



The Party Plot

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Description: When Laurel Van Marcke comes home for the summer, he's immediately thrown back into all the scandals, grudges, and petty gossip he wanted to avoid. But he was expecting that. What he wasn't expecting was Casey Bright, his mom's new party planner, who also happens to be the mystery man he spent an unforgettable night with three months ago. But something about Casey, and the whole situation, seems off, and Laurel needs this party to go off without a hitch.

Casey has his own agenda for the upcoming Halloween ball, one that doesn't include Laurel. He wants nothing to do with the spoiled little rich boy, and definitely doesn't want to get entangled with him again. But Laurel is persistent, and soon, he's involved himself not only in the party planning, but in all the most intimate aspects of Casey's life. And Casey absolutely despises him for it... right?

One thing is for sure, the first annual Halloween Ball will be the event of the year—one way or another.

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There were a lot of things about himself that Laurel Van Marcke liked. He had money, great hair, good teeth, and an impressive pedigree. He was educated, great at talking to people. Well-traveled. Just under six feet.

But none of that mattered as he sat in the back of the car his mother had hired, an abyss of self-loathing stretching out in front of him.

Of course, that might have had something to do with the cocaine he'd done the night before. Or the fact that he'd stayed up talking with Melody until dawn had streamed in through the windows, the infernal morning sounds of birdsong and traffic boring into his brain. Or maybe it was because, now that he was no longer high, the drinks he'd had last night were hitting him like a freight train.

Or maybe he just hated coming home.

Laurel pressed his cheek against the cool pane of the window. Outside, the familiar live oaks reached out over his mother's front drive like witchy arms, streamers of Spanish moss dripping from them. He was sweating, despite the AC, his heart pinging around like a pinball. His sinuses were fucked, the back of his mouth tasted like paint, and there was a slow, liquid stupidity seeping into his head that told him that the rest of the day was going to be an exercise in torture.

As if it wouldn't have been already.

There was something morbidly surreal about going to a dog wedding on a hot day. Or any day, really. Laurel stumbled getting out of the car, the humidity slapping him in the face like a wet towel. His mother's front lawn was a confectionary whirlwind of

floral arrangements and tulle drapery, beige clusters of balloons sprouting up everywhere like some kind of medical anomaly. A string quartet was, absurdly, playing an instrumental cover of *Who Let the Dogs Out*, which made him burst into nervous laughter before quickly covering his mouth.

There was a heart-shaped arch set up at the end of an aisle of chairs, but the ceremony hadn't started yet. The guest of honor, his mother's lachrymose basset hound, Jasper, was nowhere to be seen. Neither was his intended bride, a lhasa apso who had an extensive Instagram following. Laurel felt a little twinge of envy that the dogs got to be inside while he was out here fighting for his life. The wedding was ostensibly a charity event, raising donations for the local humane society, but Laurel knew its real purpose was to feed his mother's ego. She had never turned down an excuse to throw a party.

Someone circulating with a tray offered Laurel something called a "pup-mosa," which he took with a wince, almost wanting to apologize to the server—that they had to work for his mom, or that the word pup-mosa had to exit their mouth in any context, he wasn't sure. The drink tasted like it would make his headache worse. He blotted his forehead with a napkin. God, it was hot out. He hadn't been sure of the dress code, but a suit coat seemed to have been a bad idea.

No one had noticed him yet. Across the lawn, a flash of white and a garish hat: his mother, at the center of a knot of other ladies. He recognized most of them from years of society functions past. Laurel felt claustrophobia climbing up his throat at the thought of the inevitable swarm, the flurry of probing yet polite questions. What was he doing with his life? When would he settle down, get married, free his poor mother from the world of canine-only nuptials?

He wiped his face again, blinking sweat out of his eyes, and caught sight of Chip Reyes, alone at a table, a glass of bourbon in his hand. Thank God, he had come. Laurel hadn't been sure he would make the drive. Chip lived up closer to Charleston,

where most of his clients were. He looked good, his dark curls cropped shorter than Laurel was used to and his lightweight jacket hanging off him in an expensive way. His face broke into a smile as he saw Laurel waving at him.

“Laurel, hey.”

Laurel gave him a hug, clapping him on the back.

“Good to see you, man.”

“You, too.” Chip gave him an assessing look. “Late night?”

Laurel ran a hand through his hair, wondering how dark his under-eye circles were. He cleared his throat. “Yeah. Hung out with Melody.”

Chip sighed. “Partying?”

Laurel shrugged and tried another excruciating sip of the pup-mosa. Every time he came back into town, he felt a little worse, blundering into Chip’s life. Chip had a successful law practice and a sense of personal responsibility and probably just wanted to leave his wayward college friends behind.

“Well, how did it go?” Chip asked. He looked at Laurel, then down into his glass as if the ice were particularly fascinating.

“You know,” Laurel said. Friendship with Melody Harper wasn’t even a one-way street, more of a parking lot full of problems and sad shit that Laurel didn’t feel qualified to deal with. He’d barely gotten a word in edgewise; he wasn’t even sure he’d told her about the guy he’d met in Vegas, the guy whose name he hadn’t learned and who had completely rocked his world, rearranged his guts, shifted his paradigm, etc. If anyone would appreciate a torrid hookup story, it was Melody. But Laurel

didn't think it had come up during the many hours they'd spent talking. She'd been asleep in front of the TV when he'd left, a bright yellow Bojangles box cradled in her lap.

"Well. God bless her, as my mom would say."

"Yeah." Laurel scanned the crowd for Howie Bonard's handsome, punchable face, but the man who had ruined Melody's life didn't seem to be in attendance. Good. Laurel wasn't sure he could have tolerated making nice with him today.

"Denise has outdone herself. This is way more elaborate than I was expecting for a charity event."

"I know. She was raving on the phone about this new party planner she has."

"Oh yeah? Isn't that the third one in—"

"Like a year? Yeah." Laurel grimaced. His mother's new ange genie —as she had described him in questionable French—was probably one of the many creative young gay men that she and her best friend collected like Pokemon, showed off like fancy cats, and eventually discarded. He felt sorry for the guy. "She must be terrible to work for. And—"

"Here she comes, by the way."

Laurel swallowed the rest of his drink and squared his shoulders, preparing for the onslaught. Denise Cabot Van Marke looked great: tanned and toned, her face tweaked and pinched and stretched into something resembling a tasteful forty-five, her long brown hair swept over one shoulder. It always gave Laurel an uncomfortable little sensation of coldness in his stomach, realizing how similar they looked. She could have been his sister.

He felt his jaw clench as she swept him into a hug, her perfume overwhelmingly strong, something powdery and sweet. “Laurel, honey. Oh, let me look at you. How are you, darling?” She pulled back, holding him at arm’s length. “You look tired.”

“Yeah.” Laurel forced himself to smile. “Jetlag.”

“How was Belgium?”

“Great,” he said. “Cold.”

“And how’s your father?”

“Good, good.” Ancient, good-natured, obscenely rich. Rattling around in his estate, laughing at his own obscure jokes in French. Laurel’s dad was a baron, which was probably why Denise had married him, and he was remarkably easygoing and didn’t speak a lot of English, which was probably why they had stayed married for eight years, getting divorced when Laurel was three. Laurel could barely communicate with his dad, and he’d really only gotten to know him recently, as an adult. But he liked the guy.

“You’ll have to tell me everything,” his mother said, in a way that suggested the complete opposite. Seeming to notice Chip for the first time, she exclaimed, “Oh, Chip! I’m so glad you could make it. How’s the practice?”

Laurel stared into space while his mother and Chip talked, willing the buzzing in his head to go away. It was too bright out, the sunlight searing and inescapable, and his teeth, when he ran his tongue across them, tasted like artificial sweetener and something fouler. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Chip was complimenting the decorations, and Denise had Laurel by the arm, saying, “Oh, thank you, but I can’t take responsibility for it. This was all Casey’s brain child. You’ll have to meet him, he’s just fabulous. And you must come talk to the girls, Laurel. They all can’t wait to

see you again.”

It was the last thing he wanted, to be paraded around in front of the “girls”, his mother’s society friends who had all left girlhood behind eons ago, trying to brush off their mentions of eligible young daughters and nieces. And he was even less interested in meeting the poor, beleaguered party planner. God, he should have woken Melody up before leaving and seen if she had any Xanax, because the pup-mosa had made everything worse, and he could feel his stomach churning, a slick, cold layer of sweat gathering on the back of his neck.

Laurel focused on his feet as his mother pulled him across the yard. He could feel the sun beating down on his scalp, even through the thick mass of his hair. The afternoon bugs had come out, flies and midges droning in his ears. His teeth were on edge as his mother presented him to Meredith, her most current best friend and the owner of the other half of the dog couple. He had met almost everyone before, grown up with them, but the faces were a blur. A sea of big hats and big smiles and even bigger hair surrounded him, muslin and crepe and floral mumus. There were too many people here, so many that Laurel felt like he was drowning, and he cast around for an excuse, a way out the crowd. Someone caught his eye: a tall, slender figure over by the marital arch, readjusting a streamer of ribbon. An achingly familiar shock of bleach-blond hair.

It couldn’t be. He was seeing things. The heat was getting to him, and he was still all messed up from last night—

“Oh, there he is!” Laurel’s mother cried, clapping her hands. The man turned, and Laurel forgot how to breathe for a second. “Laurel, meet Casey Bright, the genius behind this whole operation.”

But he didn’t need to meet Casey Bright. Laurel was very, very familiar with every inch of Casey Bright, and if he’d still been holding a glass, he would have dropped it,

or maybe fainted dead away like a true southern belle, because the last time he'd been face-to-face with this man had been three months ago, and they'd been kissing in the hot tub attached to his suite in Vegas, with the neon city sprawling out beneath them and dawn starting to creep into the sky.

You look like you could ruin my life , Laurel had said, sidling up to him at the bar.

The mystery man—Casey's—dark gaze flicking over him, amusement and heat simmering under the surface. Looking at you? I think I might want to .

Laurel forced himself back to the present, clearing his throat. Casey was only a couple of inches taller than him, but right now it could have been miles. He looked down at Laurel, face unreadable, just as it had been before. Something in his eyes spoke of disdain, or desire, or both.

Laurel held out a hand, hoping his palm wasn't too sweaty. "Nice to meet you," he said.

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The ceremony passed in a blur. Laurel was vaguely aware of the damp hair curling at his temples, the white wicker chair digging into his thighs. A fan shaped like a paw was dangling from his fingers; he wasn't sure who'd given it to him. Blood was roaring in his ears, and the world had a white-hot glare to it, like an overexposed photograph, the edges of everything indistinct. A camera shutter was going off incessantly. Jasper seemed more interested in eating floral arrangements than in getting married, and the string quartet had circled back through Who Let the Dogs Out a second time and were now playing I Want to Be Your Dog , which was an odd choice for any kind of wedding and made Laurel have to wipe his hands off on his shirtfront as an impression flashed in his head, the memory of the rough hotel carpet against his bare knees—

A shock of lust lurched through his stomach. The soles of his feet were tingling.

God, this was embarrassing.

Why in the fuck was Casey Bright working for his mom? They hadn't shared professions, or even names, had agreed to keep everything anonymous, but just the same, he'd gotten the impression that Casey wasn't the kind of person who compromised, let alone allowed himself to be bossed around or made a spectacle of. So why was he here, wrangling dogs for photos and readjusting the draperies and making sure everything was just so? Why was he making nice with the girls, letting them squeeze his arm and ruffle his hair and manhandle him, his head cocked, an easy smile across his face, his cream suit and pastel tie perfectly complementing his tan skin? Why was someone so effortlessly elegant at an event as tacky as a dog wedding, let alone spearheading it? Laurel felt like a big puddle of sweat and nervous twitches, watching him, and he looked away too late, heat flooding his face as he realized that Casey had noticed him staring.

He could feel Casey's gaze sliding down his cheek, cool and deliberate as a caress.

They'd shaken hands. Casey had given no indication that they knew each other. Laurel couldn't remember what he had said. Some dumb words, most likely; he'd always been good at smiling and nodding and saying dumb words.

And he was good at hiding things, too. You had to be, in a place where appearances mattered so much. But his heart was fluttering like a trapped bird, and he was having a hard time brushing this off. If he was being honest with himself, Casey had felt—significant. In a way that he knew he wouldn't forget. In a way that was safe, because he could tuck the memory away and take it out for special occasions and compare every other guy to it and conveniently find them lacking.

Meeting him again had torpedoed all of that.

Laurel had to talk to him. Maybe if he talked to him, Casey wouldn't seem so wonderful anymore. Maybe whatever spell he'd cast on him would be lifted. It was worth a try, anyway.

He got up, straightening his collar, and looked around for another drink.

