I trust her as far as I can throw her. Which isn’t far, with the way she’s been putting on weight recently.”

I scoff. The man leans back and offers me his hand up. The bar crowd is long gone, the excitement over for them. I glare at his palm, and ease up onto my feet by myself. Every bone in my body screams for me to stop moving, to inject morphine, to roll in bandages, anything to stop the pain.

“I heard about what you did for the Blake family. Word travels fast in the criminal justice circuit.”

“So?”

The man reaches into his jacket and hands me a card. “When you’re ready to use the monster constructively instead of destructively, you come see me.”

He’s gone before I can snipe at him, and I’m alone in the alley with my aching body and bewildered mind. The card is simpler than any I’ve ever seen – simpler than the Rose Club cards, even. And that’s how I know it’s seedy, underworld business.

Gregory Callan

VORTEX Enterprises

I nurse my wounds long enough to get up enough energy to make it back to my car, and collapse. The booze hits my bloodstream, and I welcome the warm relief as it dulls the pain. But with the dullness comes the realization I went looking for a fight. I, Jack Hunter, actively went searching to engage someone in a fight. And now I'm hurt, and buzzed, and my mouth tastes like blood, and all I want to do is go back to that night at Avery's, to that absurd sea-themed room, to the bed with Batgirl in it, to Isis, to an Isis who confessed to me with tiny, stuttering, shy words, that she liked me, to a moment when everything was simple. Her and I. Her and I in a room, alone.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:32 am

My phone rings. I wince as I answer.

“Hello?”

“Jack!” Sophia’s sunny voice says. “Dr. Fenwall says the last payment for the surgery came through! Thank you. Thank you so, so much.”

I push out the vestiges of the memories of that night, and smile.

“Don’t thank me. It’s the least I could do.”

“You worked so hard. I’m really grateful. Remember when I said you could choose the place next time we went out?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Dr. Fenwall said he’d let me have a few days out next week. So.”

“I’ll see if I can’t find something fun for us to do.”

“Yeah! But, Avery wants to throw me a surprise party. For my birthday.”

“That’s in March.”

“I know! But if I only have a few days out, she can only plan it then.”

“I thought we hate Avery?”

“We do! I mean, we don’t like her, but she’s trying really hard. And it just seems unfair. And plus, if I don’t make it –”

“Don’t talk like that,” I snap.

“ – If I don’t make it,” she says more sternly. “I don’t want things between us to be bad when I...you know.”

“You won’t.”

“Just, please. I really want to go.”

I sigh. “Alright. I’ll ask her about it.”

“Okay. Thank you. I know it’s hard for you, but thank you.”

“It’s fine.”

“Say hi to your mom for me. Or, I guess I’ll say hi. It still feels weird, though, just popping up on facebook and being like ‘Hey Dahlia! It’s me!’”

“Don’t worry,” I assure her. “She loves you. She always will. You can say hi whenever.”

“Okay! I’m going to try to get some sleep.”

“Good. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Jack.”

When we hang up, Isis’ words ring in my head.

‘She’s dying, Jack.’

I put my head on the steering wheel and pretend I’m somewhere else. Somewhere warm. Somewhere like that ridiculous sea-themed little room.

-8-

3 Years

27 Weeks

2 Days

Since the trial, Mom’s been getting better.

I don’t know if better is the right word. She had to be so strong for so long, just for me, and now that I’m back she’s leaning on me again, and I don’t mind, it’s the norm for us, but I can’t help feeling like I’m a cane sometimes instead of a daughter, but then I get guilty about thinking that and make her dinner and bring her tea and tell her it’ll be alright, instead. Love is being there for someone. If there’s one thing I learned from Aunt Beth, it’s that family means being there when no one else is.

Mom’s going to twice as many shrink appointments, but they seem to be helping. I see Avery at the office, sometimes, and she gives me a passing sneer before flouncing out the door. She’s bitchier lately, and that means she’s happier, and that means Sophia’s probably talking to her again. Avery’s basically her yo-yo, and Sophia pulls her back and forth for her amusement. But you can’t tell Avery that. Sophia can do no wrong in Avery’s eyes. I feel sorry for her. I pity her. And pity’s not healthy, but after everything Avery’s done to me, to Kayla, to Jack and Sophia and Wren, I can’t bring myself to feel something better towards her. And it’s shitty of me, and it’s not very Isis Blake-like.

I'm changing. The old Isis would've tried harder to be friends with Avery again, even through all this bullshit. The old Isis would've soldiered in with a smile and taken all the blows.

I'm getting worse. I am the villain, after all. The fire-breathing dragon. So it makes sense.

The hospital is quiet. Like the grave. Except people here are trying extremely hard not to be in graves. Very hard. At least four morphine drips and two crappy hospital food trays worth of hard.

Being back here makes me feel claustrophobic – the smell of antiseptic, the people in gowns wandering like ghosts from room-to-room, the nurses and interns all staring and trying to decide where I belong in their mini-ecosystem of healing. Naomi isn't on duty, which I'm grateful for. I don't want this to be any messier than it has to be.

Who am I kidding, I totally want it to be messy. Bring on the best mess.

I poke my head into the kids ward for just a second when the guard steps away to pee. Mira and James wave frantically, and I wink and put the plastic bag of presents down inside the door. They come rushing over in their little cartoon-character pajamas with big smiles on.

“Mira said you'd never come back!”

“Did not!” Mira sticks her tongue out at James.

I laugh and ruffle their hair. “I can't stay long, but I'll come back in the daytime this week, okay? For now just open the presents. But don't tell Naomi where you got them. Just say it was from...uh, Jesus. Not that I'm Jesus. Uh.”

They nod frantically, and Mira hugs me around the neck so hard I think she's trying to merge with me on a cellular level. I manage to pry her fingers off and sneak out just as the guard rounds the corner. The sounds of tearing wrapping paper and squealing reverberate behind me. I made some spawn happy. And that definitely does not make me feel all gooey and happy inside in the slightest because goo is super disgusting except when it is cheese goo on pizza and –

Sophia's open doorway looms before me. It's dim, and the usual flower vases line her window. I can see her feet under the blanket.

I stand there for what feels like years. And then I take a deep breath and walk in.

She's not asleep like I'd hoped. She's very much awake, blue eyes staring at me over the cover of a romance novel. This one has a knight on it, and a very lost-looking busty lady.

"Yo!" I smile.

"I thought I told you to leave me alone," she deadpans.

"Uh, yeah, I've never been very good at following directions. Or respecting people's wishes. Or anything at all, really. So here I am. Doing...here stuff."

She shoots me a withering look. "You're annoying."

"That, my dear, is nothing new!" I sit on the end of her bed. "In fact, 'tis ancient knowledge. The Egyptians foretold of my coming. Actually they mostly told stories about how Isis got it on with her brother. Incest was big back then. So was not living past thirty."

Sophia doesn't crack a smile, eyes set and hard like blue-black flint.

There's no avoiding it. Whatever tenuous friendship we once had has been tainted by our mutual insecurities. She's treating me like she used to treat Avery, and it's cold and silent and so full of disdain my stomach shudders with queasy unrest. Sophia's presence was always calm and gentle, but heavy, and I feel the weight of it now more than ever.

"I met Tallie," I say. There's a half second of silence, and then Sophia puts her book down slowly. I can't stand the quiet. "I found her. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry for prying. I'm sorry for meeting her. I'm sure you don't want many people to. I'm sorry. I'm sorry it happened to you in the first place —"

Page 31

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

“What happened to me?” Sophia interjects viciously. “Please, tell me exactly what happened to me, since you seem to know so much already.”

“Whoa, hold on, that’s not what I meant –”

“Then why are you apologizing? Do you think that’ll make anything better? Do you think that will help at all? Words don’t help. They never have. And they help even less coming from your mouth.”

I knit my lips shut. Sophia glares.

“I don’t need your pity. That’s what you came to give, isn’t it? Or are you threatening me with the knowledge you have now?”

“No – Sophia, I wouldn’t –”

“You would. Because you think like me. And it’s what I would do.”

And just like that, all my anger wells up and blocks my throat.

“I. Am. Not. You!”

My fist swings and accidentally knocks a vase over. It shatters, opalescent shards puddling on the ground. Sophia’s glare breaks into a smile.

“It’s about time you got mad at me! I knew you weren’t as cutesy and kind as you make yourself out to be.”

“Enough with the insults! Why are you doing this? Why are you being such a horrible poop-face to me?”

She stops smiling, eyes getting heavy-lidded.

“Because you have it all. You have your health. You have family. You have friends. And even though you have all that, you still want the one thing I have left. You coveted it. You tried to take it from me.”

“I didn’t –”

“You did. You kept pressing. You met him and tried everything to get his attention, and when you had it, and found out about me, you still kept pushing. You kept yourself in his life. You wanted him. You still do. And it makes me sick –”

My hand stings. Sophia’s face swings to the side, her eyes filled with utter shock and hurt as she looks back at me, her cheek red.

“I’ve never liked Jack, and I never will. So stop. Stop being such an ass. Let go of all this useless hate.”

She goes still, staring at me, and I watch as her eyes slowly start to fill with tears.

“I can’t,” she whispers. “I can’t.”

Her hands go to her eyes, and she starts to sob. I don’t touch her. I want to, I want to hug her and call her Soapy and hold her hand like she held mine when I cried to her about Mom, and Leo, and what happened. But she hates me. I was wrong. Jack might be the bad prince, and the bad prince hurts, but a dragon hurts worse.

I am the villain.

And by talking about Tallie, by finding Tallie, I'm breathing fire over a village and burning everyone inside to a crisp. Sophia. And Jack. And Wren and Avery. It's not my delicate nightmare, but I'm inserting myself anyway because I think I can what, help? Make things right? Nothing will make things right. Nothing will reverse what happened that night in the woods, no matter how much I dig or how much I try to get them to talk about it. I'm stupid for even thinking I could make things better.

And then, just like that, Sophia reaches out for my hand, and pulls it to her heart.

"I want Tallie back," she cries, angelic face swollen. "Please. Just give me her back."

I squeeze my hand, and nod.

"I will."

Two weeks after we found the body, we decide to finally talk about it.

Kayla's been avoiding me at school about the baby at the lake. I've tried to bring it up at lunch, break, but she refused to talk about it. Until now. It's like she had to recharge, get over her own shock, before she could face the reality of it.

She calls it Lake Baby. She didn't see the name on the bracelet, and I haven't told her. Mostly because she goes the color of thousand-year-old rice when I bring Lake Baby up already. If names were attached, she might just combust on the spot out of grief. I think that's what it is. Grief. Or maybe shock. Or maybe a prolonged case of diarrhea. Maybe she's just been raised in suburban America all her life, hard things like unwanted pregnancies and skeletons far displaced from her life. I've told her it isn't Avery's baby, though, which is what she was worried and crying about in the forest. It's Sophia's. But that just confuses her more.

“How do you know Sophia had a –”

“I just do. She asked Wren why he hadn’t visited Tallie lately. They all must know about the grave. God, no wonder they all clam up about it.”

“Wait, but what about what happened that night?” Kayla munches a cucumber and every boy within five fifty feet is staring, enraptured. “The one in middle school? Did she – did she lose the baby then? Or before?”

“Avery said she hired some guys to do something to her, and Wren said Jack drove them off. What if the shock made her lose it? What if one of them pushed her and she fell hard, and she miscarried right there in the woods? That’d disturb them enough into the crazy-weird silence they have going on now.”

What if they had to bury more than one body that night? The picture from the email is still vivid, like a shitty blind spot you get from staring at the sun too long. But there’s another spot that sticks harder to my mind. Kayla voices it first.

“If Sophia and Jack were going out back then...”

My stomach curls in on itself. Kayla’s eyes widen.