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His name hadn't always been Casey Bright, but it was now, and would be for as long as he needed it to. Names didn't really matter to the people he tended to work for—at least, not the names of their staff. What mattered was the persona, and the experience it sold. The perfect party planner. Friendly, non-threatening. An expert and an accessory. Glamorous, but not in a way that would upstage anyone. A shoulder to cry on and an ear to gossip into. (Never mind that Denise's mean-spirited gossip left a bad taste in his mouth, and her tears meant nothing to him.)

Casey had been selling it flawlessly. Until this afternoon.

One of the flowers in the arrangement on the kitchen counter was sticking up a little too far above the others, and Casey pushed it down, bruising the petals. Shit. Now it was mangled, and even more noticeable than before. His hands were trembling. He couldn't trust himself. He hoped they hadn't been trembling when he'd shaken the hand of Denise's son. He hoped Laurel hadn't been able to feel his skin burning, the throb of blood in his palms.

Yes, he had known Laurel was rich. They hadn't shared much about their backgrounds, but there had been an unmissable sense of moneyed self-satisfaction to him. Plenty of people were rich, though. And Laurel had been on his way to Belgium.

(Belgium, where Denise's ex-husband, the baron, lived. Somehow, Casey hadn't made the connection.)

A headache was starting up behind his left eye. The room was too hot and smelled overwhelmingly of petunias, and he stared down at the counter in a daze, forgetting why he'd come in here. To get ice, maybe, or to escape. He thought for a moment about putting his head in the freezer, resting his cheek on a packet of frozen vegetables. The little galley kitchen of the old plantation house was seldom used—Denise had had a newer, modern kitchen put in—so Casey had known he would be alone in here. By now he was extremely familiar with the layout of Denise's house, as well as the inner workings of her mind. And yet he'd somehow missed that her wayward son was the same man he'd slept with. Had missed that Laurel was the same person as the little boy in all of her family photos. To be fair, the way she'd spoken about her son had always made Casey imagine he was straight. But the omission made Casey feel stupid, just the same. He hated feeling that way. It was suffocating in here, even more so than it was outside, and the patterns on the wallpaper were frenetic and too loud, making him dizzy.

He made himself take a breath, the air soupy and bathtub-warm.

"Okay," Casey said out loud. He'd had his little moment. He flexed his shoulders, forcing his spine to straighten up. He'd put himself back together and go back out there. It wasn't even that big of an issue, anyway. Surely Laurel knew how to be discreet. He had to; he probably had a pile of dirty little secrets even higher than Casey's, so of course he wouldn't say anything—

But that wasn't the problem, his brain whispered. The problem was that things were overlapping in a way that he didn't like. The carefully-curated sections of his life were scraping up against each other, and it set his teeth on edge.

He nearly let out a yelp as the door opened, his nails digging into the counter.

"I wasn't looking for you," Laurel Van Marcke said, standing in the doorway. "Or, I kind of was. But I also might throw up or have a heart attack if I have another one of

those sugary drinks, and I know Mom keeps the good bourbon in here.” A sheepish grin crossed his face, and Casey, annoyingly, felt his heart do a little flutter.

He pressed his lips together. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Laurel’s presence here was like a stain on his suit, out-of-place, demanding his attention. An imperfection that threw off the whole.

There wasn’t anything remarkable about Laurel Van Marcke. At least, that had been Casey’s first impression. He was blandly handsome, harmlessly affable, and obviously spoiled. The kind of low-achieving golden boy that Casey had loathed in high school. And that had been the whole point, right? The loathing. That had been the premise behind the hookup. A kind of revenge against all those boys who were rewarded just for existing.

A weird way to get revenge, and not one Casey particularly wanted to unpack. But it had felt so good to have Laurel at his mercy.

He cleared his throat. “I trust we can both be adults about this.” His voice sounded obnoxiously prim to his own ears.

“Sure.” Laurel was still smiling. There were freckles on his cheeks, and Casey knew they also scattered down his neck and across his shoulders. “Do you mind?”

“You being here?”

“No, I mean, can you move? I need to get into that cabinet.”

Casey shifted to the side wordlessly, not enough to keep Laurel’s arm from brushing against him. He allowed it, as a test of endurance.

“Aha.” Laurel pulled a dusty brown bottle out of the cabinet at Casey’s elbow. “Told

you. Do you want some? I guess maybe we should toast. To—memories, or something.” He looked up, brown eyes shining. One of his canine teeth was slightly longer than the other, and it caught on his lip when he grinned. Casey wasn’t sure why he found it so compelling.

“No thanks,” he said, crossing his arms.

“Oh yeah. You don’t drink much, do you.”

“I like to be in control.”

“I gathered that.” There was a sly expression on Laurel’s face as he poured himself a glass, then leaned against the counter, studying Casey. The little galley kitchen was far too narrow, their feet nearly touching, the air between them perfumey and humid. Casey could feel the edge of the sink digging into his hip.

“It’s good to see you,” Laurel said finally. “You look great. That skincare routine’s been paying off.”

A memory: kissing in the hot tub as dawn seeped up from the horizon, Las Vegas laid out like a carpet of tarnished rhinestones. Stay here , Laurel had said. We can sleep in. Get room service .

Sorry , Casey had told him. My morning skincare routine is more important than you .

“Thanks.” It was hot, hotter than it had been in the tub, a vein in Casey’s temple throbbing, and he could feel Laurel’s face pressed against his neck as vividly as if it had been tattooed there. He hadn’t done his skincare routine that morning, despite what he’d said. He had sat staring out over the city, face hot and blotchy, stomach cold and fingers tingling, a stack of pancakes that he had ordered but couldn’t bring

himself to eat growing cold on the table. “You look tired.”

“Long night.” Laurel took another drink, and wiped self-consciously at the shadows under one eye.

“I bet.” Up late with another stranger you met in a bar? he thought about asking—but of course he didn’t. Because it didn’t matter either way. Casey pushed off from the sink, standing up straight. “Listen, Laurel. I think it’s best if we—”

“Oh, I agree completely. Nothing happened and we’ve never met before.” And, infuriatingly, he fucking winked , and made a lazy little toast before draining his glass. “I just have to ask though, how in the hell did you end up working for my mom? You don’t strike me as a party planner, and I can’t imagine you like—”

Oh no. They wouldn’t have this conversation. This conversation was dangerous. “Control,” Casey cut him off, voice cool. “I like control. And putting things in their place. And money, Laurel. I love making money. So if you don’t mind, I need to get back to—”

The door burst open, making Casey flinch for the second time that day, and Denise Van Marcke, hat wobbling, eyes wide, stood there in a sea of tulle, her creamy pink complexion, so much like Laurel’s, spotted with red. “Laurel!” she exclaimed. “There you are! Oh, and Casey, honey, are we still on schedule for the cake cutting? Jasper is starting to get restless.” Before he could answer, she had turned back to her son, grabbing his arm. “Laurel, we need you out here. Your friend is making a scene.”

Casey could see Laurel suppress a sigh. Funny how many of his expressions were familiar, either because they mirrored Denise’s or—more disturbingly—because Casey had remembered them. The thought flooded Casey with spite, and he was happy to abandon Laurel to his mother. Let him deal with Denise’s endless drama for once. Casey had his own problems, like how to get two dogs to pose with a cake

without going full land shark on it before any pictures were taken. And how to recalibrate himself after this encounter.

“My friend?” Laurel asked. “Chip? He wouldn’t—”

“No, of course not.” Denise gestured impatiently. “That Melody girl. She’s here, and she wasn’t invited, and she’s going to ruin everything if you don’t get her under control.”

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Tall, gorgeous, and only wobbling slightly, Melody Harper stood alone in the middle of the lawn. She wasn't making a scene at all, but she definitely presented one just by being there, and by wearing some kind of snakeskin mini dress and stilettos in the midst of all the florals and peachy tulle. Laurel found it impossible to look away. Her black hair was miles long, her legs even longer, and there was a yellowing bruise on one of her thighs. She was looking at something on her phone, scrolling so intently that she didn't even notice Laurel approach, her long nails ticking across the screen. Melody always had great nails, even when she was falling apart. A vape pen was clutched in her other hand like a security blanket.

"Melody, honey," Laurel said cautiously.

She looked up, just a little flash of the eyes to acknowledge him, and went back to her phone. "Is Howie here? I need to talk to him."

Laurel put a hand on her arm. "He's not. Why don't—"

She shrugged him off, surprisingly strong, her shoulders all bones and tension. "Well, when will he be? This is important, Laurel, I need—"

"Is everything okay here?" It was Chip, and Laurel felt himself break out into a clammy, relieved sweat. He wasn't in any shape to handle this on his own, not after Casey.

"Chip." Melody did look up fully now, teeth worrying her lower lip. She'd eaten off all her lipstick, leaving just a thin ring of color around the edges of her mouth, but she was still pretty. Pretty in a striking, unruly way that seemed to make women like his

mother automatically dislike her. “I’m sorry I’m late, I—I must have misplaced my invite. I need to see Howie.”

“He’s not here. Melody, you didn’t drive, did you?”

She dismissed the question with a flick of her hand. “I’m fine.”

“Melody.” Denise was sashaying up, a dazzling smile on her face, and Laurel felt a wave of sickness at the sticky-sweet contempt in his mother’s voice. By all accounts, she’d grown up in some shitty little town in nowhere, Idaho, but she took to the role of Southern dowager bitch like she’d been born for it. He swept a hand over his face, thinking about how nice and cool it was in Belgium, how pretty the flocks of pigeons were when they took to the sky from the trees on his dad’s estate.

“Denise,” said Melody. She chewed her lip some more. “I was just telling Chip how sorry I am to be late. And I—I guess I didn’t get the memo about the dress code.” She let out a nervous laugh. “I just need to—”

“Sweetheart, you look sick,” Denise said, crossing her arms. “The heat must be getting to you. Why don’t you go home and lie down for a while?”

“I will, I just need to talk to Laurel and Chip—”

“I think you should go now.” Denise’s face, though still smiling, was a stone wall. “You really don’t look well.”

“Come on, Melody.” Laurel took her arm, feeling how clammy she was. “I’m wilting too. It would be a good idea to get inside.”

Melody flicked hair out of her face. “Yeah. Fine.”

“We’re taking my car,” Chip said. “Neither of y’all should be driving.”

“It’s fine, Chip, I got here okay.”

“Yeah,” Laurel chimed in, “I can—” he couldn’t; he wasn’t sure why he was backing Melody up. Maybe just because no one else did. He had a flashback to their freshman year of college, Chip almost as wild as the two of them. Stealing street signs, climbing trees, making burnt quesadillas as dawn streamed through the windows and then somehow managing to make it to a class at 9am. In the ensuing years, Chip had managed to turn it around, become a responsible adult, like one was supposed to. He’d even been married for a while, but they didn’t talk about that.

Chip held up his car keys. “I had one drink hours ago. Come on.”

“Laurel,” Denise said as they set off across the lawn, “call me, will you? We need to catch up.”

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His mom’s best bourbon sloshed around in Laurel’s stomach as Chip took them down lazy country roads, azaleas and pines and oaks shimmering stagnant in the heat haze, moss hanging from the branches like a shroud. The tangled greenery gave way to fields once they got onto Highway 26, farmland and rice paddies and small towns, the occasional church sign or drive-through, the ubiquitous yellow scrabble letters of Waffle House. It was so flat out here, and it made Laurel at once uneasy and hopeful, that sensation that you could drive for miles and miles.

“Isn’t this great?” he asked, though it felt anything but. “The band’s back together.”

Melody let out a weak, “Wooooo.”

Chip said nothing, radiating silent disapproval. Of the three of them, he was the only one who hadn't grown up in town. Maybe that was why he wasn't stuck in perpetual arrested development. Laurel and Melody's brand of chaos was becoming less cute now that they were all in their early thirties, he thought, with a sinking sensation.

He squeezed the bridge of his nose. The headache that had been threatening all day had finally rolled in like a thunderstorm, and he was having a hard time keeping his eyes open. A road sign for Bonard, SC ("The Sleeping Beauty Beneath the Oaks") flashed by, and he heard Chip's blinker go on as he started merging toward the exit.

"Chip, we need to stop at the arch." Melody was tapping at the back of the driver's seat. "I have a sharpie in my purse, I'm gonna go fucking deface it."

"Melody, it's broad daylight," Laurel groaned. Not that he hadn't maybe discreetly pissed on the Bonard arch once or twice upon a drunken night, but this was different. People would see.

"Who gives a shit. No one here likes me anyway."

Bonard, SC, was a tooth-achingly picturesque town of manicured lawns and tree-lined avenues and gleaming neocolonial facades. Smaller and lesser-known than its cousin, Summerville (the birthplace of sweet tea!), it was a bright little sugary-sweet pastry with a rotten filling. Centuries of dark history lurked under the creamy exterior, and it was named after Howie Bonard's family: local politicians, civil war generals, good old boys and girls who probably kept one of Robert E. Lee's fingernails somewhere in their ancestral mansion like the relic of a saint.

Laurel didn't know how she could stand to live here, with his name stamped all over everything. It must feel like Howie Bonard was looking over her shoulder at every moment, sticking his fingers into her life and muddling it up at a whim.

“I’m taking you both straight to Melody’s,” Chip said.

“We should go out tonight,” Melody said, putting a hand on his arm, but Laurel was fading, his vision going gray and fizzy at the edges. A lyric from an old Crosby, Stills, and Nash song fluttered through his head: It’s getting to the point where I’m no fun anymore . Who had been super into them? Someone from his fraternity, years ago. His thoughts were spinning like a record on a turntable, and he barely remembered getting up the steps to Melody’s townhouse and into the merciful embrace of the AC before his cheek was resting against the plush velvet of her sofa. In his head he saw the dusty moss hanging from the trees, the balloons infesting his mother’s lawn, and Casey’s slim, white-clad figure against the sunlight, and then he passed out.

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He woke to the sound of purring. Melody’s cat, a beautiful, soot-black animal with sapphires for eyes, was sitting inches from his face, staring into his soul and letting out wave after wave of contented rumbles.

“Oh my God,” Laurel mumbled. His face felt glued to the couch, and his mouth was sticky and tasted like artificial sweetener and something worse.

The cat, apparently content that it had unlocked the inner workings of his psyche, blinked at him once before yawning fish-breath into his face and jumping to the floor with a pleased little meep .

Laurel sat up, rubbing a hand over his face and through his hair. It was dusk, muted light coming in through the shades. He could see Melody outside, through the sliding-glass door to her balcony, still in the dress from that morning, her shoulder blades sticking out sharply, a cloud of vapor around her head.

Melody's apartment was tastefully decorated in what he assumed were beachy colors. It was clean, too, the fast food from last night put away, every surface scrubbed and vacuumed and lint-rolled within an inch of its life. She'd said once that she was a nervous cleaner, and Laurel knew that she would often start the morning with a mimosa or two—or five—and scour away all the chaos of the night previous.

It was sad to picture Melody waking early in the morning, stumbling around, muttering to herself as she scooped the litter box and stuffed takeout containers into the trash. Laurel swallowed. His nose was stuffed up, and the back of his throat still tasted vaguely like chemicals.

God, what was he doing here? He couldn't fix anything for Melody and he couldn't make his mom happy. He'd lived most of his adult life as an itinerant wastrel, so no one would be surprised if he just flitted off again. Laurel reached for his phone, meaning to start researching flights, but instead, his thumb landed on the Instagram icon and he was scrolling through pictures of the dog wedding, trying to see if Casey Bright had been tagged.

He had, and his Instagram wasn't private, and suddenly Laurel was down the rabbit hole.

Casey's Instagram was sun-soaked and pristine, as carefully curated as the man himself. Here he was at multiple events, posing, his hair slicked back and his expression friendly, unreadable. There he was on the boardwalk at Folly Beach, in pressed linen, the sky behind him scalloped with clouds. Casey at the Atlanta symphony orchestra—did he like music? He must like to travel, at least, because he showed up in New York City, Marseille, Venice, Ibiza. (Nothing from Vegas. Had it not fit the aesthetic?) Casey on a yacht. Casey's long legs in a beach chair. A photo tagged in downtown Charleston showed his tan, well-manicured, (skillful , Laurel's brain whispered), fingers draped around a martini glass, some kind of frozen cocktail with a whimsical garnish. Brunch with the girls , the caption read. What girls? And

what brunch, either? Casey didn't drink much, at least not from what Laurel knew.

No family. No pets. A lot of friends, but none recurring. So, a lot of people that he posed with, maybe, and no one close.

God, where have you been all my life? Laurel remembered groaning into the pillow. He'd been in a particularly compromising position, the silk of his own tie rough around his wrists.

Shh, Casey had said, kissing his spine. You talk too much . And he'd twisted his fingers in a way that had made Laurel forget words even existed.

There was the hiss of the porch door opening, and Laurel nearly threw his phone across the room, face hot.

"You're awake," Melody said.

"Yeah. Melody, I don't think I can go out tonight, I—"

"It's fine. I don't want to either." She'd taken off her makeup at some point, and she looked achingly young. The same face that had been in teen magazines and Deliah's ads, but harder, now, behind the eyes. "Will you come outside with me?"

He didn't want to leave the hermetically-sealed capsule of air conditioning inside the condo, but Laurel acquiesced, getting up. His phone was still in his hand, and he stuffed it into his pocket, skin feeling itchy.

Melody's housing development backed up to marshland, light from the setting sun glimmering on patches of water, choked with grass. It was a pretty location, and Laurel knew she had bought the condo with her own money, whatever she'd managed to keep from her days as a child model. (Whatever her parents hadn't managed to

sponge off of her.) A band of syrupy color lingered on the horizon like the dregs at the bottom of an Aperol spritz. Laurel tapped his fist against the balcony railing while Melody vaped, the day's events tumbling through his head. He'd flirted too much with Casey, probably made an idiot of himself, and he tried to remember if Casey had seemed charmed, or at least amused. But the whole day was a blur of heat and desperation, and he couldn't get a handle on it. Laurel ran his tongue over his teeth. The smell of Casey's cologne haunted his sinuses, something cottony and crisp.

He'd brushed Casey's arm, reaching into the cabinet. Had he imagined the way Casey had caught his breath, the subtle movement of his throat? Had he—

"You haven't heard a single thing I said, have you?"

"Shit." Laurel rubbed the back of his neck, his hand coming away sweaty. Melody had real problems, and here he was waxing melodramatic over some guy he'd met in a casino bar. "Melody, I'm sorry. I'm not at my best right now."

"It's alright." She slumped, resting her chin on her folded arms, hair falling around her like a tent. "I know you're tired of listening to it. The shit with Howie."

"I'm sorry," Laurel said, with a sad kind of inertia. "I just don't know what can be done." He didn't understand why Melody didn't just leave.

But then, Bonard was a hard place to escape. Laurel himself was evidence of that.

"What? You were the one who told me to come to the party and confront him."

He looked at her blankly, searching his mind for any recollection of what she was talking about.

"You said it would be my big chance," Melody explained. "To drag everything out in

the open? Get back in everyone's good graces? You really don't remember any of this?"

Laurel chewed his lip. Maybe he hadn't been as with it last night as he'd thought. That was the thing about coke: it made you feel so smart, until you were confronted later with the evidence of your own buffoonery. "I'm not so sure anything I said last night was a great idea, in retrospect."

"He deserves to see some kind of consequences." Melody looked at him, her face stubborn.

"He does, but—" but Howie Bonard was teflon. Their disastrous, on-again-off-again relationship had been truly over for six years, but Melody was still living the fallout, while Howie got to just go about his business. Suing him for emotional damages hadn't done anything. Even a charge for possession a while back hadn't made a difference; Bonard had gotten off with a fine and a slap on the wrist. Laurel sighed. There was a nasty taste in his mouth. "Melody. Don't you ever think about making a change? Moving away? Maybe focusing on your health a little bit?" Laurel's stomach felt soft, his words hollow. He really wasn't built for this sort of thing: confrontation, vendettas, the pursuit of justice.

She scoffed. "Where would I go? I didn't finish college. I've never had a real job, and I'm too old now to model."

Laurel pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling like an asshole. He forgot, sometimes, how different their situations were. Melody came from one of the area's oldest families, but they were broke, her parents refusing to move out of the decaying old mansion that they couldn't afford to repair. Anything she had, she'd earned years ago. And she refused to borrow any money from him, despite the many times he'd offered.

"Besides, I'm totally fine. I know you don't believe it, but I'm not as messy as you

think. I pay my taxes on time. I just got a new IUD, before congress can fricking outlaw them. And I take good care of Luna. I brush her and clean her ears every morning.” (Luna, Laurel remembered, was the cat.) “I volunteer at the library and the humane society. My shit is together , Laurel.”

And yet you’re showing up wasted at garden parties, trying to get back at your ex. It wasn’t a nice thought, and Laurel didn’t like himself for having it. Besides, he had apparently goaded her into it. He took a deep breath, saying nothing. A mosquito buzzed in his ear, and he waved it away. They were going to get eaten alive out here if they didn’t go in soon.

“I shouldn’t have to leave. This is my home.”

“Melody, his family owns the damn town.”

“I’m not giving up.” She took another hit off the vape, her hand trembling slightly. Strawberry-scented vapor threaded up into the sky. “I deserve to be here too.”

Laurel put an arm around her, looking out over the marsh, the razor-sharp blades of grass glowing gold in the dying light. Melody leaned into him, her face against his shoulder. “I just need a chance,” she muttered into his shirt. “If people would just accept me again, maybe I could tell my side of the story. Show everyone how far I’ve come, how good I’m doing now.”

“I know, sweetheart.” Eventually, forcing lightness into his voice, he added, “And at least you have your shit together. I don’t.”

“Nobody expects you to,” Melody grumbled.

“Damn. Ouch.”

“I know, I’m a bitch.”

“Nah.” He pressed a kiss to her scalp, the ramrod-straight line of her center part. Melody was always on top of the latest trends. “Just more honest than anyone else around here.” Laurel sighed, breathing in the smell of her shampoo. “And I want your honest opinion, because I did something pretty stupid.”

Melody chuckled. Laurel’s heart felt a little less heavy, hearing it. “Oh God, what now?”

“A few months ago, when I was flying out of Vegas, I met this guy. Had what I would categorize as a particularly epic one-night stand. Um.” Laurel cleared his throat.

“I know. You told me about that—”

“Last night?” Laurel rubbed his temples, shaking his head. Never again, he vowed. His constitution was too weak to partake in illicit substances with Melody anymore. “God, I’m an embarrassment. A menace.”

“It’s fine,” Melody said, patting his arm. “You can tell me again. I don’t remember much, either.”

“Well, I thought I’d never see him again, but...”

“Uh-oh.” He could hear the smile in Melody’s voice. “Was he in Belgium?”

“No, he’s here. He—do you know my mom’s new party planner? Casey?”

Melody pulled away to look at him, eyes narrowing. “Casey Bright?”

“That’s the one.”

“That guy’s fake as fuck, Laurel.”

Laurel’s stomach went cold. “Why would you say that?”

Melody’s jaw tightened. “Because he is. He just showed up in town one day, and suddenly he’s everybody’s best friend. Apparently he worked for some Real Housewife in LA or something. I don’t trust him. He’s always got that phony smile on, but I can tell he’s laughing behind everyone’s back.”

“Huh. I sure didn’t get that impression.” In Vegas, Casey had seemed like the type of person to laugh directly in your face, his contempt simmering right on the surface. It had been almost refreshing.

“Trust me.”

“Melody—”

“I know, I know. I’m probably the worst judge of character there is. But something’s off about him. You should keep your distance.”

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“I might have a problem,” Casey said into the phone.

“Talk to me.” Jamie Riggins had a deep, soothing voice, the voice of a therapist or podcaster, although he was neither of those things. He was a hermit who lived on a houseboat, doing something expensive with cybersecurity, and Casey was probably the only human who heard him talk on a regular basis.

“I guess it’s really more of a situation.” Casey scraped a fingernail along the windowsill, peeling away a flake of paint. These old Southern houses always seemed to be in a state of perpetual decay, a symbiotic relationship with the marshy earth and the ivy and moss and bougainvillea that was at once trying to reclaim them and the only thing keeping them intact. He was upstairs, in a spare room that Denise had said he could use as an office, but there was nothing in here that made it his. Not that there was much that made anything, or any place, his. Casey traveled light, and the only things he really had any attachment to were his rotation of designer outfits, carefully curated by combing through the thrift stores in Beverly Hills. Rich people in Southern California, he’d learned, would throw away anything, even if it still had the tags on it.

Rich people in the actual South, on the other hand, seemed to keep every piece of chintzy crap they could get their hands on. The “office” was crammed with knick-knacks: porcelain figurines, statuettes, a stuffed impala head, a line of aggressively ugly Wedgewood China along the wall. He wondered where Denise had gotten all of it. Had it come with the house, or had she scoured estate sales for the perfect accessories to support her fantasy? When poor people did this, it was called hoarding. But he guessed it was different when you had an estate.

“Come on, man,” Jamie said. “Don’t keep me in suspense. Are you in trouble?”

Casey heard an edge of concern in Jamie's voice. He didn't exactly disapprove of what Casey did; they were both fairly pragmatic souls, which was one of the reasons why they got along so well. But Casey knew he worried from time to time.

"No, everything's fine. It's just—" Ooh, he didn't want to say it. They had been best friends since age eleven, when Casey had moved in with his grandmother and finally started going to public school. He'd been a weird child, with gaps missing in his education and socialization, not really sure how to be a kid at all after so many years traveling around as an accessory to his dad's various cons. Jamie was his opposite in many ways—skin color, height, introversion—but they'd both always known what it was like to be an outcast. The two of them had bonded in middle school Computer Club, making fan sites and illegally downloading entire discographies when the teacher wasn't paying attention. Since his awkward preteen years, Casey had gotten much better at constructing palatable personas. Jamie was probably the only one who knew the real him.