“...does that mean –”

“You two look way too serious for eleven thirty am.” Wren slides to sit by Kayla, a smile on his face. Kayla clears her throat and smooths her hair.

“Um. Yeah! We were just, um, talking about the prom! Senior prom feels like such a let down after Junior prom, I think.”

“Well, it’s the last time we’ll have a school function,” He says.

“And the last time we’ll ever have to buy hand-me-down dresses from Ross and put up with groping boys who can’t tell the vagina from the anus apart while a DJ plays something about partying till the sun goes up from the Top 40 and people sneak cheap vodka from thigh-flasks,” I say.

Wren and Kayla stare at me.

“What?” I ask innocently.

“You sound like you’ve been to a lot of school dances,” Wren says.

“I’ve been to exactly zero school dances.” I puff my chest proudly and my nipple hits the ketchup bottle off the table and there is a fabulous red puddle on the floor directly in front of the shoes of Jack Hunter. Kayla and Wren freeze, staring at him as if waiting for him to say something first. I keep my eyes ahead, focused on the radical silver perm of the second-in-line lunch lady.

“I’d advise you learn to control your extremities,” Jack sneers. “Or lack thereof.”

It’s almost traditional. My mind nags at me that this is the normal procedure of things between Jack and I. The memories are there, just hazy, and they all say I should snark something back about the way his hair looks like a duck’s butt, but I can’t. I can’t say anything. He’s terrifying. The picture is fresh in my mind, and the image of Tallie’s skeleton hangs just before my eyes and I can’t get rid of either of them. They’re his. They are extensions of him, and they terrify me - me! The girl who’s afraid of nothing except centipedes. And the green Teletubby. And the front row seat of Space Mountain.

So I just stare and don’t say anything. Jack waits, and Kayla and Wren wait on him, and nothing moves. Jack’s expression is barely there, but the hint of smug wilts rapidly, and he steps over the ketchup puddle and leaves. Wren gets up with a wad of

napkins and wipes the puddle.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

“What was that all about?” He asks.

“What do you mean?”

“You didn’t say anything. You always say something.”

“Ignoring him is the best way to get him to back off,” I shrug. “I’ve had enough, I guess. It’s just boring, now.”

Kayla narrows her eyes. “That sounds like bullshit to the max.”

“You’d rather I fight him like I used to? Didn’t that like, end in tears? And a broken head? Let’s not go for a repeat performance just this once, okay?”

Kayla and Wren look at each other, but don’t press it. And I’m grateful. The last thing I need for them to know is what I know. Because I know a lot. And it hurts my head. And possibly my heart. If I had one.

“Did you see his face?” Kayla asks as we walk together to our next class.

“Whose?”

“Jack’s. It was all bruised up. His lip was busted and scabbing. And that was a mean bruise on his cheekbone.”

“Probably got in a fight with the mirror when he saw it was prettier than him.”

“Isis, I’m being serious!”

“So am I!”

“Look, I know you have like, amnesia about him and your feelings for him are all mixed up or whatever –”

“Feelings? What is this foreign word you speak of?”

“ – but you don’t have to be such a f**king jerk about it. He’s a person too, okay? Not just some part of your past that you can cut out and put back in whenever you want.”

The words sting, mostly because they sound too much like what Jack himself said. Kayla’s too pissed to talk to me anymore, so I spend the period doodling exploding things on my worksheet.

Wren and I have Yearbook together, so it’s the perfect time to show him. I print out the email picture and pass it to him over the computers. There’s a beat, and then;

“What is this, Isis?”

“What does it look like?” I singsong.

“Where did you get this?”

“Someone sent it to me. Over email. That’s Jack’s lovely hand, isn’t it? Holding that bloody bat, and standing over that guy who looks very much dead.”

I can see Wren’s hand on his mouse, and it’s shaking.

“What interests me wayyyy more,” I press. “Is the fact the quality is shit. Shit enough to be in a sewage pipe. Or my makeup collection. And see the way the pixels are a little off? Like they’re wavy? It’s almost like someone took a screenshot of a video –”

“What’s the email address?” Wren interrupts.

“Just random keysmash. . Nobody either of us would know just from the address. You can’t even say it. Ickwajihuk? Ikewjahooooookk?”

I hear Wren typing, and sigh.

“Trust me, I’ve already looked. Google’s got nothing. I’ve dug in fifty-two pages and a lot of backlog. Ickwajihuk doesn’t exist anywhere else on the internet.”

“Isis, listen to me,” Wren looks at me from between our computers, expression serious. “Whoever gave you that picture is dangerous. Block the address, and don’t correspond with them.”

“Why?” I laugh. “What’s he gonna do, send me an unsolicited dick pic?”

“That’s the video I took from that night,” Wren murmurs. “I gave it to the federal investigator who questioned us.”

“This fed sent me the picture?”

“He turned it over to the bureau’s vault. He died five years ago of a heart attack. So it couldn’t have been him. Whoever sent you this picture – they either work there, or hacked into it. If they work there, they aren’t good news. And if they could hack something that secure, they are really, really bad news.”

“This is ridiculous –”

“Trust me, Isis. Wipe your computer. Wipe the entire hard drive. Don’t take any chances. And don’t ask any more questions.”

“So that’s it? I’m just supposed to forget I’ve ever seen this? Sorry, I have a better memory and more self-respect than that.”

Wren sets his jaw. I lean in and whisper.

“I saw Tallie, Wren. I met her. I know where she is and who she is. And I know that’s what happened that night. Sophia lost her. And you all saw it. And you buried her together. And maybe you buried other bodies too. I don’t know. But I won’t stop until I do.”

Wren clenches his fist, and stands from the chair.

“Then you leave me no choice.”

He says something to Mrs. Greene and strides out the door. I try to follow, but Mrs. Greene harps with her shrieky voice.

“Where do you think you’re going, Blake?”

“The South Pole?”

She frowns.

“Nicaragua?”

She frowns harder.

“Okay, fine, the poop palace.”

“No. Emily left with the bathroom pass. You’ll have to wait till she gets back.”

“But what if I shit my pants? Do teacher salaries really pay enough to replace student underwear? I’m wearing very expensive underwear.”

This is a bluff. My underwear are blue and three years old. We both know I am not That Girl.

“Sit. Down. Ms. Blake.”

I cross my arms and flop in my chair with considerable grumpy pizazz.

For the first time in nearly five years, Wren walks up to me. He peeks into study hall, finds my table, and walks over, looking me in the eye as he does it, too.

This is my first indication that something has gone very wrong. He’s cowardly. He’s hesitant. And he’s carrying years of guilt on his shoulders towards me. He would never approach me this boldly unless something dire was happening.

He slides a paper across the table. It’s a print out of a picture, of a very familiar bloody baseball bat, and my hand, and a dark shape in the background I know all too well. I see it each night my brain decides to grant me a nightmare.

“Isis had this,” Wren says, voice strong but low. My lungs splinter with ice at her name, but I quell the pain and quirk a brow.

“And?”

“You know what it’s from,” he hisses. “Someone sent that to her in an email.”

“Did she say what the address was?”

“. All in lower case.”

The letters are simple to memorize. I sit back in my chair and struggle to look casual.
“Sounds like a trash-byte spammer.”

Wren leans in, now closer to me physically than we’ve ever been in five years. His green eyes are dark behind his glasses.

“I know you know more about computers than I do, or anyone in this school.”

“Correct.”

“And I know, god - the whole school knows - you like Isis.”

I have to force the chuckle, and it comes out bitter. “Really? Fascinating. I love hearing fresh gossip.”

“It’s not gossip, Jack, and it’s sure as hell not new - it’s the goddamn old truth and you and I both know it.”

He’s breathing heavily, his face flushed. He’s frustrated and flustered, not angry. Wren never gets truly angry. I give him my best glare.

“Didn’t you see her in the cafeteria? I don’t exist to her. She clearly has no concern for me. Why should I care who she’s emailing?”

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

“She’ll find out the truth about you!”

“It’s about time someone other than us did.”

“This person –” He splutters and jabs his finger at the photo. “This person is dangerous. And they’re talking to Isis. What if they hurt her?”

There’s a long silence. I scoff and look him up and down.

“I’m sorry, am I supposed to care?”

Wren’s face falls like someone’s slapped him. He grits his teeth and grabs the paper back.

“I thought you did. I guess I was wrong.”

“Yes. Now, if you could turn around and march back the way you came in, I would be exceedingly grateful.”

“I care about her!” Wren shouts suddenly. Study hall goes quiet. The librarian looks up, but Wren doesn’t seem to notice. His hair comes undone from its gel, and his glasses skew minutely. “I care about Isis! She’s done more for me than anyone, and if she gets hurt again, I swear to you –”

“You’ll what?” I laugh. “Slap me with a ruler? Sic your student council grubs on me? Oh wait, I know – you’ll call in some favors and have my pudding privileges revoked.”

And then he snaps. Wren, the coward behind the camera and my mild-mannered ex-friend of ten years, snaps.

Before I can move he's grabbed my shirt and shoved me against a bookshelf. The librarian frantically dials security and girls shriek and boys start to clamber around us in an encouraging, scattered circle.

"Come on," I smirk. "Punch me. Do it."

Wren's green eyes blaze, his muscles taut for someone who isn't in any sports clubs. I eye his fist, and just as I see it pull back, he drops me and snarls.

"No. That's exactly what you want. Someone's already ground you into pulp by the looks of it, and now you want me to do it more because you're a self-absorbed, masochistic ass**le."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I laugh. Wren nods, fast and hard.

"Yeah. I don't. I just know that before her, you were dead inside and out, walking around like a zombie. Anybody could see that. And then she came, and you lit up like a f**king candle. And we could all see that, too. Even Sophia."

"Shut your mouth," I growl.

"Is that why Isis ignores you now?" Wren laughs. "Because she realized Sophia means so much to you, and you were out here fooling around with her?"

"I never – no one ever –"

"You did!" Wren shouts. "You f**king did, Jack! She's been through more shit than any girl should go through and you got her hopes up! And then she met Sophia and

you f**king crushed them!”

“You have no –”

“How could she compete, you moron?” Wren’s voice gets louder. “Just use that huge f**king brain of yours for two seconds; you’ve given up everything for Sophia. You send her letters. You’ve been with her since middle school. You had Tallie, and she f**king knows about that, too –”

My mind goes white, a horrible keening noise starting in the back of my skull.

“She what?”

“She knows! She saw it! She went out and found it herself because she’s Isis and that’s what she does!”

Something in me plummets.

“What do we do?” I whisper, my own voice surprising me by how hoarse it is. Wren’s eyes grow brighter.

“You tell her the truth. Before this emailer does, and gets her involved deeper.”

“You forget she doesn’t acknowledge my presence anymore.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Wren says. “Just promise me you’ll tell her when I give you the opening.”

“You’ve become quite the little dictator,” I sneer.

“I’ve had it,” he clenches his fist. “With running away. Every time I do, someone’s

gotten hurt. But not this time. I won't run this time."

He turns and leaves before I can verbally cut him down to size.

I watch Isis from the parking lot, feeling every bit the stalker, but bent on studying her face in a new light. She knows what I did that night. That's why she's ignoring me. She's too smart not to put two and two together. And she knows about Tallie.

My biggest secrets are in her hands, now. Just as I've known hers for months. I've had her number for months. But I've never texted or called. Until now. My thumbs fly over the keyboard.

'We're even'.

I see her stop and pull her phone out, Kayla chatting aimlessly at her. She looks up and scans the parking lot, and our eyes meet for the briefest moment. For one second, the warm amber engulfs me, and I let it.

And then I let it go, and turn away.

Tonight is the last night.

This woman is the last woman.

She's older – the trophy wife of a lawyer, confined to a house and left to treadmill and Martha Stewart her way into being ignored by her husband, who has enough hookers and blow to far outlast a wife. They have no children. She is miserable and in shape and anxious, and the hotel room is nicer than normal, and when she's satisfied and exhausted, she starts crying.

“Thank you.”

I pull on my jeans and nod cordially.

“How – how old are you? I know I asked that in the lobby, but really, you can’t be twenty-three–”

I flash her a smile. “Over eighteen. You’re safe.”

She covers her eyes with her arm. “Oh Jesus. I practically cradle robbed.”

I think of all the women who came before her, who were deceived by the fact I’d looked twenty-one since I was fifteen. She has no idea. I grew up fast, and she has no idea.

“This is my last night,” I say as I button my shirt. “Of this job.”

“Oh? That’s good. Someone as nice as you doesn’t need to stay in this field. It ruins good people.”

And yet you still use our services. I curl my lip where she can’t see it. She showers and dresses, and I take my laptop out and sit on the bed, taking advantage of the free wifi.

“The room is yours for the night,” she says when she comes out, now in a pressed pink suit and perfectly styled red hair.

“Thanks,” I grunt. The woman – I forget her name – leans over my shoulder.

“Ooh, what are you doing? It looks fascinating –”

“I’m running seventy-two targeting executables for a free-roam IP trace.”

She gives me a blank look. I sigh.

“I’m trying to find someone.”

“Oh! Girlfriend? Ex-girlfriend?”

Tiresome. Women always jump straight to romance. I roll my eyes.

“An anonymous email sender.”

She laughs nervously. “Right, well, I’ll leave you to it. Thank you again.”

“It was a pleasure doing business with you.” I nod. It was no pleasure at all. The last time I felt honest pleasure - not sickly release - from sex was the last time Sophia and I slept together. And that was nearly a year and a half ago.

I wait until the door clicks shut behind the woman to pull up the trace results. I parse them down twice – once using the email address name, and once using Isis’ email address. Which I also happen to have. She didn’t exactly hide it when she put up posters around the school asking for people to contact her with dirty information bits about me.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

‘She knows about Tallie.’

I shake Wren’s words out of my head and work quickly. I’m by no means gifted at computer hacking – if you could even call it that – but I know my way around a program or two. Ruby and C++ are far easier languages than any drivel humans speak.

After fifteen minutes of process parsing, I’m left with a hundred and thirty-seven possible IP addresses the email could have originated from. I could go through them all one by one, but there has to be some connecting factor. And that factor is no doubt Isis. Why her? I check Maryland, and Washington D.C. There are two IPs there, but none of them from the federal bureau where the investigators have the tape. The tape Wren gave to them behind my back.

I’m not mad about it. I was at first. But then I learned the tape was badly damaged, and video imaging technology back then wasn’t the best. And with no physical evidence, the police declared Joseph Hernandez missing. The other three were conveniently paid off by Avery’s parents, and never spoke a word of what happened.

That reminds me - Belina will be needing the check sometime soon. I’d give it to Wren, but this was the last lump sum I’d have for a while. Of course, I’d invested a small amount in a hedge fund so she wouldn’t be completely cut off when I went off to college, but she’d quickly run out in a year or two. Hopefully, by my second year, I’ll have an internship that pays well. No, I have to have one. It’s the only option.

By then, Sophia’s surgery will be over.

And she will either be dead or alive.

I press my fingers to my temple and try to focus. The majority of the IP address near-matches are located in Florida. I narrow my eyes. Florida is where Isis used to live. That can't be a coincidence.

But there's one IP address that bucks the norm, way out in Dubai. The rest are in America. Whoever this person is, they clearly know how to access information that isn't theirs. They're good. Rerouting their IP through proxy servers to Dubai would throw anyone looking for an American off the trail. Unless they kept their IP in Florida, purposefully, knowing something like Dubai would stick out like a sore thumb. Basically, every one of these dots is suspect.

I sigh and pick up the phone to order room service. It's going to be a long night.

Between coffee and eggrolls at one a.m, I get a text. From someone in my phone I've labeled 'Never'. I ignore the palpitation in my lungs at the sight of that name on my phone.

'What would you do if everyone hated you?'

I pause and consider my answer carefully. Everyone has hated me at some point. Women, because I turn them down. Men, because I turn the women they love down.

'I would ignore them.'

I try not to stare at my phone, waiting. I have work to do. But I slog through it reluctantly until her answer comes, ten minutes later.

'That's what I'm doing. But I don't like it much.'

‘Then stop doing it. Do what you like, not what you don’t.’

‘But what I like hurts people. I get in the way. I mess things up.’

‘Sometimes people need to be messed up. It reminds them life is short.’

There’s a long silence. Just as I start regretting what I said, my phone lights up again.

‘She would have been a very pretty baby.’

My eyes sting. The cold numbness of the woman I’d f**ked earlier and the single-minded focus on finding the mystery emailer melts. Just like that; with a single sentence.

‘Thank you.’

-9-

3 Years

29 Weeks

6 Days

The dark trees loom like massive sticks of cinnamon. Lake Galonagah at midnight looks like a sheet of glazed black sugar. The moon resembles a perfectly white round of brie cheese.

I am lost as hell. Also, hungry. But that’s nothing new. I am hungry approximately 364 days of the year. The one day I am not hungry is Hitler’s birthday. And also the day after Thanksgiving. Thankfully these two days are not on top of each other,

otherwise we would've named it 'ThankgodHitlerkickedthebucketbackinthe40's' and that assuredly does not carry the same ring capitalist America likes so much for their holidays.

In my vast and strenuous consideration of the importance of holiday cheer, I manage to get myself even more lost. Contrary to popular belief, flashlights don't contribute all that much to awesomeness other than being a cool thing you can use to put on a makeshift rave. I rave alone for two whole seconds and since it is horrible and quiet I give up immediately and sit down. On a skunk's home. The great brute is understandably displeased, and pokes his butt out just in time for my ankle to get completely soaked by hellacious spray.

"Oh holy –" I gag and cover my nose with my hoodie sleeve. "You knave! Hear ye, hear ye, this stripey beast of yonder wood is an ASSHOLE! Oh Christ this is never going to come out, is it?"

The skunk admires his work for a split-second before taking off. I shake my fist at it impotently. I can't mess around with the local bitchy wildlife. I have to find Tallie again. The forest in the day is way different from the forest in the dead of the night, and when I hear a crow caw hoarsely I start to regret my decision to wander onto the apparent set of The Blair Witch Project. But I stick to the cliffside, careful to always know where the edge is, and follow it around.

Finally, the white cross peeks out of the trees, and I dash to it. The dirt's still soft where I dug it up and put it back, and I dig it up for the second time. Graverobbing isn't my ideal job, but I'm getting pretty freakin' good at it. Not that anyone needs to know that. Ever.

"Hey, Tallie," I say in a low voice. "I'm back."

The little pink bundle is dirty. I brush the mud off, and pick pine needles off it. Tallie

looks up at me with her empty eyes. They'd be blue, since Sophia has blue eyes and so does Jack. I bet they'd be stunning, like lapis lazuli, or the ocean on a summer day. And she would've been beautiful – with Sophia's hair, and Jack's height and face. I smile and open the bundle and grasp the bracelet with her name on it.

"Is it okay if I take this with me?"

Tallie lies there, and I nod and take it, the silver flashing in the moonlight. I close the bundle back up and rebury it for what I hope will be the last time.

"I'll come visit," I say. "I'll bring you a toy, okay? I know where to get all the good ones."

"Hey! This way!"

Someone's voice cuts through the night, and the forest rustles with newcomers. Footsteps, heavy and deep, reverberate through the ground. Lots of them. Lots of potential serial killers ready to chop my head off with a fire axe. Or it's Avery's parents. Either way, I'm f**ked. I duck behind a rotting log and hold my breath. I can barely hear their words; they're a good distance away, but close enough.

"Find anything?"

"No, sir. Are you certain this is the place?"

"Of course. My source is reliable. Keep searching. We need that evidence."

Evidence? My foolhardy marvelous curiosity gets the better of me, and I peek over the log. A man in an impeccable tweed suit stands with two other men in dark, matching suits. The man in tweed is so tall, and broad-shouldered. His hair is a shocking white, and he has an old-white-guy-in-charge aura about him that makes me

instantly dislike him. Not Avery's dad – I've seen him at open house. And he's rich, but not rich like this guy – Rolex watch, Italian leather shoes, and anybody who runs around with two guys in suits taking orders from them is rich enough to have a lot of enemies.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

“Sir, if you don’t mind me asking – is Jack Hunter really worth all this trouble? He’s just a high school student,” One of the suits asks. Tweed-guy sighs.

“Yes. He’s in high school. But he’s four months away from college. It’s just a matter of time before the Harvard scouts sniff his brilliance out, and I intend to recruit it before them. I won’t let Aramon take this one from me. He’s too smart, too ruthless, and too perfect. He is the future of my company. Now, get back to searching. The body has to be here somewhere. Look for a badly-dug grave, six by two feet.”

Body. They aren’t talking about Tallie’s body. They’re after a full-grown, adult body. How do they know about that night? How are they so sure it’s buried here at all? And who the heckle is Tweed-guy’s source?

I move my leg because it's cramping, and it's the last thing I ever do. Theoretically. In the alternate reality where they have guns. But they don't. All they have are ears. Which is slightly problematic.

"What the hell was that?" One of the suits looks up.

"Deer?" The other offers.

"No deer here," Tweed-guy says. "Moriyama, check over there."

A suit starts moving towards me, his back hunched and his fists clenched. Saying I don't wanna get caught by these guys is like saying being on fire is a mild discomfort. My heart throbs in my ears. I scramble for a rock and chuck it to the left of me. The suit freezes, and starts gravitating towards the noise, and I move in the opposite

direction around the log, slowly.

And then something fuzzy scampers over my leg, and, unable to contain my fabulous voice, I yelp. Or sing an opera. I can't be sure, because all of a sudden there's chaos, and I'm running, and someone's running after me, and the Tweed-guy is shouting, and a hand grasps my hair and I stop dead in my tracks and duck, and he goes soaring over my head down the hill, a chunk of hair in his hand.

"Thanks for ruining the do, doo-doo!" I scream. My gloating's short-lived, as the other suit catches up with me and puts his arms around my torso, pinning my own arms to my side.

"Fuck you! Unhand me at once!"

"Don't think so, princess." He struggles to contain my flailing. I switch up my voice to make it sweet.

"Please let go of me. Your future children will thank you."

"What?"

I take his moment of confusion and dig my heel into his crotch. He lets out a strangled moan and collapses, and I tear away and slide down the hill. My car isn't far down the trail. Air burns like cold flame as it goes down. My legs want to collapse and never work again. It's not fear. Okay, it's a little bit of fear. But like, 15%. 60% is elation at what a fantastic ninja I'd make, and the last 25% is my mind screaming at me to let Jack know about these f**kers. Platonically. We'd texted earlier and I said some dumb shit about Tallie, but he didn't seem mad. Hopefully my luck sticks long enough. Hopefully my stupid newfound butthead fear of him keeps it's voice down.

Finally the trail gives way to the parking lot, and I scramble into my lime-green

Beatle. Don't let me down baby. It coughs and sputters as it starts, and I glance wildly back at the trail entrance. "C'mon, c'mon, now is not the time to fart out on me! Pick another time! Like, you know, when I'm not running for my life from mysterious gangsters with thousand-dollar suits and tiny nuts!"

The engine roars to life, and I do the greatest u-turn in Ohio. Which is saying a lot, because everyone here drives like they just got their license and are celebrating with six beers.