Just the same, that didn't mean Casey told him everything. Especially not the embarrassing shit. He picked at the windowsill more aggressively. Layer upon layer of paint, decades of it. He wondered if he would get lead poisoning.

"I'm going to hang up unless you get less vague."

"Denise has a son," Casey said in a rush.

"What, like a little kid?" The concern in Jamie's voice turned to bemusement.

"No, an adult son. A grown man. Who—who I slept with." Casey tilted his head back, staring up at the ceiling. Someone had thought it was a good idea to combine Venetian glass light fixtures with all the other chaos in this room. Jesus, pick a theme

.

“Okay,” Jamie said slowly. “Good for you, I guess?” Casey couldn’t tell what he was thinking. They didn’t usually talk about sex or relationships. Casey had never known Jamie to date anyone, of any gender, and Casey didn’t exactly date, either. He hadn’t grown into his looks until his twenties, and he’d spent the following years making up for lost time, in a series of casual encounters and no-strings arrangements. Of which Laurel should have just been another, he thought, grinding his teeth.

“It does seem a little stupid, though,” Jamie continued. “Getting involved with her son when you’re—”

“No, I know. It wasn’t on purpose. It was months ago, in Vegas, and I didn’t know he was her son at the time.”

He could feel Jamie shrugging down the line. “So, it’s over. No worries.”

“Yes worries. He’s back in town, and I have to, like, interact with him.”

“How much does he know about you?”

“Nothing,” Casey said quickly. “I mean, we didn’t even exchange names. This is the first time I’ve seen him since then.”

“Then you should be fine, right? Just be your usual charming self. And don’t sleep with him again. I mean, unless you want to? How long is he going to be there?”

Shit. How long was he going to be there?

“I don’t know why you’re telling me this,” Jamie continued. “Do you like him? Are you worried you’re going to fall for him and ruin all your plans, or something?”

“No, of course not. I just—ow!” A splinter of paint lodged itself under Casey’s nail,

and he jerked his hand away from the windowsill. “It’s just inconvenient,” he said, sucking his wounded finger into his mouth.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine. Was there anything else? I’m headed to Costco to get hot dogs for the babies.”

The babies were a teeming colony of raccoons that lived in the woods adjacent to Jamie’s swamp.

“No, you’re right. I’ll be fine. He’s—” Casey’s throat closed up as he saw a familiar figure down below. He was here, wandering across Denise’s front lawn with that loping, self-assured stride of his. Casey had the urge to bang his head against the window. “You know what? I’ve got to go, too.”

*

Melody’s car had been out in the sun long enough for Laurel to see heat haze shimmering across the dashboard, and he knew that the inside would be a little goldfish bowl of Hell, hotter than the Earth’s molten core. He thought about just leaving it here. If he were Chip, he’d figure out a way to get it impounded, so that she couldn’t drive anymore. But instead here he was, being nice. Picking it up for her.

There was a creepy, uncomfortable feeling in his chest. Melody had been under some kind of influence when she’d driven here, or else she’d still been loaded from the night before, and he should really talk to her about it. But no one talked about these sorts of things. Everyone had that uncle who was especially jolly, except when he was ranting about The War (there was only one, down here), or that maiden aunt who had persistent stomach issues and lived on mint juleps and benzos and the occasional finger sandwich. Admitting anything was wrong would just be bad manners.

Sighing, he turned to look at the house. There was movement in one of the upstairs

windows, and he wondered if Denise was watching him. God, he really didn't want to talk to her. But he also didn't want to bake alive in Melody's car, or talk to her .

“Laurel!” His mom was waving from the porch, decked out in Lilly Pulitzer as if she had somewhere to be, instead of just lounging around the house all day. “What a surprise. Come in, honey. Come have some tea.”

The thought of ice cubes clinking in a glass, of something cold, made up his mind. The car could wait.

Denise ushered him into her parlor. Jasper, the newlywed dog, was splayed out on the floor as if melting into it. He gave Laurel a look of infinite tragedy as he walked into the room.

The parlor, like all the rooms in the big plantation-style house, was an over-decorated, maximalist nightmare. Laurel remembered the pall of anxiety that had followed him around, living in this house as a kid. The itchy weight of all of the stuff , none of which he was allowed to touch, for fear of breaking it. The walls were covered with glamor shots from his mother's pageant days and paintings of old white men that he might be related to. He wasn't even sure who most of them were; one, at least, was his dad's dad, but Denise had no “people”, as they said here. She'd spent thousands at auctions and antiques markets, building up some kind of provenance.

Laurel sank into one of the overstuffed armchairs, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

And sat back up, heart pounding, as Casey came into the room.

“What, do you live here now?” Laurel blurted.

“Nice to see you too,” Casey said dryly. He was put-together as always, hair slicked back, cream suit free of sweat stains or creases. Like a special edition Party Planner

Ken that had just stepped out of its box. Laurel ground his teeth.

“Laurel, don’t be rude. Casey is already hard at work on my next soirée.” Denise sat down, crossing her long legs beneath her tasteful skirt. “Won’t you join us? We’re just about to have some tea.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Casey said, to Laurel’s dismay.

“Mom, I can’t stay long. I’m just picking up Melody’s car.”

Denise let out a theatrical sigh. “Laurel, I really wish you would just cut that girl loose. After all the trouble she’s caused—”

A sour taste rose in the back of Laurel’s throat. “Mom, please.”

“No, someone has got to say it. Oh, thank you, Miss Mina.” There was a clink as Miss Mina, Denise’s maid, set down a pitcher of sweet tea on the coffee table. She was a petite Black woman, and Laurel noticed with a pang that her hair was much more gray than he remembered. He realized he didn’t know how old she was. He didn’t know much about her, and he had never heard her complain, but he’d occasionally caught her casting her eyes to the heavens behind Denise’s back.

Miss Mina smiled at Casey, setting a separate, full glass in front of him. “And unsweet for Mr. Casey.”

“Girl, you know I’m watching my figure.”

Denise giggled. Laurel felt a twinge of disgust. No sugar, no alcohol: how did this guy live? And what figure did he need to watch? Casey was thin, maybe almost too thin, with no muscle tone except what he’d been given by genetics.

That guy's fake as fuck .

Laurel wondered what Casey was thinking, behind that pleasant, empty expression. He took a gulp of tea, the ice cubes clattering against his teeth, the cold sending a spike of pain through his head.

"I mean it, though," Denise said, leaning forward to place a hand on his knee. "That Melody girl is an embarrassment. I can't imagine what her parents think. I see them at church, you know, and they can't even bear to mention her." She tossed her long hair over one shoulder. "It's just bad manners, to go around bad-mouthing her ex-boyfriend like that. They were on and off for years . Surely it can't have been that terrible, the way she kept going back to him."

Laurel kind of wanted to dump his glass out all over the stupid, ornate coffee table with its filigreed legs, but he held it to his neck instead, trying to infuse some coolness into his being. "Mom. They started dating when she was sixteen and he was, like, thirty-five. You can't—"

She made a dismissive gesture. "Girls like that grow up fast. Especially around here."

He closed his eyes, wanting to sink into the couch.

"And she simply can't be trusted in public. I can't even remember how many times she's embarrassed herself. I mean, what would you say to someone like that, Casey?"

Laurel heard the tinkle of ice, and he opened his eyes to see Casey watching him over the brim of his glass. "I'd say, bless her heart," Casey remarked, with a little smirk. One of his fingers was bright red at the tip, and Laurel wondered if he had hurt it. He almost hoped he had; it would be a crack in the facade.

"So what's the next soirée?" he asked with false sweetness, holding Casey's gaze.

“The dog wedding was such a success. I was just looking at the pictures on Instagram.”

Denise clasped her hands together. “Casey’s throwing me a Halloween ball. The first ever in Bonard! It’s sure to be an event to remember.”

“Oh yeah?” Halloween was three months away. Laurel wondered how long it took to plan a ball. His eyes kept being drawn back to Casey’s finger. The phantom taste of Casey’s skin filled his mouth, and he washed it away with another sip of tea.

“We’ve rented out Landry Hall. It’s going to be sensational,” Denise continued. “Everyone who’s anyone will be there.”

“Everyone.” Laurel tapped the rim of his glass against his lips. He thought of Melody saying, I just need a chance. “Tell me more,” he said, leaning back. “I absolutely love Halloween.”

*

Casey followed Laurel out onto the porch, into the sizzling skillet of the day. Immediately, he could feel sweat prickle under his collar and beneath his arms. He thought again about getting botox for his armpits. Maybe when the next payment from Denise hit his bank account. He hated the sensation of being sweaty, hated even more when it dried, the film of salt it left behind.

Laurel had licked sweat from the hollow of his throat, once. And somehow at the time it hadn’t made Casey’s skin crawl. Just the opposite, it had—

Oh my God. Fuck this. He had to get a hold of himself.

“So you’re sticking around for a while,” he said, crossing his arms. “I hadn’t realized

you'd be here in October."

"I promise I won't get in your way." Laurel smiled. He had Denise's long-lashed eyes and defined jaw, but his nose was a little large for his face, Casey thought spitefully. "I mean, unless you want me to."

"Laurel."

"And I couldn't possibly miss the ball," Laurel bulldozed on, waving a hand in the air. "This is my mom's chance to finally make it in society. She's lived here for years, but she's still not in, you know?"

Oh yes, Casey had heard all about this, too. Old money vs. new money, and how much it tortured Denise that she wasn't accepted as the former, even though she'd once been married to European royalty. It was baffling to him; money was money, and if you weren't happy about your reputation, you could go and cry about it on your private yacht. But her desperation to be accepted was good. It made her easy to exploit. He didn't say that, though. He said, "She seems in enough. Everyone loved the dog wedding."

"You don't know this place like I do. People still call her 'Miss Idaho' behind her back. Or 'The Baroness,' but, like, not in a good way."

Miss Idaho was hilarious. He'd have to remember that. "I don't see how there could be a not good way—"

"Trust me. If this ball is as big as you say, maybe it'll be that last piece she needs."

"So nice of you to care," Casey said. "I'm sure Denise appreciates your support."

To his surprise, he felt a little guilty, and pushed it away. There were more important

things in the world than Denise Cabot Van Marcke's reputation in this town, and she would survive with or without the ball. People like her always did.

"That's me. Chock-full of filial piety." Another thing Casey disliked about Laurel Van Marcke: he talked like he needed to remind everyone how Ivy League his education had been. That first night, he'd made some reference to French poetry that had been way over Casey's head.

"Well, we'll probably see each other occasionally, then," Casey said, arms still crossed, voice still carefully bland. He didn't want Laurel here, in his space. He didn't like his eagerness, or the bright curiosity that was currently in his eyes. "I hope that's not going to be a problem for you."

Laurel grinned again, that one tooth catching on his bottom lip. What was it about the imperfections in his face that made it so compelling? "So who's on the guest list for this thing, anyway? If you need any suggestions—"

Suggestions ? Casey pinched his lips together, trying to keep himself from sneering. That was the last thing he needed. If Laurel turned out to be as much of a micro-manager as his mother, Casey might have to flee town even sooner than he'd planned. "Thanks so much. But I have enough resources here already."

"Not as many as I do." Laurel leaned against one of the porch's columns. "Where are you from, Casey?"

"Florida." That much was true, although he and his dad had, at times, been all up and down the Eastern Seaboard. If he was from anywhere, it was the backseat of his dad's classic Chevy, rolling around on sun-baked leather with no seatbelt, a packet of Ho-Hos, and a stack of coloring books, finding comfort in the names of the crayon colors. Fuschia, tangerine, olive.

“Florida, huh? I wouldn’t have expected that. Which part?”

“Doesn’t matter.” The place he associated the most with home, his grandma’s house, had been outside of Jacksonville. The heat was weighing on him, and for a moment it felt too familiar, too knowing, like someone was looking over his shoulder, breathing on his neck. Why had he come back to the South in the first place? There were other places he could have gone too, plenty of rich idiots in every state in the nation.

“I didn’t see any pictures of Florida on your Instagram.” Laurel was looking at him strangely, and Casey felt a cold jolt go through his stomach. There was a spark of intelligence behind the harmless friendliness in Laurel’s eyes, and he didn’t like it.

“No. Not all of us have a palatial family estate to go home to.” The word palatial hardly ever found its way into his vocabulary on its own. Was he copying the way Laurel spoke? Casey had a habit of doing that. Usually it helped him connect with people, but right now, he didn’t want Laurel in his brain.

“Palatial, huh? Honestly, I’d rather be wrestling gators.”

Casey groaned internally. He was distinctly aware of the sweat gathering at his hairline. “I promise you there is no gator wrestling in my past.” That was also true. “And why were you on my Instagram, anyway?”

“I’m curious about you.”

“Don’t be. I thought we agreed nothing happened.”

Laurel shrugged. “Would it be so bad if something had?”

“I don’t know. Should we tell Denise about it?”

Laurel looked away, a muscle twitching in his neck. Just as he had thought: Laurel was hiding things. Denise must not know that he liked men.