I pull over only when there are ten miles between me and Lake Galonagah, and fourteen McDonald's to choose from. They'll never find me. Unless they saw my car in the parking lot and are looking for it now, which is likely. I consider a midnight paintjob. Maybe I could just, I dunno, bathe it in the blood of my enemies really quick and turn it red? Avery doesn't have enough blood, though, and I feel kind of sorry for her, and the only other people I really hate are the people chasing me, and they are not an option because they are chasing me, and -

"Did you want ketchup with that?"

I look up, the cashier handing me my order of fries. Just fries. An entire bag of fries.

"Ketchup is the great illusion. Only when you put barbeque sauce on your fries will you know truth and freedom," I chastise.

He looks appropriately enlightened. I head to the nearest, least-greasy table and inhale my kill. When my writhing stomach is appeased slightly, I text Jack.

"I need to talk to you. In person. Right now."

His response is nigh-instantaneous.

"What happened? Is something wrong?"

"I don't wanna talk about it over text. Where are you?"

"Come to the Hilton, on first and broadview street. I'll meet you in the lobby."

I grab my bag of fries and head out. I shouldn't be scared. I shouldn't be feeling nervous. I told him off but I'm the dragon, and he's just a prince, and I breathe fire and I meddled and hurt the people he loves, and him, but I'm still the dragon, and I can fly away if I need to. I'll be fine. I am always fine. I survived Nameless. I survived Leo. I can survive this. I'm fine. I'm fine.

I find a parking space four blocks away. The Hilton is small compared to the one in Columbus, but it's fancy - fresh orchids and a fountain in the marble-floor lobby. The concierge smiles at me. Jack is waiting, sitting in a leather chair with too-perfect posture and a lazy flannel shirt and jeans. He's on edge. The second I walk through the doors he bolts up and walks over.

"What happened?" He demands. "Are you alright?"

"I won a million d-dollars," I say. I can't look at his face for some reason. Shame. Shame and guilt, probably.

"You're shaking like a leaf. Come. It's warmer in the room."

"No - I -" I pull away. "I just, I just want to tell you something, and then I'll leave. I don't want to - I don't want to -"

"Be in the same room as me?" His voice is low.

"Just...don't be nice to me. I'd appreciate it if you'd just momentarily forget I've been pretending you don't exist for the last few weeks long enough for me to tell you this. Just like, develop amnesia. Wait, shit. Don't. I've been there. It's terrible. Also, there's a lot of jello involved."

"Isis -"

"There's someone digging around in your past. Other than me, I mean. I saw them at the lake."

Jack's eyes narrow.

"I'm sorry, I went to see Tallie again, because Sophia - she asked me to, and -"

He starts walking away, to the elevator.

"Hey! Wait! I'm not done talking to you!"

"Get in."

"Uh, no? Have you not seen The Grudge? Getting in elevators after dark is asking for the voodooos."

"You either get in this elevator and come back with me to the room, or you leave."

I puff my cheeks out and agonize for four whole seconds.

"Fine! But I'm leaving right after!"

"I'll kick you out promptly," He promises. Somehow, it makes me feel better, but in a weird twingy-gut way. The doors close and he hits the button for floor eleven. There

are approximately thirty seconds of us standing together in a closed space. He smells like mint and sweat in the best way. I mash myself into the farthest corner and think about how much he and Sophia like each other and it works, keeps my head above the swirling memories lurking just beneath the surface of that smell. The elevator opens and he leads me to room 1106. It's not a big room, but it's beautiful, and the queen bed is disheveled in a way only sex can dishevel things. Not that I'd know. But it's messy, and sex is messy, all those fluids, and I really have to stop thinking about sex while I'm facing down my nemesis, who I incidentally do not like in any way, I am just concerned about various creepy suited men in my neighborhood because I am a good Samaritan, that's all -

Page 36

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

"Stop thinking out loud," Jack takes his shoes off.

"I am overwhelmed," I say. "By certain recent events."

"You were thinking outloud. About sex. Has it been a recent event for you? Congratulations. Who's the lucky man?"

"Sea slug," I correct, and sit on a chair. Warily.

"I was trying to be nice."

"Don't. You suck at it."

Jack's lips quirk in the shadow of a smirk, but it's gone quickly.

"Did you cut yourself?"

I follow his finger pointing to my jeans. A massive tear along the thighs shows an angry red cut, the blood staining the fabric around it.

"Aw, man! These were my favorite jeans! I saw Amelie in these!"

"I'd be a little more concerned about the gaping wound in your flesh," He snarls.

"Well, that's your deal. Personally, I'm okay with blood. Happens every month. Also you should stop rolling your eyes that much because I read somewhere that really hurts your eyesight and you wouldn't exactly be as aloof and enigmatic if you're

running into walls all the time now, would you?"

"Get in the shower."

"No! What is this, Jersey Shore? You get in the shower!"

"You smell like skunk. And you're bleeding. You need a shower."

"There was quite a big skunk. But really this will only take two seconds and then I'll be out of your duckbutt hair, so listen up -"

"No." He crosses his arms over his chest. "Unfortunately, my powers of immense concentration are compromised by the stench of wildlife and the sight of blood. Take. A. Shower. There are towels, and a robe, and I'll have room service wash and dry your things."

"You're being nice, dude. It's sickening. The color does not match your eyes. Zero out of ten would not buy that nicey-nice makeup again."

"I'm being practical. I have work to do that's important, anyway. I'll have finished by the time you come out, and I'll be able to devote my full attention to your apparent chaotic experience involving my past. Now go."

"Oh, I hate you so much."

"Good. I prefer it to the silence."

He turns to the laptop on the bed and types away, lost in it. The guilt ironizes, clamping down on my chest. I move mechanically into the bathroom, and wince as I peel my muddy jeans and jacket off. I'll have bruises for millennia. Thanks, small-nuts. The knock on the door makes me jump into the ceiling.

"Give me your clothes," Jack says.

"Thanks, thanks a lot. Now I have a light bulb for a head."

"What are you babbling about? Just give me your clothes."

"Go away! I'll drop them on the floor! I can't risk your cooties infecting me!"

"Fine. Just hurry up."

"You hurry up," I grumble wittily. The truth is my heart is pounding. Everything in me is pounding, bashing against my skeleton and skin to escape and slink away like a fleshy, independent meatbag. I'm naked. I'm naked and a boy is within ten feet of me and I am panicking, but I don't let it leak through anywhere, not in my voice, not in my choice of words, because panic is normal, panic is what I'll always do when I'm naked and a boy is around, and I'm shaking suddenly as I open the door when I'm sure he's gone, and I drop the clothes on the floor and lock it behind me.

My underwear is stupid. It's pink with a panda on it. He'll think I'm a kid. He'll think I'm immature -

'Stupid little girl. You're ugly. Do you think anyone on this planet would want to go out with a fat, ugly girl like you?'

The hot water is a luxurious relief, and helps with the shaking, and the fancy shampoo and soap smells like milky almonds. The adrenaline of my escape winds down, and when I exit and tie the robe around myself I feel like a new person. A person who's not-me. And that'd be nice right now. Any other girl wouldn't shake. Any other girl wouldn't be panicking that I have to walk out there in only a robe. There's another knock on the door.

"What?" I snap.

"I've got clothes for you. They aren't yours, but they're better than a robe. And there's a box of bandaids."

"Just drop them outside."

I peek out and pull them in quick. It's a soft skirt, long and shimmery and black, and a white dress shirt. The shirt is obviously Jack's - it smells like him. And there's a pink lip imprint on the collar. I roll my eyes. No wonder he has a lady's skirt on him, and he's holed up in the Hilton. I put a band-aid on my cut and walk out of the bathroom.

"Just got done working, huh?" I ask. He looks up from the laptop briefly, pauses as his eyes find the shirt and skirt, and nods.

"Yes. For the last time."

"You mean - your last appointment? Ever?"

He nods.

"That's great!" I clap my hands. "Jesus that's - that's really great. Congratulations on not being a sex-slave anymore!"

He curls his lip. "Oh, be quiet."

"How's it feel? To be free and all?"

"It's riotous fun," he deadpans.

"Ah! You're distracting me!" I point at him. "Listen, some guys were looking around

the woods where Tallie is. I overheard them talking, and they were looking for a body. Not Tallie's. An adult's body."

Jack closes the laptop. "What did they look like?"

"Two guys in black suits, lackeys obviously, and one huge guy in a tweed suit. He had like, white hair and a really buttheaded presence, like he owned the place. Super rich watch. Super rich in general."

"Did he say who he was? Any hint at all?"

"No. Just that you were going off to Harvard and he wanted to recruit you for his company before all the other scouts. And he called you brilliant and ruthless and some other such nonsense but I forget most of everything after that because I always tend to start zoning out when people start complimenting you."

"What happened after you overheard them?"

"Well, they overheard me. Specifically, my feet on the noisy ground. So I ran. Threw one guy down a hill and kicked the other in the balls. Not a bad night, if I may say so myself."

"And you just...got in your car and came here right after?"

I hold up the faintly warm bag of fries. "Refueled."

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Damnit."

"Something wrong? I mean, other than the corporate dudes after your neck? Protect your neck, by the way. That's a Wu-Tang song. Also it's a mildly good neck. I've stared at it many times while considering choking it."

He chuckles. I cross my arms over my chest.

"What's so funny?"

He shakes his head, a bit of his stupid hair glancing across his stupid eyes. His bruises are faint, but still there, like inky imprints of a harder time.

"It's nice. Having the old you back."

"Oh."

"I missed it," he continues. His eyes are softer, but all at once they become hard.
"Nevermind. Forget I said that."

There's a silence, and suddenly I'm blindsided by a headache. It throbs, sending lances of white-hot electricity up and down my spine. It's the same pain I felt in Mernich's office. Shit, shit shit. Not now, brain, not now -

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

I've worn his shirt before. The smell is the same. He gave it to me to wear for bed, because my Halloween costume was too tight, and I was drunk, and the room had pictures of the sea on it and smelled like lavender, and I was happy, for a few seconds he was leaning over me and kissing me and I was happy. Reality and my memories blur together. I'm in the hotel room but I'm in the seashore room all at once. The shirt is soft. The smell of him is the same. Except the Jack now is sitting at his computer, staring at me with concerned eyes, and the Jack of the past is leaning over me, his lips on every part of my neck, my collarbone, my mouth and the corner of my mouth, and -

"Isis, are you alright?" Hotel-Jack asks. "Forget what I said. I'm trying to let the past go. Sometimes it's difficult, and I say ridiculous things. You're not a part of my life anymore, just like you wanted. I've blocked you off. I promise."

'I like you.'

Something painful and monstrous opens up in my chest, like a massive, shadowy venus flytrap. The two me's reach for his hand at the same time.

"I remember," I whisper. His fingers are long and delicate, but I can feel the strength in them. "I remember the Halloween party. I said I liked you. You - You kissed me. We - "

Sophia's words reverberate in my head.

'That's why he kissed you. That's why he even bothered getting to know you. Because you're exactly like me. Hopeless like me.'

I drop his hand like it's burned me.

"I'm sorry. Shit - I'm sorry."

"For what?" Jack murmurs.

"I'm assuming things! My memories are back but I know the full story, now, too, so I'm sorry for even bringing it up!"

"Your memories are back?" His voice is strangled, but he clears it. "That's - that's good. You don't have to be sorry for -"

"I just mean that wasn't - obviously that night wasn't a real, uh, kiss thing. I mean, we were both pretty drunk! You didn't really mean it, you were just being weirdly nice like you sometimes are once in a blue-ass moon, and I was super drunk, so when I said I liked you I just meant as a nemesis, you know? As a friend I could fight with verbally and stuff! Yeah. I really did like you. As a nemesis. Man, fighting you was fun!"

I laugh, but it sounds hollow even to my own ears.