“How was Ibiza?” Laurel asked. He pronounced it, obnoxiously, eye-bee-tha , the pink tip of his tongue flicking against his teeth, and for a second, Casey had no idea what he had said, let alone what he was talking about.

“What?”

“Ibiza.” Laurel’s voice was casual, but he was still looking at him a little too intensely. “You were there, what, last year? It’s one of my favorite places. I’m honestly surprised we didn’t run into each other. I’m there super often.”

“Right.”

“There’s this tapas bar called El Pavo , right off the beach. Have you been to it?”

“Yeah,” Casey lied, feeling a line of sweat drip down his cheek. “Great place.”

“I love their sardinas. Have you had it? It’s like a spicy sardine paste on toast.”

“I don’t really eat seafood.” What was happening? Casey had the feeling that the conversation had gotten away from him, and he could see his sense of control floating off into the sky like a stray balloon. “Laurel—”

He persisted. “No? What do you eat?”

After this? Probably a whole box of donuts. He remembered Laurel hand-feeding him peanuts from the mini-bar, remembered sucking the salt off his fingers. He’d licked champagne bubbles off of his chest, too, and—a lot of other things that had seemed like a good idea in the heat of the moment. Casey cleared his throat. “I have to get

back to work.”

“Sure.” Laurel clapped him on the shoulder, and Casey just barely kept himself from flinching. His hand lingered, a hot, heavy weight that Casey could feel sinking into his skin. “I’ll see you around.”

“You’re not—”

“Don’t worry, I won’t get in your way. But we’re bound to run into each other in a town as small as this. Might as well lean into it.” He squeezed his shoulder, then stepped away, and Casey only had a brief moment of relief before Laurel was straightening his bow tie. “Crooked,” he said, with a grin. “Wouldn’t want that.”

Casey’s mouth was too dry to speak. He could feel the veins pulsing in his temples.

“Talk soon,” Laurel said. It sounded like a threat.

Casey’s hands were shaking as he watched Laurel walk across the lawn, and the shaking didn’t subside once the car had pulled away, sun glinting off its windows. He waited until it was out of sight to pull his phone out of his pocket, nearly dropping it.

He could barely type, and he didn’t even know if his spelling was correct as he Googled, el pavo ibiza —math had been his strong suit in school before he’d dropped out, the orderly reliability of numbers appealing to his brain—but of course, nothing popped up. Not even when he did a larger search for famous tapas bars, or when he examined the street view of businesses along the waterfront.

Fuck, fuck, fuck .

Casey typed out a text to Jamie. Did you put me in ibiza on my instagram? They’d set several of them up a long time ago, for different purposes, different identities. He

remembered joking with Jamie about what a bougie gay party planner's Instagram would look like. Cocktails Casey didn't drink, clubs he didn't go to, places he hadn't been.

People will believe anything if you have a good enough backstory , he remembered his dad slurring, in the little house that smelled like old newspapers and mothballs and bird shit and was slowly creeping its way down the pitted, overgrown lawn, back into the water. Obviously Casey had gotten complacent, because he'd forgotten parts of his.

A little crescent moon appeared under his text, and the message, Jamie Riggins has notifications silenced.

Of course he did. Maybe if Casey was a hungry raccoon, he'd warrant more of Jamie's undivided attention.

But Jamie had been right, as always. Casey didn't like Laurel, and he definitely wasn't falling for him, but the man was still going to ruin all of his plans.

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Laurel took a gulp of his old-fashioned, watching the sleek bodies of the ponies thunder by across the deep green of the field, lines of sweat tracing lacy patterns down their flanks. His heart thudded in rhythm with their hooves. Though they were called ponies, they were full-sized horses, thoroughbreds with the agility of a cheetah and the force of a freight train. Laurel had loved horses as a kid, maybe even wanted to be one. The power and beauty when they ran, the sense of freedom. And all the goofiness and neuroses that each one had, when you got to know their individual personalities. He'd even played junior polo for a bit, but never gotten past the position of Number One.

A bad fall at fourteen had ruined all of his polo dreams, and Denise had sold his horse, Sunny, without asking him.

She didn't forgive very easily.

Laurel cleared his throat. "How would you find someone's employment history if it's not online? Out of curiosity." Casey Bright was on LinkedIn, but he was listed as self-employed, and had been forever. There were no clues about where he'd come from or why he was here. From what Laurel had managed to gather, he had just shown up in town one day and attached himself to Denise. And he definitely hadn't been to Ibiza, so he was faking things on social media.

Chip made a face. Laurel knew he disliked getting legal questions when he was off the clock. "I guess you could always run a background check. But you'd need the person's consent."

"What if you don't have that?"

“Whose employment history do you need, anyway?”

“Nobody’s. I’m just curious.” Laurel felt a little giddy. He took another sip of his drink, humming the opening lines of the Ascot Gavotte to himself as the horses rushed past a second time. Polo matches always made him think of the Ascot scene in *My Fair Lady*. His fingertips were vibrating with adrenaline, and he remembered how exciting it had been, to lean out from the saddle with his mallet in hand, just on the edge of off-balance, swinging for the ball. How it had felt like anything could happen.

“Well, if this hypothetical person were to have a criminal record, it would show up in a simple Google search,” Chip said.

“Right.” Laurel took a sip of his drink. He had tried that already and come up with nothing. Which should be a relief, right? Still, he was convinced that Casey Bright was hiding something. It was too convenient, his being here. And his background was too vague. Laurel didn’t trust him. If the Halloween ball was going to be Melody’s chance to get back into society, then it had to go perfectly.

“How’s Melody?” Chip asked, as if sensing his thoughts. “Are you staying with her?”

“No, I’m at the beach house.”

Chip frowned. “Somebody should stay with her. Someone should be keeping her from getting behind the wheel.”

“She’s fine, Chip. You’re worrying for no reason.” People had started to clap politely, and Laurel joined them without thinking, one hand tapping against the back of the one that held his glass. The first chukka must be over. Raising his voice so Chip could hear, he continued, “She just had a bad day, that’s all.”

“You haven’t been here,” Chip said. “There have been a lot of bad days.”

But Laurel wasn’t listening. He’d seen a familiar head of hair and set of shoulders in a pastel suit coat, over by the drink cart. What was that color called anyway, salmon? And how had Casey gotten an invitation to a polo match? He really had insinuated himself into everything, and after only being here for a few months.

Laurel drained his glass. “Well, would you look at that. I’m out of liquor. I’ll be right back. Do you want anything?”

Chip shook his head tersely, but Laurel didn’t have time to worry if he was upset. He was already making his way through the crowd.

A hand on his arm stopped him before he could reach the drink tent. Sarah Ann Copeland stood blinking up at him from beneath a straw hat, oddly strong for a woman of a certain age, her grip on his shirtsleeve like a talon. Laurel struggled to free himself, murmuring platitudes, but she wouldn’t release him. Her eyes were a little wobbly, her expression earnest. “Laurel, sweetie, it has been ages since we talked.”

Sarah Ann Copeland was one of the church ladies. God-fearing and timid as a mouse, until she was talking behind people’s backs, or in her cups, threatening to put rat poison in the punch bowl at parties. She had always reminded him a little of a bushbaby, the way she stared and clung to arms.

“Sarah Ann!” Laurel forced enthusiasm into his voice. He cast around the crowd for another glimpse of Casey, but he had disappeared, and now Laurel was trapped.

“When will we see you at church again, Laurel?”

When Hell freezes over . “Oh gosh, I keep sleeping in. You know.”

Sarah Ann pursed her lips. “Yes, well, I’m sure you keep a busy schedule over there in Europe. It’s probably been hard re-adjusting to our way of life.”

Laurel ran a hand through his hair. Even after all this time, he found himself shrinking under the obvious judgment in her eyes. Everyone in town seemed to think he was some kind of playboy, fucking his way across Europe. Which maybe he was, but not in the way they imagined. And there were a lot of hiking trips through the Dolomites and museum visits mixed in with all the slutting around, thanks. Besides, there actually hadn’t been anyone since Casey, which was embarrassing in its own way. He rubbed the nape of his neck, skin feeling hot.

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s a slower pace over here for sure.”

“Well, I am so glad I ran into you.” She squeezed his arm even harder. “I had hoped we would get a chance to talk at your mother’s charity gala, but of course there was that unpleasantness, and you had to leave.”

“Of course, of course.” He tried to sound friendly, but all he could think was how much he wanted to shake himself off like a dog, get rid of the weight of Sarah Ann’s hand on him. The knowledge of Casey somewhere in the crowd was still buzzing in the back of his head. He cleared his throat. “Actually, what did you think of the dog wedding? Fabulous, right?” If anyone would know the gossip about Denise’s new employee, it would be Sarah Ann. “That Casey Bright knows how to throw a party.” He thought he sounded casual enough. He wasn’t sure. A drop of sweat trickled down his neck.

“Oh goodness, I don’t know.” Sarah Ann lowered her voice conspiratorially. “I thought it was all rather gauche, with all the balloons.” Laurel wondered what could possibly be offensive about balloons, but he said nothing. “But of course it was for a good cause,” Sarah Ann added. “Denise really does fancy herself some sort of celebrity, though, doesn’t she? With all these events and these LA types.”

Melody had mentioned something about LA, too. Laurel would have to look into that. He knew a couple of people in the LA area who might have moved in the same circles as Casey. If he'd even been there at all; if it wasn't another fiction, like Ibiza. "Well, what do you think of him? The party planner?"

Sarah Ann made a dismissive gesture. "Oh, I shouldn't say anything. He seems like a pleasant enough young man. And he keeps Denise company. But none of us really know anything about him. And—well—I wouldn't want him around my sons."

"Because...?"

"Oh." Sarah Ann smiled uncomfortably. "Just the lifestyle choices, you know. But he's very nice. Very polite."

Laurel wanted to melt into the ground. He thought again of the Ascot scene in *My Fair Lady*, of Audrey Hepburn screaming obscenities in a big hat. How freeing that must be, to look gorgeous and be an absolute menace in public. To say what you were thinking. "Well, I have to go. I see my mother waving to me, and I don't want to leave her waiting."

"Oh, of course." She squeezed his arm one last time. "Tell her the party was lovely, won't you? We're all looking forward to the next one."

"Oh, I am too." It was the truest thing he had said to her so far.

*

The horses looked as tense as Casey felt, standing in line, their long legs like rubber bands about to snap. Some shuffled and pranced, impatient to run, as if their natural state was to be in motion, always. They were waiting for some command, Casey guessed, for the next part of the game to start. Honestly, he knew nothing about polo,

but he knew plenty about running. He had only come up close to the pitch to get a moment with his own thoughts. Denise and Meredith had been talking in his ear all afternoon, salacious stories about the people at the match, laced with sickly-sweet proclamations of, “Bless their heart.” Usually, he would welcome gossip, file away facts about the people in this town like a student taking notes. But Laurel had complicated everything, thrown him off.

We’re bound to run into each other. Might as well lean into it . What was that supposed to mean? Did Laurel want to hook up again? It wasn’t going to happen. Casey would be keeping him at a distance, no matter how much Laurel winked or grinned at him. Did he want to—God forbid—be friends? Casey didn’t do friends, except for Jamie, who was really more like family. And he especially didn’t do friends with some spoiled, lazy playboy who’d been born on third base. Besides, Laurel would hate him if he knew what Casey had planned.

It shouldn’t matter, being hated by him. Casey remembered the red flush that had spread across Laurel’s freckled chest, the worshipful way he’d looked up at him, hair feathered across the pillow. The taste of his skin.

He shook his head, trying to get rid of the thought. He would deal with this the same way he dealt with everything. Slap on a pleasant face and make up a story.

And he’d have to do it now, because here Denise was, coming through the crowd with Meredith and Laurel in tow. Casey groaned internally.

“Well, fancy seeing you here,” Laurel said. There was a glass of something brown in his hand, and an easy smile on his face, but his eyes were sharp. Too sharp for Casey’s comfort. “How are you enjoying the match?”

Casey shrugged. “I don’t really know enough about it to say.”

“I could explain the rules. I used to play.”

Of course you did . Unbidden, the image of Laurel, sweaty, in a tight sweater and riding pants, flashed through his head, making his knees a little weak. Was Casey imagining things, or had his accent gotten deeper since he'd been back in South Carolina? When they'd met in Vegas, it had just been a tease, a ribbon of caramel through Laurel's voice. Now it was stronger, his vowels sleepy and soft and somehow refined, so different from the country hick accent that Casey had grown up with and spent years erasing.

Casey cleared his throat. “Maybe some other time.”

“It must all feel very foreign, after LA,” Laurel said innocently. “Being here in our little backwoods town.”

Who had told him about LA? God, everyone was in everyone's business around here. Casey smoothed the front of his shirt. The phantom of Laurel's fingers prickled across his throat as he remembered Laurel adjusting his bowtie. How it had seemed somehow more intimate than a kiss. “It's a nice change of scenery.”