"And, you know. I remind you of Sophia. We are kind of similar, deep down, so it makes sense you'd get confused and kiss me! Totally cool. Totally understandable. Man, I'm just sorry I drunkenly forced myself on you like that, and then did a total 180 and got scared like a little bitch. Like, wow, nobody deserves that ever, you feel me? I'm really sorry you had to go through that."

I've wanted to hold her for months. It's a need I've tamped down, a carefully-controlled fire kept locked in the center of an iceberg. And she's unknowingly tested

me, over and over; she's prodded and poked and sometimes taken a chainsaw to the ice, but she's never gotten through because I am Jack Hunter, and I am in control of myself at all times.

Except that one time, in the seashore room. The time she thinks was false. The time she is heaping piles of guilt on herself for. Guilt that's coming from her past, and from Will Cavanaugh. If I don't stop this now, she'll hurt herself with it. The cycle of Will's damage will only dig its thorns deeper into her.

"I don't want to scare you," I say finally. She looks up, warm cinnamon eyes surprised.

"What?"

"I don't want to hurt you. And I don't want to make you uncomfortable - "

"Um -"

" - but you are nothing like Sophia. You are Isis Blake - stubborn and ridiculous and kind and strong. You are exactly you. And that's why I kissed you that night - because I wanted to kiss Isis Blake. And I did. And it was hasty of me, and uncalled for. You had every right to stop, and every right to pull away. You were afraid, and I exacerbated that fear by trying to kiss you, and it is my fault. Not yours."

Her face goes blank with shock, and she's silent for once in her life.

"Yes, we were drunk," I continue. "You were, more specifically, and I was a little. So I'm the one who should have known better, and I apologize. I went too far, too fast. I was excited," I chuckle darkly. "For once in my life, I was excited. It's no excuse, but I hope it helps you understand my actions that night."

Her shell-shocked expression doesn't change.

"I'm sorry," I smile. "It won't happen again."

She doesn't say anything. I have to break the tension. I get up and stretch, cracking my neck and wrists.

"You should go. It's getting late, and I'm sure you're tired. You need to get some rest. Thank you for telling me about the men. I'll look into them -"

Something crashes into me from behind, and it takes me a second to realize it's her, wrapping her arms around my stomach and pulling my spine to rest against her chest. She buries her face in my back.

"I want it," she whispers. "I...I want it to h-happen again."

The web of anxiety in me snaps, thread by thread, and every muscle in my body relaxes. It is relief, pure and bright, coursing through me. I'm not the only one who wants it. I am not the only one, and my skin warms and my breathing comes easier as that knowledge sinks in with each passing second of silence. What she said that night in the seashore room wasn't just a drunk babble. She likes me. And I soak in that realization for as long as I can, before she rubs her face against my shirt like an animal, something wild and used to marking others with its scent.

"I want to show you something," she says.

"Alright." I keep my voice carefully even and low.

She puts her arms out on either side of me, and pulls up the shirt on her right arm. She's always, always kept that arm covered. She's never worn short sleeved t-shirts, and even when I saw her in that blouse, she kept the sleeve carefully covering it and

her arm faced downward. It's almost a reflex with her, to keep the arm out of sight.

My breath catches.

There, on the delicate underside of her wrist, are the marks. Round, puckered white scars. Dozens of them. They molt her skin, the pockmarks overlapping like a dappled pond. Cigarette burns.

"How -" I stop myself, even though I know the answer already. "I'm sorry. It's not my place to ask."

Her arms tremble as she speaks. "Nameless."

I close my eyes. Hearing the confirmation from her is more infuriating, more heartbreaking than any conclusion I reached on my own.

"It's ugly, I know," she laughs shakily. "Sorry, I didn't mean to gross you out -"

I turn and lace my arms around her, careful not to put too much pressure or squeeze tight to the point she'd feel trapped. Her mouth against my chest makes me shiver, but I suppress it at the last second. I can see her scar on the top of her still-wet head. She smells like almonds and forest pine.

"There is nothing about it that is ugly," I say. "May I?"

She hesitates, and nods. I reach around and bring her wrist up, gently running my fingers over the marks. The raised ridges are rough, but in other parts, silky. I trace around each circle with my thumb.

"It looks like a galaxy," I say. "Full of stars and supernovas and conductive cryogeysers and a lot of wonderful science things I could go on to list that would

probably bore the hell out of you."

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

She laughs, the sound vibrating in my ribs.

"I have another one." She gestures to her head. "It's not as ugly, but it's a lot bigger. Just call me Scarface. Head. Cranium. ScarCranium is definitely a Swedish death metal band."

I lean in and kiss the top of her head, the scar smooth under my lips.

"We'll have to listen to them someday," I say. She makes a sound halfway between a squeak and a sigh. "Something wrong?"

"N-No. Just...having someone - kiss - um - having someone...doing that - um -"

"You don't like it?"

"No! I - I do. It's really - um, just really, it's nice. It feels nice. Um." She buries her face in my shirt like she's trying to disappear, but I can see the red flush creeping up her forehead.

I feel like I'm melting. My insides are warm, and I'm all weirdly relaxed. And I don't ever want it to stop.

I feel safe.

For the first time in a long time, I feel really, really safe. Like nothing can get to me.

Like, for once, Nameless can't reach his fingers in and get to me through my memories.

"I was scared," I murmur. "When I was running from those guys. And I'm scared they saw my car."

"You can stay here, if you want," Jack offers. "I can take the couch."

"That'd be rad."

"Alright. I've got work to finish, but feel free to take the bed." He grabs his laptop and sits on the couch. I'm almost sorry for the loss of his warmth, but then I remember he's a nerd. I spot the empty plate of what looks like soy sauce, and my stomach makes a noise like a dying cow. Jack raises an eyebrow, smirking.

"Hungry? Or is that one of the lovely noises your brain makes as it tries so very hard to think?"

"Shut up," I flush. "I've got my fries."

"Those are embalming you from the inside out," he says, and picks up the phone. "Let's get something that doesn't survive radioactive deterioration, shall we?"

I dive under the blankets and try not to think about the fact Jack had sex with some old lady in them. They smell more like him than her, so that's something. And it's so fluffy I might as well be lying on my own flabby belly.

"Hello, yes, this is for Room 1106. I'd like the salmon parmesan, with the spinach salad, and an order of the crème brulee. Yes. Yes, thank you."

When he hangs up, I raise an eyebrow.

“Yeah? Suddenly rolling in cash?”

“My final client is paying for the room. We could order a dozen lobsters and she’d have to pay it.”

“Ah, the perks of sex-work.” I flop into the pillows. He doesn’t answer, absorbed in his laptop. “Hey, who was that tweed-guy, anyway?”

Jack shrugs. “Going by your description, I think I’ve met him.”

“Oh yeah? Where, at a g*y club?”

“A bar. Where he beat the shit out of me.”

“That’s where you got the beaten-hamburger look?”

Jack nods. “He’s good. Trained, probably. Karate, if I had to guess by his forms and strikes.”

“And you’re just trained in bat, right? Not the billionaire playboy vigilante kind, but the baseball kind.”

“I took taekwondo until high school. He’s much better than me.”

“Someone sent me a picture,” I say. “Of your hand on a baseball bat, and a body –”

“I know. Wren told me about it. More accurately, he screamed it at me. In the library.”

“Wren? Screaming? C’mon, lying isn’t funny. Except when it is.”

“He was very worked up,” Jack ignores me. “Agitated. He’s a lot of things, and we have a complicated history, but he’s surprisingly loyal to the people he considers friends. Not that it mattered when he turned tail and ran that night, but still. It’s the thought now that counts. Reform and second chances and all that drivel.”

“You killed someone,” I say. There’s no fear behind it, now. I’ve shown him my scar, and he didn’t flinch. So if he says yes, I won’t flinch, either. His icy eyes flick up. There’s a long, languid silence in which I’m sure he can hear my thunderous, anticipating heartbeat from ten feet away.

“They staggered off the lakeside cliff to get away from me. I didn’t touch them, but I might as well have killed them. The other three recovered from their injuries.”

The months of pressure the mystery pushed on me lifts all at once. I feel like I can finally breathe again. He’s telling the truth – the guilt in his eyes is obvious. If it was a lie, they’d be clear.

He walked off the cliff. Jack didn’t kill anyone. Not really. But I’m sure he thinks otherwise.

“What...what about the body?”

Jack glares at me. “You’re not concerned? I killed someone. I’m a murderer, Isis.”

“You were defending Sophia. Just like you defended my mom and I from Leo. That’s what you do. You protect people.”

He opens his mouth, then closes it, and stares at the floor.

“Look,” I start. “I’ve done some things I’m not proud of. I know what it feels like to want to kill someone. I really do. I was going to try to kill Leo, when my mom first

told me about what happened with her and him. I had it all planned out – I’d drug him with chloroform, and if that didn’t kill him, I’d slice his dick off with a butcher knife, and then his fingers, and then his throat. I dreamed about it sometimes. I wanted it more than anything. I wanted to make him pay for what he did to her.”

Jack looks up at me. I shrug.

“So yeah. I know what it’s like.”

There’s something like gratitude that flickers behind his eyes.

“So c’mon,” I press. “What about the body?”

“You haven’t told me some things. I can’t tell you some things. That’s how it works.”

“Fine. Fine. That’s fair. So the guy in the tweed wants to know where you dumped the body. But why?”

“Because he wants dirt on me,” Jack says slowly. “Blackmail. To, presumably, join his corporation.”

“Because you’re the perfect businessman already.”

“Because I am perfect, period.” He smirks. I throw the extra pillow and it graciously arcs over his laptop and hits him smack in the face.

“Thanks, physics!” I thumb up no one. Jack belligerently coughs out a feather and keeps typing.

“Wow, you’re super dedicated to that computery thing over there. Wow. I can’t stop saying wow.”

“Stop saying wow.”

“What are you wowing? I mean, doing?”

“Tracing the email address that sent you that picture.”

“Oh. Then what? What happens after you find him?”

“Then I blow him up,” Jack growls.

I raise an eyebrow.

“Crash his hard-drive,” He corrects.

“Slightly more legal,” I agree. “Alas, not as fun.”

The food comes, and the maid wheels it in and leaves after Jack gives her a tip, and I inhale everything little thing on the tray in less than five minutes.

“Jesus, woman, you’re going to choke.”

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

“Worth it!” I chirp, and slurp crème brulee. I start coughing massively.

“Choke quietly,” He turns back to the laptop, and mutters to himself. “There. Finally. This guy is ridiculously good. But if I run the byte scan, I can –”

He goes still, like a deer hearing a gun cock.

“I’m...dying...” I remind him from the general vicinity of the floor.

“The IP traces back to Good Falls, Florida. Your hometown,” He says. “Someone from your hometown sent you this. It has to be someone you know. Who do you know from back then that’s good at computers?”

My heart stutters, and I stop pretending to die and start actually dying.

“Isis? What’s wrong?”

I stare up at the hotel ceiling, debating how many steps it’d take for me to get to the toilet. I don’t wanna throw up on Jack again, no matter how marvelous the last time was. Jack’s face looms over my vision.

“Isis? You’re pale –”

“Him,” I say softly. “He won the state hacking championship for the middle school division every year.”

“Who?”

I thought he'd left me alone. I never thought the email could be him. An almost-year of silence convinced me I was free.

I grit my teeth and put my hands over my eyes, like it'll block out the darkness. I knew the safety wouldn't last long. It never does. The darkness always finds a way in, just like it has now.

"Nameless."

-9-

3 Years

30 Weeks

0 Days

Jack tries to convince me he'll do everything he can to block Nameless from contacting me again. But I know it won't work. Jack's good, but Nameless is much, much better. He always has been.

If Nameless can get access to a video in a federal vault, then he can get to me. If he knows about the video, he knows about Jack, probably through Wren. Not that Wren would ever tell him purposefully. Maybe he let it slip. Or maybe Nameless just tracked me all the way here, and somehow found out about Jack through the school's computers. People talked about our war on the beat-up old Macs in the computer lab, I'm sure. Or maybe –

My stomach sinks, and the wonderful crème brulee taste goes sour in my mouth.

Maybe Nameless has had my email hacked all along, and he read my emails to Kayla

about Jack.

“Wipe your old hard drive, just in case,” Jack says. “Get a new email address, and change the passwords on everything.”

“He’ll just break in again.”

“He won’t,” Jack says sternly. “He won’t. I won’t let that happen.”

“He’s been watching me this whole time,” I laugh. “I was so stupid. I thought I got away from him for good.”

“You will. You can. You just can’t give up. Work with me, okay? We’ll fix this together.”

“It’s no good,” I roll over. “He’s gonna torment me for my entire life. He’s always gonna be here, just like this stupid – this stupid f**king scar –”

I wrap it in the sheet so I don’t have to look at it. Jack walks over and unwraps it, pulling it to his lips.

“Listen to me, Isis. He won’t be with you forever. Someday, you’ll force him to leave, and he will, and you’ll be happier for it. The memories won’t go away, but they’ll become less clear as you make more.”

I flinch. His eyes don’t leave mine.

“I want to help you make more, if that’s alright with you.”

“What about...Sophia?”

“She’ll always be a part of my life, and I’ll always support her. But I know now who I want. The truth is here, right now, staring me in the face and sitting on a hotel bed, wearing my shirt and looking ridiculously cute.”

My face heats like a brushfire. Jack stands.

“Let’s get some sleep. We can worry uselessly tomorrow.”

I nod. He turns out the light and takes a spare blanket from the closet, draping it over the couch and laying on it. I snuggle under the blankets and try not to feel guilty. I can’t fall asleep at all. It’s a repeat of what happened at Avery’s house, but this time, I’m not drunk, and I’m not as scared. It’s just the darkness, ebbing away at me. Nameless feels like he’s everywhere. And I’d give anything, do anything, to chase him away and feel safe again.

“It’s cold,” I say. I hear Jack roll over.

“Do you want another blanket?”

“No, um.” I swallow. This is the hardest thing I’ve ever done, second only to my first-grade spelling bee in which I spelled ‘fabulous’ wrong, and third to when I had my first period ever and bled through my pants and on the metal foldout chair during band class and had to attach the chair to my bottom as I walked to the bathroom so no one would see the damage. I gained a whole new respect for crabs and their walking style. Shit’s straight difficult.

“Can you –” I try to raise my voice, but it cracks. “Can you – please – I’m usually not this bad at talking,” I laugh. “This is so stupid. I’m sorry. Nevermind.”

I roll over and pull the blankets over my head so he won’t hear me whispering curses at myself. But then I feel a weight on the other side of the bed, and my lungs rapidly

decide they want to burst. Jack's voice is close.

"This?"

I pull the blankets off my head and nod, too furiously. Too eagerly. Jack laughs, low and soft. With my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I see him roll over and face away from me, pulling the blanket over him. His legs are just a few feet to the left, his back even closer. I'm shaking, but I pray to whatever god is listening that he can't feel that through the bed. I don't want him to get the wrong idea; that I'm afraid, and then leave. I am afraid - a deep-down, rock-solid fear burned into me by Nameless - but I'm not scared. I'm not shallowly breathing or panicky or jumping at every little thing. And that makes all the difference. It's not chaotic fear – it's orderly, and I know the causes for it. I can control it.

I reach out, slowly, and put my hand on his back. I feel his muscles tense under my fingers. When he doesn't say anything, or move, I lean in and press my weight against him. He's warm, warmer than a blanket. There's a long pause as our breathing moves in and out of each other's rhythm. And then finally, he speaks.

"You're the most confusing girl I've ever met."

"Yeah." I smile. "Not sorry."

"Good."

The sun barges in and sits its butt on my eyes and the world is ending and I'm blind and everything is over. And then I roll over and see Jack's face on the pillow and then everything is really over. Permanently. Because my universe explodes.

I make small screeching noises under my breath as I try to remember how I got here, in the hotel room. It all floods back at once and I'm more than a little mad at myself for giving in and staying here without a fight. Jack cracks one sleepy blue eye open. He runs his fingers through my hair idly as he groans.

“Who gave you permission to be conscious before six, and how can I end them?”

“Why are you touching me?” I whisper. “Is it really that fun? Because most people say it feels squishy and gross.”

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

He laughs and puts his hands over his eyes, stretching like a freshly woken cat who likes to arch its back.

“What do you want for breakfast? I can run out and get something, or we can call in. Check-out isn’t until one.”

“There was a café I saw on my way in last night. Looked really swanky and smelled permanently like bacon. You should go there. While I sneak out the window.”

“I think we should go together.”

“But I like you so much more when you are a generally enormous distance away from me.”

He rolls over and sits on his elbows, playing with a strand of my purple hair.

“That’s an incredibly contradictory statement considering what you did last night.”

“I touched your back! Stop making it sound sexual!” I gasp. “Did I just say sexual? Out loud? Without stuttering? Praise Jesus. Wait, does Jesus like people having sex? I keep forgetting who likes what.”

“I like you,” Jack murmurs. I elegantly fall off the bed. There’s a silence, and then I peek my head over the mattress and raise my hand.

“Uh, hello? Me here. I would preferably not like to be given a heart attack before I reach legal drinking age.”

“Did that really surprise you that bad?” Jack smirks. He pauses. “I like you.”

“Ah!” I put my arms up to shield myself.

“I like you.”

“Stop!”

“Oh, this will be fun.”

“I will kill you slowly,” I retort, but he’s already up and pulling his pants on. I set my entire facial region on fire involuntarily when I realize he slept in boxers. Next to me. And in the split second before he pulled his pants on there was a distinct bulge and I am dying, this is what dying is, you burn up and then the ashes blow away and someone gets them in their eye and they walk around with a red eye all day and their co-workers think it’s pink eye when really it’s just your dead carbon –

“Isis. Shhh.”

“You shhhh!” I hiss. “I’m having a fifteenth-life crisis here upon seeing a man’s junk for the first time.”

He pulls his jacket on and grabs his wallet off the nightstand.

“I’ll wait for you downstairs.”

“I’ll eat your firstborn!”

He shuts the door, and I’m alone. Alone but with him waiting for me downstairs. In a fancy hotel. For breakfast at a café. I pinch my feet and yelp when I don’t wake up. There aren’t any hidden cameras I can see, but then again if I could see them they

wouldn't be very good hidden cameras now would they? I don't think this is a set-up, at least. It's an impossible little dream probably, cooked up by my waking subconscious, but for now I'll let it slide. For now I'll go along with it. Me, the fat ugly girl, slept in the same bed as Jack Hunter, my nemesis, my rival, and now apparently something a little more than my friend.

And I felt safe.

Over breakfast, Jack and I talk logistics. He'll keep an eye on Nameless' IP, and I'll do a thorough cleansing of my computer. When we're standing in the parking lot with bellies full of bacon and toast, we linger. I shuffle my feet. I have no idea what to do. What's a girl supposed to do to say goodbye to a boy she slept with but didn't really sleep with? Is there a handbook for this shit? Should I write one real quick and mail it to past self? Does publishing even work that fast?

Before I can agonize any longer, Jack reaches his hand out and pats my head.

"You'll be okay driving home?"

"Duh," I feel miffed that he'd pat me like a child, but also weird and glowy on the inside in places I don't even wanna think about. "I'm like a NASCAR driver. Minus the millions of dollars."

"Shame, really. Imagine how many more people you could annoy if you were a millionaire."

"At least ten whole people. And their grandmas."

"Ah yes, the time-honored Blake tradition of annoying grandmas."

"All it takes is like, a dirty pan and a cat without a pink, furry sweater on it."

“Say hi to your mother for me.”

“You too. Um. If she still remembers me. Actually, don’t, it’s fine, I didn’t exactly make the best impression when I went over there –”

“She remembers,” Jack insists. “She thinks you’re sweet.”

“Hah. Must’ve met my doppelganger. The one who doesn’t exist anywhere ever.”

Jack smiles. It’s not a bright smile, like the one I’d seen him give Sophia in the hospital once. But it’s warm and without ice, and that’s all I can ask for, really.

“You have my number,” He says.

“Yup. I’ll text if there’s issues. Tissues. Not tissues, tissues are disgusting and so are issues.”

He starts to walk away. I want to say a thousand dumb things at once – thank you, and I’m sorry you chose a shithhead like me, and you deserve better, and drive safe, and be safe, and sleep well and eat well, but all the words and feelings come up in a jumbled mess and dissipate into the air as I open my mouth to say nothing at all and close it again.

“YOU WHAT?”

I hold the phone away from my ear to preserve my future hearing for eighty years to come.

“Slept. In the uh, same bed,” I whisper.

“YOU HAD SEX WITH JACK HUNTER?”

“Jesus Kayla, no, stop shouting, it’s indecent.”

“I’LL TELL YOU WHAT’S INDECENT – SLEEPING WITH JACK HUNTER!”

“We didn’t sleep together, idiot! Do I look stupid enough to ever touch that bag of germs?”

Kayla finally takes a breath. “That’s true. You can’t even say ‘dick’ without vomiting in your mouth a little. And sometimes, on desks. And small children.”

“That was one time, and that kid totally walked into the flight path of my vomit. It’s not my fault if he had no grasp of liquid physics.”

“But you totally slept in the same bed and, like, hello, isn’t that at least second base? Second and a half base?”

“Uh, like a second moon base?”

“Ugh, no! Nevermind, I’m not gonna explain really outdated sex terms to you.”

“For the last time! There was no sect...ional things going on, okay? I would never do that with your ex. Ever.”

“I would. With your ex. If you had one. If he was smoking hot. If you gave me your sure-as-hell approval, obviously. Which I totally give you, by the way, because, duh – it’s Jack Hunter! Someone in this school has to bed him before he gets to Hollywood or modelland or whatever and contracts a bunch of icky diseases!”

“You are insane.”

“Omigod! Did I tell you?”

“That you’re insane? Already figured it out, thanks.”

“No, dummy! Wren asked me out to Senior Prom!”

I feel my mouth drop open. “The one with glasses?”

“Uh, duh, what other Wren do you know?”

“Was he...was he drooling or shuffling or moaning about brains?”

“Ew, no! He was in his right mind and I’m like, 99% sure he wasn’t a zombie, okay?
Is it so weird that someone would want to take me to Senior Prom?”

Page 41

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

“No, it’s just – Wren isn’t exactly, like, bold?”

“I know!” She squeals. “Which is like, the biggest compliment, if he got all gung-ho to ask me and stuff, right?”

“Yeah. Are you gonna say yes?”

“I already did!”

“What happened to him being a nerd-king?”

“He’s a slightly....cooler nerd-king now? I mean, I just – we’ve had woodshop together and it’s been really fun, we made this birdhouse and it came out really cute, and I cut my finger on the bandsaw a little and he got really concerned and took me to the nurses and –”

“You like him.”

Kayla chokes on nothing. “I-I do not! Like him! I just happen to want to go to Senior Prom! And he’s cute enough! And he’s nice!”

“He doesn’t drive.”

“That’s fine! I do! And anyway I’m totally gonna ask Daddy for a limo and you and Jack are definitely invited.”

“Uh, thanks? But me and Jack aren’t a thing.”

“You slept in the same bed.”

“Yes?”

“You’re a thing,” she asserts. “I’ll see you on Monday!”