“I'm telling you, Laurel, I lucked out with this one.” Denise put an unwelcome hand on his arm, and Casey felt a little queasy. “He has the magic touch.”

“Really, you're a genius. Peaches has gained over a thousand new followers because of you,” Meredith said. Peaches was her dog, Jasper's bride.

Casey forced himself to smile, but it felt more like a baring of teeth. Fucking Peaches and her Instagram. If Meredith hadn't tagged him in the first place, maybe Laurel wouldn't have been asking so many probing questions. Maybe Casey wouldn't have gotten tripped up by Ibiza.

“And we raised two thousand dollars for the humane society,” Denise added. “Isn’t that wonderful?” She squeezed Casey’s arm, gazing starry-eyed off into the distance. “I really do think that’s my calling: helping the less fortunate. I’ve always considered myself an empath, to be honest.”

“You are, Denise. You absolutely are,” Meredith gushed.

Laurel choked on his drink audibly, and Casey bit his lip. Jesus, could she hear herself?

Their eyes met. Casey saw his own incredulous amusement reflected in Laurel’s expression. He looked away.

“Well gosh, Casey just sounds like he’s heaven-sent,” Laurel said. “What a blessing that he showed up in town to help you find your calling, Mom.”

“Isn’t it? He’s worked with some very exclusive people,” Denise said. Her hand was still on Casey’s arm, uncomfortably warm. “I just know my Halloween ball is going to be sensational. Maybe we’ll even get into Country Living .”

“Wow, Country Living .” Laurel took a sip of his drink, watching Casey over the rim of the glass. “Have you ever been featured in a magazine before, Casey? You must have, what with all the rubbing elbows with Hollywood types.”

“I prefer to stay out of the spotlight.” Hollywood had been a magic word to get him into Denise’s good graces and convince her to open up her wallet, but it hadn’t been a lie. Now he was wondering if he should have mentioned it at all.

“But you at least can drop some names, right?” Laurel asked.

“I signed an NDA,” Casey said tersely.

“Laurel, stop pestering him.” Denise let out a dramatic sigh. “Honestly, you’d think he wanted to plan the party himself, with all the questions he’s been asking,” she told Meredith. “I keep telling him not to worry. I trust Casey to figure everything out. It’s going to be the event of the season, right, Casey?”

Casey licked his lips, mouth feeling dry. “Yes, absolutely.” One way or another . He felt Laurel’s gaze on him, and a bead of sweat ran down his neck. “It’ll be the talk of the town.”

*

Back at the house, Miss Mina was leaning against the sideboard, fanning herself. She stood upright as Casey came into the kitchen, reaching for a dish towel that sat discarded on the counter.

“Don’t trouble yourself, Miss Mina. It’s too hot to be cleaning kitchens.”

“It sure is.” She patted her forehead with the towel, posture growing more relaxed. “Are you hungry? I made lemon bars.”

Casey desperately wanted an ice-cold lemon bar, could practically feel it dissolving on his tongue, like liquid gold. But he said, “Just an unsweet tea, if you have some.”

“You know, the sweet kind wouldn’t hurt you any,” Miss Mina said, opening the fridge. “Neither would a lemon bar. Put some meat on your bones.”

Casey made a noncommittal noise. Miss Mina was always trying to feed him. Maybe he reminded her of some grandson, the same way she vaguely reminded him of his grandmother, another nice yet formidable working-class lady. But he didn’t need the sugar; he hadn’t gotten all of his acne scars lasered away just to break out again, and he refused to gain back any of his adolescent chubbiness. That could stay in the past,

along with all the other grubby aspects of his childhood.

“So how is the ball coming along?” Miss Mina handed him a glass.

Ugh . The ball was the last thing he wanted to talk about. Denise was drunk on her own power after the success of the dog wedding, and her demands were getting wilder and wilder. He was having a hard time keeping track of what he’d agreed to. Not that it mattered, in the long run.

“It’s coming. We were in talks with the band today, putting together a set list. She wants to sing.”

“Uh-huh.” A wry expression flashed across Miss Mina’s face, almost too quick to see.

“Some song called Moon River . I guess it’s from an old movie?” Casey had grown up on Christian talk radio and, later, crime dramas and 80’s action movies, so his knowledge of the classics was limited.

“They love their old movies, those two,” Miss Mina said. “I’m surprised she doesn’t want Laurel to sing, too. Now that he’s back in town.”

“Oh yeah?” Ugh, again . Laurel was the last person he wanted to think about right now, but he kept popping up. The nape of Casey’s neck tingled, and his hands tightened slightly around the glass. “He sings?” He hadn’t mentioned it in Vegas. Casey really didn’t know much about Laurel at all, besides the fact that he traveled a lot, liked horses and French poetry, loved giving head, and what his face looked like when he—

“He used to, as a kid,” Miss Mina said, mercifully derailing his train of thought. Casey felt heat rising in his cheeks, and he took another sip of tea. “He had the voice

of an angel. Sang in the church choir every Sunday. But he was lonely, too, it seemed like, always trying to please. He used to follow me around like a little puppy, trying to help with the chores. Of course, I couldn't let him." She paused. "She's hard on him, I think. Mrs. Denise."

Casey rolled his eyes. Oh, boohoo, he didn't get to help clean. But he got all sorts of other things. A trust fund. A college degree. A dad who wasn't in and out of prison and court-mandated rehab. "What's he like now?" It didn't matter; Casey didn't want to get to know him. There probably wasn't anything to get to know, anyway. Rich pretty boys like Laurel were a dime a dozen, French poetry or not. But maybe Miss Mina knew some of his secrets, or something embarrassing. Housekeepers, in Casey's experience, often knew much more than their employers thought they did.

Miss Mina shrugged. "I couldn't tell you. He comes and goes whenever he feels like it. He's never settled down, or really had a girlfriend, besides the one in college."

"Right. Weren't they engaged, or something?" Denise had talked his ear off about it. Apparently the college girlfriend had been a perfect beautiful blameless angel, and Laurel had fucked it up somehow. Sounded about right; he seemed like the type to fuck things up. He was definitely ruining Casey's whole month, just by being here.

He thought of Laurel's smug little smile at the polo match, the way his long-lashed eyes had sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. The sly, conspiratorial tone in his voice as he'd called Casey heaven-sent. Inadvertently, he felt a little shiver go down his spine. From the cold of the iced tea, surely. He was drinking it too quickly.

Miss Mina gave Casey a look. "Engaged to be engaged, maybe. I don't think his heart was ever in it." She went back to the sink, polishing one spot on the faucet over and over again.

Interesting. Laurel clearly hadn't told his mom anything about his sexuality, but

Casey wondered if Miss Mina had her own suspicions. Leaning against the counter, he asked, “And what about the girl who crashed the party the other day? Melody? White girl, long black hair, about five-ten? Kind of a bombshell?” She had something of a reputation, from what he heard. Casey had only met her in passing, at the Bonard Fourth of July Jamboree a few months ago. She’d been pretty out of it, if he remembered correctly. “She’s a friend of his, right?”

“Yes, just a friend. But part of me always wished they would get together. Maybe it would have been different.” She grimaced, continuing to scrub the sink. “She used to sparkle, that girl. Before Howie Bonard came along and sucked all the life out of her.”

“He’s running for congress. Or, no, his brother is, right?” The family were local royalty, the kind of old-money dirtbags that Casey tried to avoid. He hadn’t met Howie Bonard, only his brother, Wayon, who had reacted to Casey with over-friendliness and barely concealed disgust. As if he’d been afraid of the gay rubbing off, or of Casey hitting on him. Please. Some of us have actual taste.

Questionable taste, maybe, Casey reflected, considering Laurel. But taste nevertheless.

“Running for congress, running just about everything around here...” Miss Mina shrugged, trailing off.

Casey jumped as his phone buzzed again in his pocket, sending an electric shiver down his thigh. Jamie had texted back finally, sending him a comprehensive spreadsheet of all the places he’d been on his Instagram. There was also a message from the caterers at Landry Hall, with an updated estimate for the Halloween ball. The amount kept climbing, which was good news for him. He tucked the phone back into his pocket, concealing a satisfied smile.

“Do you think he’ll win?” Casey was planning to be out of town before November, so it didn’t matter. If he got the chance, he’d gladly leave the whole state of South Carolina—Hell, the whole country—and its rotten politics in the dust. Hopefully the increase in the catering bill would help with that.

“They always seem to, in that family.”

His stomach went a little sour. “What did Howie Bonard do to Melody?” Casey asked.

Miss Mina eyed him from across the counter. “You’re a smart kid, Casey. You know what men do to pretty girls.”

The glass felt too slippery in Casey’s hand all of a sudden, and he set it down. He shouldn’t be surprised. “So how is Laurel—”

“It’s none of my business.” Miss Mina turned away. “I need to get back to work. You’re sure you don’t want a lemon bar?”

“No, no,” Casey said, too many thoughts darting through his head. These poisonous little towns were all the same. He’d been in enough of them to know that everything had an ugly underside and everyone was all tangled up in each other’s drama, and the last thing he wanted was to get involved, or to start caring about any of it. The sooner he could get his money and get out of here, the better. “Thank you. But I should probably get back to work, too.” He had to re-memorize his backstory. Figure out how to get Laurel off his back. And look at mockups of a seafood tower that would never exist.

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The little town of Bonard was languishing in the heat, even though the sun had only been up for a few hours, sunlight smearing over the cobbles, steam rising from lawns and flower pots, wrought-iron lamp posts and fences and cemetery gates already hot to the touch. It was the kind of day that most men of means would spend golfing, or out on the water, but Laurel hated golf and didn't own a boat, so here he was, lurking in the long slice of shade that the clocktower cast over the east side of Main Street, licking sweat off his upper lip and regretting the hot latte in his hand.

At this time of day, the town was barely awake, most shops still shuttered, a few cars meandering down the street in a daze. The only sounds were the drone of insects and the hiss of sprinklers, his only company the occasional seagull or squirrel. Normally, Laurel liked being up before everyone else. His frequent travels often left him between time zones, waking up at odd hours. The early morning always seemed like a little capsule of hope and possibility, before all the noise of reality came rushing in. A time to breathe, to feel refreshed.

He felt anything but refreshed this morning. He'd tossed and turned all night, sweaty despite the AC, achingly aware of the sheets caressing his bare skin. He'd had such a hard time figuring out where to put his hands. Thoughts of Casey had swirled around in his mind: Casey's adorable little frown of annoyance at the polo match, Casey looking pressed and professional on his LinkedIn, Casey trailing his tongue down Laurel's spine. Really, it was Casey's fault he was downtown so early. He'd hoped to go to Landry Hall, to talk to the event coordinator there and learn more about the party. Over the phone, they had said they hadn't received a deposit yet. Maybe Casey would be there too. Maybe—

Laurel let out a disgusted sigh, giving up on the latte and dumping it into a nearby

trash can. He didn't like feeling this way. He wasn't obsessed; he wasn't. He was doing this for Melody, right? It was the party that mattered, not the planner.

Laurel kept telling himself that as he started off down the street toward Landry Hall, past the milk-white colonnades of mansions that had been turned into art galleries and bed and breakfasts and trendy brunch spots, the old red-brick market building that still had faded feed and seed advertisements painted on the side, the little boutiques with quirky names, the multitude of churches and bars and the one New-Age store that had somehow been clinging on since the 90s, exhaling a cloud of patchouli into the air even now. Not much had changed since he'd been here last, but that was by design. The town got by on being a snapshot of better times—though who they'd been better for was debatable.

As Main crossed Third, the street curved out around the crescent-shaped park where the Bonard arch stood, made of vine-draped brick and looming over everything. It really wasn't a terribly offensive structure, but Laurel was offended that someone had stuck a bunch of bright red signs for Wayon Bonard's congressional campaign in the surrounding lawn. He was half-tempted to throw them away, or at least step on a couple of them, but he refrained. He was here for a purpose, after all. And he managed to stay single-minded until he saw a horse.

It was a horse that he recognized, and it was tethered to a carriage, pulling up mouthfuls of grass from the parking strip outside a coffee shop.

"Clementine!" Laurel exclaimed.

There was something joyful about seeing the old Clydesdale again, the sheer size of her, the weighty cinder block of her head and the way she stood there chewing nonchalantly, an immovable object taking up the entire sidewalk. Her chestnut coat was glossy despite her age, and the fur on her massive hooves made it look like she was wearing bell bottoms. As Laurel approached, she shot him a calm side-eye from

beneath heavy lashes, then went back to demolishing the lawn. Her teeth and jaws were probably strong enough to grind up concrete.

“Hey, girl. Do you remember me?” Laurel petted her neck, smelling the sweet barnyard smell of her. She acknowledged him with a brief snuffle at his foot and shin, her rubbery lips grazing his skin and making him laugh. Her muscles were like steel cable under his hand, flexing as she moved. Her mane was long and white and rough as straw, and Laurel’s head just crested her shoulder.