I sigh and hang up. Having friends is great. Having friends determine your romantic status is not so great. Yeah, Jack and I slept in the same bed. And he touched my hair. And smiled a lot. And he was warm, and –

I run into the bathroom and grace my head with a cold shower. Mom’s surprised to see my wet hair when I drive up to her shrink’s.

“Did...did something happen?”

“Jesus blessed me with his holy water.”

“Oh?”

“Took a shower. How was your session?”

She laughs. “It was...it was alright. We talked about you, mostly, and Stanford.”

“Oh yeah?” My voice pitches up. “Cool.”

“It would be so wonderful for you, honey. And with your dad willing to help with the costs – you could really do it. You’d meet so many new people, and learn so many amazing things.”

“Yeah. And they’ve got these awesome foreign exchange programs – ” I pull onto the highway. “I’ve been looking at this one in Belgium, it’s like, four months, so one

semester, but you live with a host family right in the city and there's all this cultural exchange stuff in your program, like going out to the countryside, and visiting France for a week, and it sounds so –"

I stop when I see Mom raise her hand to her face out of the corner of my eye.

"Mom? Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry," she sniffs, laughing. "I'm fine. Really, I'm okay."

"Are you crying?"

"I'm fine, sweetie! I-I'm –"

Her crying gets louder. She's shaking, her shoulders quivering and her hands quaking as she desperately tries to hide her face from me.

"Mom!" I pull over onto the shoulder lane and put the car in park, lacing my arm around her. "Mom, are you okay? What's wrong? Tell me, please."

"N-No," she whimpers. "I'm being selfish. I'm sorry. Please, just drive us home."

"No! Not until you tell me what's making you cry like this!"

She sobs into my shoulder, every echo of her pain tearing a hole in my heart. I shouldn't have gotten so excited about Stanford. It probably hurts her just to hear me talk about going away so far.

"I don't want you to go," she cries. "Please, stay here. I need you here."

I wince, and shut my eyes. I pull her closer to me, her trenchcoat enveloping the both

of us.

“Hey, it’s okay,” I say softly. “Mom, it’s okay. Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

“No! I want you to go,” She looks up, eyes panicked and red. “But I don’t want you to go. I know you have to. You have to grow and learn and fly on your own. But I don’t know what I’ll do without you. I’m sorry. Please, go. Please do whatever you want. Just...just promise me you’ll come back and visit sometimes, alright?”

“Mom, I’m not going –”

“You are!” Her expression suddenly turns furious. “You are, don’t listen to me! Don’t hold yourself back for me. I want you to go to Stanford.”

“But I don’t want to.”

“Yes you do, Isis. I know you do. And you’re giving it up for me, and I can’t have that. You need people as smart as you, sweetie. You need challenges, and you’ll get that at Stanford. God, my little girl, going to Stanford. I’m so proud. So, so proud.”

She composes herself, and I start driving again, and she smiles and talks about mundane stuff like grocery shopping and what the neighbors said about her yard and how work was, but I know she isn’t done with the sorrow, because when we get home, she locks herself in her room and turns her music on. And she only does that when she doesn’t want me to hear her crying. My chest burns as I look over the Stanford brochures again. They’re a wonderful, impossible dream. I can’t leave her. There’s no way I can leave Mom here with a good conscience. I’d be too far to help if anything happened again – and she’d be too lonely. She wouldn’t get better if I was gone, she’d only get worse. I have to be close. Very close. Community college close. I have to stay with her until she’s strong enough to stand on her own two feet again,

and going to Stanford won't make that happen. Shit, going to Ohio State won't make that happen.

My path is clear.

My path has always been clear.

I put the brochures in my desk drawer and cover them with my old sketchbooks from elementary school. Things I don't touch. Things I won't touch, ever again.

My email beeps, shakes me out of my misery, and then piles more on. The email's from the same address that sent me the picture. Nameless.

'Hi, Isis!

How've you been? You got my pic, right? That Jack guy seems really cool. Have you guys f**ked yet? :)'

I fight the urge to puke and lose, fantastically.

The darkness wells up in the bathroom. It bleeds out of my eyes and my mouth that cries with no sound. I lock the door and huddle on the floor, hugging my knees.

I'm not safe. I've never been safe.

I'll never be safe. Jack's wrong. He can't do anything. He can't help. Nameless lives inside me, and always will. The darkness will always be here.

There is a nest inside of me, and all it takes is a few words from the boy who raped me to bring the monsters roaring out of it.

-10-

3 Years

30 Weeks

5 Days

Naomi isn't pleased with the fact I'm leaving town. She's never been pleased when I leave, ever, because Sophia gets sad, and that probably makes her job harder. She escorts me to Sophia's room grumpily.

"Something the matter, Naomi?" I inquire. Naomi grunts eloquently.

"Don't try to schmooze me."

"I'm just wondering why your face is more lovely than usual. New eye cream?"

"Are you really going to Harvard?" She snaps. "Do you know how far away that is?"

“In another state, I believe.”

“What about Sophia, hm? What is she going to do when you’re gone?”

Naomi’s words dig a needle straight through my heart. She seems to see that, and sighs and rubs her forehead.

“I’m sorry, Jack. I – she’s been here so long, I care about her so much, and with the surgery coming up I’m just so worried. Dr. Fenwall says her likelihood of pulling through -”

“She’ll be fine,” I say. “She’s tough, even though she doesn’t look it. She’ll live. She’ll be able to live her own life when it’s over.”

Naomi nods. She pushes open the door to Sophia’s room, and gasps. It’s empty. I walk over to the windowsill, where every single one of the vases I’d bought her are smashed. The floor’s littered with pottery, sharp and gleaming and just begging for someone to step in and shed blood.

“Where is she?” Naomi moans. “I told her you were coming, and to stay in her room so I could bring you here. Oh no, oh, no no no -”

“We’ll split up. Check her usual spots,” I say. “I’ll take the top floors, you check the bottom. And ask Dr. Fenwall if he’s seen her.”

Naomi nods, and we run out of the door. I take the steps two at a time and weave around wheelchairs and interns. She’s not in the cafeteria, and the servers say they

haven't seen her all day. The recreation room is nearly empty, and when I ask a kindly old woman if she's seen her, she shakes her head. Nurses who work with Naomi say they haven't seen her either. The bathrooms are fruitless. Finally, I get to the kid's ward, where Mina and James are playing videogames. They look up, and Mina smiles.

"Hey, Jack! Sophia was just here."

"Where did she go?"

"Upstairs. To the roof, I think. Even though we're not supposed to be up there."

I kiss the top of Mina's head and ruffle's James' hair, and take off through the door. Four flights of stairs leave me breathless and sick to my stomach – why the roof? She only goes there when she's irrevocably sad, or depressed. And with all the smashed vases? She loves those vases. She'd never –

I climb faster, and burst through the emergency door and into the weak sunlight.

Sophia's standing at the edge. Not on it, like I'd found her so many times, like I was afraid she'd be. She peers over it, watching the world spread out below. Her hands are clasped behind her back, her platinum hair billowing in the wind like moonlit threads of gold.

She looks over her shoulder, and smiles at me.

"Hey."

"Sophia –" I run towards her, turning her to face me and inspecting her for wounds.

"Are you okay?"

“I’m fine. Just wanted some air. You don’t look so good, though.”

I exhale all the worry out. “I was – I came to visit, and your room, all the vases were broken. Did you do that?”

She nods. “On accident. I was dancing to dubstep and got a little crazy. I didn’t want to deal with it, so I just left it there for the janitor to clean and came up here. Mean of me, I know.”

“No, no it’s fine – you just worried Naomi and I.”

She cocks her head and hugs me. “Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to, really.”

I put my arms around her and inhale the smell of her hair, making sure she’s still here. She’s real. She has a scent and a feel and she’s realer than anything in my life. She always has been.

Half of me wants to tell her about Isis. The other half knows she’d take it badly either way, and with such an important surgery coming up, her mental stability has to be rock-solid. I’ll tell her after, when she’s healthy and whole again.

“I love you,” I say. She giggles and pets my hair.

“I know. I love you too. Thank you for being so strong for me all this time. Thank you for trying so hard, for so long. It’ll all be over soon.”

“You’ll be able to do whatever you want. Go wherever you want. You’ll be free.”

She laughs, and hugs me tighter.

“I already am.”

Today is easier.

It's not any brighter – the darkness still lingers on the edges of my vision but I punch it in the gut and drive to the hospital anyway. I pause in the doorway of the ER.

The first time I came in here, I was a different person. Also, unconscious and bleeding. But also extremely different. Louder. And more obnoxious. And less evil. It's clearly not a fair trade. But no trades are ever really fair. I've learned that much.

“Isis!”

I look over to see Dr. Mernich coming towards me, her flyaway hair even fuzzier today.

“M-dawg! What's going down in crazy town?”

She laughs. “Nothing much, really. All the interesting pranks conducted around here suddenly and mysteriously stopped once you left.”

“Ah, well. What can I say? Poltergeists are fickle. Also, supernatural and imaginary. But mostly fickle.”

“Are you here to visit Sophia?”

“Yeah.”

“You look much better,” she says, looking me up and down. “You sound better.”

“Do I? Because I feel like shit now more than ever.”

“But now you’re feeling it. Not running away from it. That’s a good start. Little steps, remember?”

I nod. “Yeah. I think I’m getting there. I mean, a fancy mind-wipe machine like in *Eternal Sunshine* would be helpful and extremely welcome, but hey, you scientist guys are slow and always out of funds. I forgive you.”

Mernich smiles, but it fades quickly. “Isis? Just between me and you – how is Sophia doing, you think?”

“I dunno. One minute she likes me, the next she hates me, the next she’s crying on me. But she seems like she’s stronger, somehow. She’s focused on the things that really matter to her, now. And she’s still nice. She’s always nice.”

“Except when she isn’t,” Mernich offers.

“Yeah. That.”

Mernich turns my words over, and finally claps me on the shoulder.

“Well, thank you for coming to visit her so often. She really does like you, you know. Deep down. She sees you as herself, and wants you to be happy like she can’t always be.”

“None of us can be happy all the time.”

“Yes. But you certainly try more than anyone else, don’t you?”

Her words hit hard. She smiles one last time, and turns and walks down the hall, calling out to another doctor.

I peek into the kid's ward, but Mira and James are out to lunch in the cafeteria. Sophia's door is open, and I walk in to see her and Jack, hugging. I back up immediately, and Sophia hears me first and pulls away.

"Isis! Hey!" She runs over and hugs me, and I look at Jack over her shoulder. He's expressionless, the slightest frown on his face.

"Hi, sorry, wow. I just barged in here without even knocking first. Dang. I'm really sorry," I say.

"It's okay! I'm just glad you're here. You, and Jack, and me, all together for once. It's great. Isn't it?" She turns to Jack and asks. He nods, stiffly, and then locks eyes with me. It's quick, but it lingers, and reminds me of everything that happened that night in the hotel – how kind he was, how warm. I feel my face burning up, and Sophia staring at me.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

“I should go,” Jack says suddenly.

“What? Why? Work again?” Sophia tilts her head.

“No. I just don’t want to get in the way of any girl talk.”

“Periods,” I say to Sophia immediately. “Huge, bloody periods.”

“Tampons!” She shouts.

Jack pushes past us, and out the door. “I’m going to get something to eat. I’ll be back.”

When he’s gone, Sophia turns to me.

“So? What’s up?”

I hold out the silver bracelet. It jingles faintly in the air. Her blue eyes widen, and she reaches out, reverently, to take it. She strokes the name engraved on it with her thumb.

“Tallie,” she whispers.

“I couldn’t bring back...um. The rest of her. I mean, that’s her grave, so that’s where she should stay, you know? That’s where she rests. But I thought you’d like the bracelet.”