Clementine was a fixture of downtown, and of weddings and parades and any other occasion that called for a carriage. Later today, she would probably be hauling tourists around on a historical tour, her slow, plodding steps echoing down the street. Right now, it seemed like she was off the clock.

“Mr. Petrowski left you out here on your own, huh?” Laurel scratched the warm, velvety expanse of her flank. “He must be getting coffee.”

Sure enough, the door to the coffee shop opened with a jingle of bells, and Stephen Petrowski stepped out, holding the door for someone behind him.

“Laurel!” Mr. Petrowski cried, in his rich, plummy voice. He was a part-time drama teacher at the high school, as well as running his own tour company and owning a horse stable out by the beach. And, according to Melody, he also moonlighted at several drag clubs in Charleston as a queen named Toptimus Prime. Laurel wondered how awkward it would be to turn up at one of his shows. “Well, well, what a coincidence. We were just talking about you.”

Looking over his shoulder, Laurel saw who he was. Casey had followed Mr. Petrowski out of the door, looking as cool and pristine as the unadulterated iced coffee in his hand. Laurel suddenly regretted not washing his hair that morning. He was aching aware of the oiliness of his scalp, the sweaty collar of his shirt.

“It’s good to see you again,” Mr. Petrowski said, clapping him on the shoulder. Turning to Casey, he added, “Laurel was my favorite student. Such a voice. The pipes on this kid, I swear.”

“Oh yeah?” Casey looked unimpressed. “The lead in every school play, huh?”

“Oh, definitely not,” said Mr. Petrowski. “I always had to put him in the chorus. Great at singing, but the boy simply cannot act. He’s too honest.”

You’d be surprised, Laurel thought, watching Casey’s face.

“And what are you up to this morning, Casey?” he asked, hand still on Clementine’s flank. “Important party business?”

“Yeah.” Casey checked his phone. “Actually, I should get back to—”

“Now wait a second, Casey.” Mr. Petrowski held up a hand. “I wasn’t kidding about the tour. I’d be happy to show you around.”

“Right now?” Casey frowned. Several thoughts seemed to pass behind his eyes before his expression evened back out. “I don’t want to impose—”

“Don’t be silly.” Mr. Petrowski patted Clementine’s neck, and the horse replied with a thunderous grunt. “I don’t have any bookings this morning, and the old girl gets bored if she’s got nothing to do.”

“I really—”

“Oh,” Laurel said, seeing an opportunity. “You haven’t experienced Bonard until you’ve been on one of Mr. Petrowski’s tours. Nobody can tell a story quite like he can.”

“Laurel.” Mr. Petrowski put a hand to his heart. “I’m flattered.”

“Actually, I might tag along, if you don’t mind. It’s been so long.” His heart was pounding, and he could feel his neck getting hot. He caught Casey’s eye, gave him a smile.

Casey pressed his lips together, looking like he very much did mind, but Mr. Petrowski was already climbing up into the driver’s seat of the carriage. “Of course not, the more the merrier! Get in, boys, and let me regale you with local color.”

Casey squeezed himself in against the window sash, as far from Laurel as was possible. As the wheels began to roll, he looked resolutely out onto the street, his shoulders stiff, his profile sharp and brittle. Laurel studied the long line of his neck, the delicate shell of his ear. He remembered sucking Casey’s earlobe into his mouth like a piece of candy, peppering his neck with kisses as Casey moved inside of him, slow and decadent and deliberate, then fast and filthy and—

Jesus . His teacher was driving. Laurel couldn’t be thinking like this.

“...Clarissa Bonard died of a broken heart. Or so the doctor claimed at the time, the doctor who was, as you remember, employed by her husband. And some say, on foggy nights, the figure of a woman in white appears beneath the arch, searching for her murdered lover...” Mr. Petrowski looked over his shoulder, a wicked grin on his face. “I’d stay away from the arch at night, boys. A couple of good-looking young men like y’all would be catnip for a ghost.”

Casey rolled his eyes, taking a sip of his iced coffee. Laurel watched his lips on the straw.

“Speaking of catnip, this little hole-in-the-wall has catnip for the living. The best crab in the county, if not the whole state.”

“Casey doesn’t like seafood,” Laurel said.

“What a shame,” said Mr. Petrowski. “Well, nobody’s perfect.”

“It is a shame,” Laurel said in a low voice. “You don’t seem to like much. Are you on some kind of a diet?”

Casey made an exasperated noise, picking at a threadbare patch on the seat.

“You don’t need to be, you know. And you are in the South. There’s so much amazing food around—“

“I’m good,” Casey said. “Thanks.”

“Now here is a house with quite a history. There was a Madame here during prohibition who ran her business with an iron fist...”

Laurel snuck another glance at Casey. He had sunk into the seat, nursing his coffee. As the tour went on, Laurel saw the tight lines of his posture relaxing slightly. Mr. Petrowski really was an excellent storyteller, his voice melodious and commanding, and he knew the town and its scandals like the back of his hand. The morning haze had burned off, and the sunlight dripped down the facades of the buildings they passed, catching on the sharp leaves of palmettos and the wiry branches of live oaks. The sky was a bright, aching blue, scalloped by wispy clouds. Clementine’s hooves clopped lazily across the cobbles as Mr. Petrowski told them about murder and prostitution, about gangsters and Civil War ghosts and cross-dressing pirate queens. Every so often, a certain turn of phrase would cause a genuine smile to crinkle Casey’s face, his teeth white and straight, his dark eyes shining.

He caught Laurel staring at him and the smile dropped off his face. Laurel’s stomach flip-flopped, his heart jumping oddly in his chest.

“Enjoying the tour?” he asked.

Casey didn’t answer.

“Must be nice getting a break from your busy schedule. My mom is driving you so hard that you forgot to pay the deposit at Landry Hall.”

Casey looked at him sharply. “I’m sorry?”

“The deposit,” Laurel said, sitting up. Sparks were going off in his belly, and his fingers dug into the seat cushion. “They haven’t gotten it yet.”

“Why do you care?”

“Well, it’s just a little strange. Seems like my mom has given you carte blanche with her credit card. Seems like she just trusts that the money will make it to the right place. I’m only looking out for her.”

“It slipped my mind,” Casey said, an annoyed little tic appearing between his eyebrows. “I’ll pay it after I’m done wasting my time here.”

“Wasting your time? Come on, don’t you think it’s a little romantic? You and me, in a horse-drawn carriage, learning about murder and mayhem?”

“You have a weird concept of romance.” Casey looked him up and down, narrowing his eyes. “And a weird concept of keeping things discreet.”

“I don’t know.” Laurel licked his lips, feeling a little giddy. God, he had to stop flirting, he really did. But was he imagining it, or had Casey’s gaze lingered on his crotch, his thighs? “We keep running into each other. Maybe—”

“It’s a small town, like you said before.” Casey looked back out the window.

They were passing the Belmont Hotel now, and Mr. Petrowski was telling them about its resident ghost, a phantom dog that would press up against the legs of people it liked. Pretty adorable as far as hauntings went. Laurel tried again to get Casey’s attention.

“Do you like dogs, Casey?”

Casey shrugged, an irritated frown on his face. “They’re fine, I guess.”

“Wow, what an enthusiastic endorsement. Not exactly what a dog lover would say.”

“My grandmother had birds when I was a kid.”

“Birds?” Laurel hadn’t been expecting that. He sat up, curious about what else Casey might reveal.

“Parakeets. And love birds. They were—” Laurel might have been mistaken, but his face seemed to soften for a moment. Then the frown was back. “Loud. They were really loud.”

“God. I don’t know how I feel about you being a bird person.”

“Says the guy who gives off big Horse Girl Energy.” Casey crossed his arms. “And it was my grandma, not me. I just had to put up with them. Like I’m having to put up with you. Why are you so obsessed with me, anyway?”

Because it was hard not to be. Because Casey had been starring in his dreams for the last three months, had been a constant in the back of his mind. Every shock of bleach-blond hair he’d seen across the room, in clubs, in airport lounges, had made his

stomach drop and his skin feel hot all over. Every time he put on a tie, he could feel it wrapped around his wrists, could close his eyes and inhale Casey's scent, the salty, intimate scent of his skin beneath the cologne.

Laurel swallowed, feeling desperate and pathetic, feeling like a dog ghost plastering itself to Casey's leg. "I just want to get to know you."

"Well, I don't." Casey looked at him for a long moment. Outside were the footsteps of the horse, slow and deliberate. The sounds of the city waking up. Mr. Petrowski was telling another story, but all Laurel could hear was static, his heart pounding, his tongue heavy in his mouth. Casey held his gaze as he slid across the seat toward him, and then his hand was on Laurel's thigh, his breath against Laurel's ear, and Laurel barely kept himself from gasping. His skin was on fire, his scalp tingling and his dick stirring to life as Casey whispered, "I already know everything I want to know about you, Laurel Van Marcke. I know that you're spoiled, and useless, and not as smart as you think you are. I know that you're used to getting what you want. But this time, you're not going to, because it's run its course. I'm not interested. And when this party is over, I'm looking forward to never having to think of you again."

"Ouch," Laurel said, not sure why excitement was bubbling in his chest, not sure why—God—he was still hard. Somehow his hand had found its way onto Casey's collar, and he could smell the coffee on him, feel the quickness of his breath.

"Are we clear?" Casey asked.

"Sure." Laurel struggled out. "So clear. Crystal." Casey's lips were so close, and he knew how he would taste. Bitter, then sweet and familiar.

"Good," said Casey, and moved away, going back to looking out the window.

Laurel's ears were ringing, moths fluttering in his stomach, his thigh throbbing where

Casey's hand had been. So this was it, then. Casey wasn't interested in playing nice; he'd said it himself. If there was no hope of being friends (or more, so much more), then there was no reason not to go scorched earth. Figure out what he was hiding once and for all. Laurel cleared his throat. He could still feel the roughness of Casey's collar between his fingers. "I actually am very smart, you know. Despite evidence to the contrary."

"Could you stop talking?" Casey pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Ooh, I'm not good at that. Not good at stopping in general." He felt a smile sliding across his face.

"You're going to have to be."

"We'll see," Laurel said, tapping his fingers on the seat. "We'll see."

*

Casey's teeth were on edge the whole next day, anticipation needling at his spine. He was sure Laurel would show up. He seemed incapable of not being everywhere Casey was, and the whole speech in the carriage hadn't deterred him as much as Casey had hoped; in fact, it had seemed to make him more excited and buoyant than ever. Casey shouldn't have touched him. He shouldn't have gotten into an enclosed space with him to begin with. The air had been too thick, Laurel's imperfect smile too arresting, his lips too lush and sweet-looking.

It didn't matter. Casey refused to let him get into his head. He was so focused on not thinking about Laurel, in fact, that he lost several hours scrolling through dog costumes without registering a single one, and completely missed what Denise was saying about the entrance to Landry Hall—something involving a red carpet and a flower wall?

“We can get a step and repeat, right, Casey? I want plenty of pictures.”

“What? Oh, absolutely.” He doodled something on his tablet, trying to look like he was taking notes. He knew Denise would never ask to see them. She was convinced that Casey was hanging on her every word. So far he had written, signature cocktail. Jasper: top hat? And part of a grocery list. He needed more ramen packets. And maybe some of those blueberry muffins with the crumble topping. But no, scratch that. He wasn’t going to let Laurel make him stress-eat a bunch of sugar, either.

“And what about chandeliers? I mean, I know they already have some.” Denise scrunched up her face prettily. “But I don’t really like the ones there. Do you think it would be possible to put up replacements, just for the party? I really like the ones with a lot of beading, don’t you?”

Was she insane? “Gorgeous,” Casey said. “Totally.” Yeah. I’ll just pull ten to twelve chandeliers out of my ass. God, no wonder Laurel seemed to think he deserved Casey’s undivided attention. He was just as entitled as his mother. “And what’s our budget for that?” he asked innocently.

“Oh, whatever you think it needs to be is fine,” Denise said, waving a hand in the air. “I trust you.”

You shouldn’t, Casey thought, drawing a series of dollar signs in his notes app.

Mercifully, Laurel never appeared. There was no sign of him the next day, either, or the next, and then it was Thursday, which was Casey’s one day to work from home. There wasn’t really any work to do besides replying to emails, making vague, rote promises that he had no plans to keep. He tried to relax, but even soothing five steps of his skincare routine and the familiar background noise of a CSI marathon on the TV (it had been on constantly at his grandma’s, along with the chattering of her birds and the belting voice of Shania Twain) didn’t calm him down. So he paced, and

obsessed over every single one of his pores in the mirror, his T-zone feeling dense and sticky as if a dozen zits were building under the skin. Close-up, his face looked too much like his dad's, especially with the dark roots of his hair starting to grow back in. Casey didn't like seeing him there, knowing how much they had in common.

Denise hadn't been worried. Laurel came and went, so maybe he had just lost interest. Or actually taken the hint. Or maybe he was on a days-long bender with that Melody girl. Maybe—

There was a knock on the door, as invasive as if someone were knocking on his actual skull. Casey flinched.