Sophia's quiet for a long time. She traces the bracelet chain over and over. Just as I start to feel awkward for staying, she raises her voice.

"Jack got it for me. After it happened. It's nice to have it back."

I try to smile, but it comes out crooked.

"It's been with her for years, now," she continues. "In the ground, with her. I could see her, or visit her. But now it's with me."

"Now she's with you," I offer. Sophia looks up, eyes wet, and flings her arm around my neck.

"Thank you. Thank you so much. Let me make it up to you, okay? I really wanna make it up to you."

"You don't have to, actually, I know things have been really hard? And like, your life is hard? So I don't want to make it extra hard?"

"You won't be! Avery's doing the entire party, so I won't be doing anything stressful. All you have to do is wear something 'rad', or whatever, and come!"

"Uh, historically I haven't had the greatest experience at Avery's parties."

"Neither have I," She reminds me. "But it's my birthday party, and she's promised to behave herself. And I'll be there, so I'll keep an eye on her. I'd just like it if you came. Wren's coming, and so is Jack. And a bunch of other people who I was supposed to go to school with, so like, most of your class."

"Big party?"

“Huge! And there’s a cake, and a DJ, and please, please come!”

Her face is shining, in the same way it used to shine when I’d make her laugh, back at the beginning. Back when I first came here.

“Yeah. Yeah, alright. I’ll come.”

Sophia smiles, relief carving her features.

“Awesome. Okay, it’s on the 28th, up at her house. It’s supposed to start at seven, but you should arrive fashionably late, because the booze is also arriving fashionably late.”

“You know me too well.”

Sophia shakes her head, and laughs.

“I thought I did. But, no. No, Isis. I don’t know you at all.”

-11-

3 Years

31 Weeks

1 Day

Avery’s house is familiar in all the wrong ways. I park in the same place I always do – easy to back out and easy to drive away fast if I gotta. The music is thumping across the lawn, down into the street, and permeating the gated community. It bounces off the trees and the dozens of cars parked haphazardly in her yard. People

are already drunkenly stumbling out of the front door, lying on the lawn, wrestling with each other and chasing each other with toilet paper and the hose.

I smooth my shirt one last time. It's the Florence and the Machine one I wore here the first time, and I didn't even realize I was wearing it until I got in the car. My jeans are frayed on the thighs – not because I bought them at some high boutique that purposefully frayed them – but because I'd eaten pavement so many times on my bike back when I was losing weight. The cool air on my thighs through the fray reminds me how broken the jeans are, and why they're broken, and how I broke them myself. I did it. I broke them, but I can still wear them, and they work just fine at what they're supposed to do – cover my fabulous butt.

Things are broken, but they still work.

I get out and pull my jacket closer to me. It's bitter cold. Did spring not get the memo? Does spring ever get memos? What are they written on, leaves? Petals? The carcass of a newborn deer?

“Getting maudlin this early in the night, are we?”

I look up. Jack's standing there, in a preposterously gross leather jacket and dark jeans. Wren's standing by him, looking a little shook up in his usual plaid shirt.

“It's sort of my job,” I say. “Provide the searing atmosphere, throw a few shallow but well-meaning compliments, mutter to myself, maybe break a bottle or two.”

“Please don't break a bottle,” Wren wrings his hands. “We've had three people cut themselves already.”

“Whoa, what's that on your chest, prez?” I blurt. A little golden star pin that has the number one on it is tacked to his shirt. His glasses slide off as he looks at it, and he

pushes them up.

“Um. Just something Sophia gave me. From when...from when –”

“Is that the math rally pin?” Jack interrupts. “Wow. I didn’t know she still had it.”

“Neither did I,” Wren lets out a half-laugh. “I mean, I thought she got rid of it a long time ago.”

“Math rally pin?” I ask. Jack nods.

“Back in the day, Wren and Sophia competed in this math rally. They were really into it, invested like only competitive smart kids can get. They studied for weeks, months. Sophia wanted to win so badly. But Wren did. They tied, technically, but the judges gave it to Wren for some extra calculation he did.”

“Sophia was furious at me,” Wren says. “She wouldn’t talk to me for a whole month. So I gave her the pin, and she started crying, and said to not be so nice to her.”

Jack laughs, low, and Wren shakes his head, a wistful smile on his face. It’s a history I’m not a part of, but it gives me a warm feeling just to see them remember that time when they were all friends, and close, and cared for each other, without the darkness between them.

“Look, I’m gonna go get a mood-fluid. Thirst burst. Flavor savor.”

Wren and Jack raise their eyebrows in sync, and I laugh.

“A drink. I’ll be back.”

I recognize a lot of people – not just Avery’s group is here. She’s invited the not-

populars; Wren's student government friends, the band kids, the hipsters, even Knife-kid. And I know he didn't just sneak in this time like he usually does, because I see Avery nod at him as she passes, instead of curling her lip.

"Being civil? Color me surprised," I say. Avery looks me over. Her hair is straight and glossy again, her skin perfect and makeup on-point. She looks much, much better than usual.

"Sophia wanted me to be nice. And I figured, hell, I can do it once in my life. It might kill me, but I'll do it for the sake of getting to say I did. I was nice." She ponders this, and sighs. "Should've put that on my college resume. They love nice people."

I chuckle. "Yeah. Most people like nice people. Good thing I'm not most people."

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

“You’ve never liked me,” she sneers. “And I’ve never liked you.”

“True. But we’re willing to put up with each other. That counts for something, right?”

She stares at me, green eyes flaring. And it’s then I notice she’s been crying. She’s applied makeup over it, but I can barely see red puffiness under her eyes, and her nose is swollen.

“Have you seen Sophia?” I ask.

“I was just talking with her upstairs. She’s been bugging me to tell you to come find her when you get here, so, go talk to her. Quick. Before she explodes.”

“That happy, is she?”

For once, Avery smiles. It isn’t a sneer, or a sour grimace, or a catty, petty grin. It is exactly a smile, no more and no less. It is a younger Avery that shines through in that smile – a lighter Avery. A more innocent Avery. She nods.

“Yeah. She’s happy. She’s really, really happy.”

I pat her on the shoulder, and walk upstairs to the third level. It’s quieter up here, but less like a soundproof room and more like the top level of a jungle infested by monkeys in heat. Correction; monkeys in heat with access to Lil Wayne. The noise dulls, and I wander around aimlessly, but with a very specific aim. I spot a wisp of platinum blonde hair at the end of the hall, where French doors open to a mini balcony. Sophia’s leaning on the banister of it, watching the stars, a drink in one

hand. She's in a beautiful, lacy white dress with a short skirt and no sleeves, and she looks stunning, like a dove about to take flight.

She hears me coming, and turns.

"Hey! It's about time you came. No drink?"

"You were a little higher on my priorities list. Which is weird because no one comes before booze. Except Johnny Depp. But even he has to take a number and wait in line a little."

She smiles, and I lean on the balcony with her. Someone streaks by below, completely naked and yelling about the 'king of alien invaders'.

"It's a good party. People are having fun, losing their pants –"

"- Possibly their minds," Sophia interrupts.

"– and most definitely their minds. I take it back. It's a perfect party."

She giggles, and drinks out of her cup. It's something blue and frothy, and she sticks out her stained tongue and waggles it at me.

"Gross!" I push her playfully. "You really are sick!"

"I'm contagious!" She insists. "That was my plan all along, hold a massive birthday party, infect you all, and start the zombie apocalypse."

"'Bout damn time. I've been waiting for that thing for years."

There's a comfortable silence. I look over, and notice then her wrist is decorated with

Tallie's bracelet. It's just barely big enough, and her wrist is just that thin and tiny. The silver glints in the moonlight. It's breathtaking.

"I wanted to thank you," Sophia says. "Properly."

"For what? Making your life hell?"

"For trying."

The wind plays with her hair, and she tucks it behind her ear and smiles at me.

"Not many people try. Once they see the real me, the one who's suspicious and bitter and angry and hopeless, they leave, or give up. But you stayed. So I wanted to thank you for that."

"Wasn't...wasn't a big deal. I just...I was just sort of pig-headed around you. I didn't really do anything."

"You tried to help," She insists, grabbing my hand. Tallie's bracelet is cool on my skin, and her palm is surprisingly cool as well. "You tried to help, and for that I can never thank you enough."

We stand there like that, our hands joined, me looking at her and her looking at the sky.

"Do you know about Van Gough?" She asks suddenly.

"Cut off his own ear and painted LSD sunflowers, right?"

She laughs. "Yeah. His paintings...everyone says they're beautiful, but they've always made me a little sad, and scared. They're frightening – all those bright colors

and all that chaos. But I suppose that is beautiful, in its own way.”

I nod, quelling the snark in me to try and enjoy this moment of peace.

“He painted Starry Night while he was in a mental asylum,” she says.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Right before he died, he painted a lot of wheatfields. I like those paintings the best – they’re calm, peaceful.”

“I wanna see ‘em someday.”

“You will,” she asserts. “They’re really nice. It’s sad though; he killed himself. With a gun. Well, he tried to. He missed and crawled back to the inn he was staying at, and died in his bed after hours and hours of pain.”

“Jesus,” I suck in air through my teeth. She shakes her head and smiles.

“But his last words were; ‘The sadness will last forever’. And I think he was right, but I also think he was very, very wrong. It doesn’t last forever. Because we don’t last forever.”

The darkness I’d put bars over to appear cheerful at this party bubbles up from my heart. Sophia must see it, because she squeezes my hand gently.

“Hey, it’s okay. Go and get me some more of the blue stuff, will you? I’m not nearly tipsy enough to dance, yet, and that’s gotta be remedied.”

“Hah, I know that feeling. I’ll be right back.”

I take her glass and squeeze her hand as I leave. Downstairs, the party is batshit insane and only getting batshittier insaner. I wave to Jack, who follows me into the kitchen.

“So? Is she alright?” He asks.

“Yeah, she just wanted a refill on the booze. You should go see her. Drag her down here, dance with her, something.”

He flinches, but it’s well-hidden.

“I still haven’t told her.”

“I know.” I nod. “And I haven’t told you some things, either. So. Everybody’s not telling everybody else stuff. It’s fine. Secrets are kind of the crappy bread-and-butter around here.”

“I haven’t told you something very important. And I want you to know it,” he starts, icy eyes burrowing into me.

“Don’t,” I start. “Don’t, seriously, Jackoff. Not now.”

“If I don’t tell you this, Isis, it’s going to drive me crazy,” He leans in, breath hot on my cheek. “I need you to know. I want you to know –”

A scream rips through the party. That’s typical, but what’s not typical is it doesn’t stop. Someone is screaming, and they’re screaming over, and over, and it’s like metal scraping over slate. It is panic and terror, pure and unfiltered, and it’s coming from outside. Jack looks up, and I follow his gaze.

“What the f**k is that?” I hiss. Jack and I push through the crowd that’s running in

the direction of the scream. The night air is crisp and people's breath floats up as a suspended ring of clouds around a certain patch of grass on the left side of the house. People are swearing, some are sobbing, some are frantically dialing on their phones. Jack keeps pushing through the people, Wren pushing with him, but I'm frozen to the ground as I look up and see the balcony just above.

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 7:33 am

Everything goes quiet, but people's mouths are still moving. Jack's screams are barely audible above the ringing in my head. I move achingly slow, like I'm in a sea of sludge. People won't move. I lean on them until they do, until the last person in the circle parts, and shows me Jack leaning over Sophia's lovely white dress, Tallie's bracelet around her contorted wrist, and her head twisted at a perfect ninety degree angle and her ocean eyes staring at me, wide and open, like a mannequin, like a doll, like a bird who never learned how to take flight.

'The sadness will last forever. And I think he was right, but I also think he was very, very wrong. It doesn't last forever. Because we don't last forever.'