Through the fish-eye lens of the peephole, he saw Laurel, standing on his doorstep with his hands in his pockets and a stupid grin on his face. Of course. Casey should pretend he wasn't here. The blinds were drawn, and Laurel didn't know which of the cars outside the apartment complex was his. Did he?

"I know you're there, Casey. I saw your car outside."

Well, fuck.

"Come on, open up. We need to talk."

Casey opened the door a crack, blocking the view into his apartment with his body. He didn't want Laurel to know what his personal space looked like, much less let him in.

"I called Landry Hall again," Laurel said. His voice was casual, but there was a jittery edge to his shoulders, and he was practically bouncing on the pads of his feet. Like a kid about to tell a secret, Casey thought. He thought about closing the door in his face.

Instead, he said nothing, watching him.

“It’s funny,” Laurel continued. “They still haven’t gotten the deposit for the ball. And you know, they were kind enough to get me in touch with the caterers and the florist, and the mixologist and the Halloween novelty store that you’re apparently getting props from, and wouldn’t you know it—none of them have seen a speck of money, either.”

Casey’s fingers went cold, and he felt dizzy for a second, spots of light dancing before his eyes. He gripped the edge of the door, stomach roiling. How fragile this whole thing had been. People will believe anything. Except when they don’t.

“Now admittedly, I am not a party planner. But it seems to me that you need to actually pay the people you’re enlisting to put together the event. Usually in advance.”

Casey cleared his throat. “Of course I’m going to—”

“And—” Laurel put up a hand, preventing Casey from saying anything. “I did some research on you. I’m guessing most of the nice, rich older ladies you work with don’t know how to do a reverse image search, but I do. Some of those red carpet photos from your Instagram also popped up on the social media of a certain Z-list celebrity in Calabasas. You’d cropped her out, but the source was the same. She’d cropped you out too. Understandably, since her pirate-themed 60th birthday bash fell apart after you skipped town with all of the money.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you? It was covered in Page Six. I can see why you wanted to move across the country, Casey Bright. Or Cal Dennis, or whatever your name is.”

Casey guessed he should be horrified. Instead, he almost felt like he'd taken a shot of liquor, a soothing, liquid sense of relief seeping through his veins. He sighed. "It was a stupid theme for a birthday party, anyway. Pirates."

"There's not going to be a Halloween ball, is there?" Laurel asked.

Casey stepped away from the door. "You should probably come in."

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Laurel sat down on the faded couch. Casey had the bizarre urge to offer him something to drink, but that was stupid. He would not cater to the person threatening to expose him. If that was even what Laurel was doing. Casey could practically see the thoughts ticking away in his brain as he took in the apartment: the used furniture, the bare walls, the embarrassing pile of empty Lean Cuisine boxes and Diet Coke cans in the recycling bin next to the sink. A characterless place, and an impermanent one. Casey had never intended for anyone else to be in here.

“Love what you’ve done with the place,” Laurel said.

Casey pressed his lips together, studying a spot on the wall.

“It’s interesting to see where you live. And to see you out of that suit and bow tie. It was a little much, don’t you think?”

Suddenly too aware of the thin cotton of his t-shirt and the sweatpants he was wearing, Casey crossed his arms. “Oh, fuck off. Are you going to tell Denise about me, or not?”

Laurel smiled luxuriantly, leaning back. “There it is, that refreshing honesty I missed so much.”

Casey didn’t reply. His fingers played over the corner of the kitchen counter. There were no other chairs in the apartment besides the sofa, and he wasn’t about to sit down next to Laurel, who had apparently made himself at home, stretching his legs out, feet making a divot in the carpet. He looked expectant, like he was waiting for Casey to say something. To apologize, maybe, or beg for mercy.

That wasn't going to happen. Casey had nothing to feel guilty about. He had done his time as a contributing member of society, after all. He'd worked since he was legally able to, dropping out of school to support his grandma. His grades had been shit, anyway. His early twenties had been a patchwork of seasonal jobs, temp jobs, retail and food service and catering. His longest position had been as a hotel front desk clerk, but he'd had to disappear after the manager had found out that someone was selling guests' credit card information online. (Only the really rich ones. Or the ones who were assholes to the staff. Unsurprisingly, the Venn diagram between the two groups had been basically a circle.)

That was the thing. When you'd grown up outside of the system, it was easy to start slipping, just a little. Easy to disregard the rules. Casey's dad was a dirtbag, a hypocrite, and an addict, but he'd taught him a few valuable lessons. Why stay on the straight and narrow, when it was impossible to get anywhere that way?

Besides, it wasn't as if Denise didn't have money to spare. He wasn't hurting anyone vulnerable, wasn't defrauding the elderly or stealing from the poor. (Or from cats and dogs. He had made sure the two thousand dollars actually made it to the humane society.) Honestly, he was doing her a favor, teaching her to be less gullible. Knocking her down a peg.

"So, what happens now?" he asked, not really intending to listen. Whatever Laurel had to say didn't matter. Casey could be packed and in the car in about fifteen minutes, and the state line was only an hour away.

"You'll have to go through with the ball."

"You're not going to tell your mom?" Casey felt a little dizzy. Laurel had surprised him once again, and he didn't like it.

"Not if you can still make this thing happen, no. I don't see any reason to."

“It’s too late. I haven’t done any work, and putting it all together in two and a half months would be impossible.” That was ridiculous. Why did Laurel even want him to go through with the party? He should hate him, after what Casey had said in the carriage. He should be delighted about getting to expose him. Instead, he was almost being—generous? It felt wrong, and Casey’s equilibrium was off. He needed something to do with his hands, or he was going to start picking at the edge of the counter, where the formica had begun to chip away. He opened the fridge, getting himself a drink. The can was glacier-cold, and he could feel the carbonation pinging against his palms through the aluminum, fizzling around just like his insides.

“Well, I could help.” Laurel sat up, pulling out his phone. “I’ve never planned a party before, but I do have connections in town. And money.”

“Look,” Casey said cautiously. Inside his head, he was screaming, Get out of my apartment . The hairs on the back of his neck were standing up, his body tense with the need to run. “I guess I’m grateful to you for not turning me in, but I don’t understand—”

“You don’t need to. Regardless, you have a vested interest in making this work. Or you should. Otherwise, I tell my mom that you’ve been pocketing all the money she’s given you for the ball.”

There it was, the catch, the teeth behind Laurel’s generosity. Casey crossed his arms. “I can cash out my accounts and be out of town before you even have the chance.”

“Can you?” Laurel gave him an assessing look. His pupils were dilated, eyes looking nearly black in the low light in the apartment, and Casey could see the pulse pounding in his neck. He remembered what it had felt like under his tongue, the naked rawness of it. “I wrote down your license plate number, by the way.”

Casey crushed the Diet Coke can in his fist. His stomach felt too full; he had chugged

the soda, and now it was sitting there in his gut like a balloon. He wanted to throw up, or scream, pressure building in his throat and pushing against the back of his teeth. What he really wanted was to jump into traffic, because if someone like Laurel could outsmart him, then there was obviously no hope for him as a human being. He should never have had an online presence to begin with, should have known it was a ticking time bomb to have his face on the internet. God, his own stupidity was pounding in his head, so loud that he hardly heard Laurel say, “It’s not that bad, Casey. I can sweeten the deal, you know.”

“There is no deal,” Casey said through gritted teeth. “And nothing about this is sweet, and I am not going to fuck you again, if that’s what you’re offering—”

“I’m not, but I like the way you’re thinking,” Laurel said.

Casey bit down on the inside of his cheek, hard.

“How much were you going to make off of the ball?” Laurel asked. “A rough estimate.”

“A hundred and twenty thousand.”

“Okay.” Laurel swiped at his phone, checking something on the screen. “I can pay you. A hundred and twenty thousand to make sure the ball goes off without a hitch, plus whatever you’ve already gotten from my mom. It can’t be that hard to actually pull off, right? You already did the dog wedding, so it’s not like you’ve never done a successful event. And I can help you.”

Laurel didn’t understand. It was a classic bait-and-switch, like Casey’s dad had taught him. Deliver on something small, then float something bigger. There was no way he could actually pull together the Halloween ball, and the thought of trying made him feel sick. The weight of it dug into his shoulders, like someone had grabbed him

there. All the hours of planning that he hadn't done, all the moving parts and maddening little details. "No. The dog wedding was manageable, small. I can't pull an event this big together in this amount of time."

Laurel shrugged. "A hundred fifty thousand?"

It was obscene, the ease with which he said it, and Casey wanted to knock the phone out of his hand.

He could still get out of here. Agree to whatever Laurel said, just to get him out of the apartment. The license plate thing didn't matter, not really. Those were easy enough to switch out. Hell, he could just buy another used car with the money he had siphoned off Denise.

And chip away more of his nest egg. Casey hated the thought of it. He wanted to get out of this life eventually (God, what a cliché, but it was true), and he'd been intentionally saving up, living as frugally as he could. Hoping to eventually be comfortable enough to open his own business. A hundred and fifty thousand dollars would make a big difference. A world of difference.

He allowed himself to think about it for a second. His own little flower shop, somewhere with actual seasons, somewhere with no hurricanes. A big city, where people weren't always prying into each other's business and where he could be whoever he wanted.

But at the cost of having to work with Laurel? It couldn't be worth it.

Casey made one last bid for sanity—or mercy. "You don't understand how much work this is going to be. How stressful—"

"Nothing a bunch of money can't fix, right?" Laurel stretched, lacing his fingers

behind his head. "I'm actually kind of looking forward to it."

"I'm not." He sighed, trying to look like he was actually considering it. Cracked his neck, ran a hand through his hair. "But fine. A hundred and fifty thousand, and you help put everything together." Now leave.

Laurel didn't make any move to get up. Casey fiddled with his Coke can, breaking off the tab. He could feel Laurel's gaze boring into him.

"I hope you mean it," Laurel said finally.

Casey flinched. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Oh, I don't know. Because you've lied about everything else?" There was an easy, nonthreatening smile on Laurel's face, but his pupils were still dilated, his eyes shining. "I'd hate to have to give your description to the police. Oh, or to get in touch with that lady in Calabasas. I bet she'd love to get her money back. How long do you think you can keep this up, Casey? I mean, if someone like me can figure out what you're up to, it's only a matter of time before you get caught for real."

Casey's stomach dropped, and he almost threw the Coke can across the room. God damn it, why did Laurel have to be smart? And why did he have to be right ?

"I'm good at disappearing," he said, through gritted teeth. If only he'd controlled himself in Vegas. If only he hadn't let himself fall under Laurel's spell, fall into bed with him, give in to that weird charm of his that was both infuriating and addictive. The smell of Laurel's hair was in his nose, suddenly, the taste of his skin in Casey's mouth, and Casey remembered how Laurel had trembled and gasped beneath his hands.

That version of him was nowhere to be found. If anyone was in control now, it was

Laurel. And he seemed to know it. “In this day and age? No one can really disappear. And you’ve left a digital trail miles long, sweetheart.”

“I really, really, fucking hate you,” Casey sighed.

“Well, I didn’t exactly expect you to like me,” Laurel said, with a crooked smile. “Not after this. But we can come to an understanding, can’t we?”

Casey said nothing, glaring at him, but his silence seemed to be answer enough.

“Good.” Laurel stood, pushing off from the couch and crossing the room. “Let’s shake on it. And then we’re going to sit down and you’re going to pay all those deposits, while I watch.” He made it sound almost deviant, a kind of sly promise in his voice, and Casey felt something tingle between his shoulder blades as he held his hand out robotically for Laurel to shake.

“Just so you know,” he hissed, “this is a business arrangement. Nothing more.”

“Of course.” Laurel smiled, holding onto Casey’s hand for just a second too long. His gaze trailed over Casey’s lips and down his neck, over his bare throat. “I’m glad we’re finally being honest with each other.”

*

Laurel had doomed them by saying it couldn’t actually be that hard; he saw that now. His back ached from leaning over the kitchen table, and his head was so full of linens and glassware and baby’s breath that he was sure his dreams that night would look like a Martha Stewart magazine written by a lunatic. If he ever got to sleep at all. He wasn’t sure what time it was, but the white-hot slats of sunlight coming in through the blinds had faded long ago, giving way to darkness. He was trying not to shiver; Casey kept it colder than a meat locker in here. His mouth was dry, and his eyes felt parched

as styrofoam peanuts from hours of looking at Casey's laptop screen.

God, parties were monstrous, and now he wanted to apologize for every single one he'd been to. There was so much to do, and Casey had been letting it all sit, since he hadn't been planning to actually deliver on any of it. Laurel's stomach let out a very loud growl, and he ran a hand over his face self-consciously.

"Should we at least order food, or something?" he asked.

"Knock yourself out," Casey said. "You're financing this whole thing."

"You're not hungry?" Laurel stood and stretched, feeling his lower back pop.

"Not really. Getting blackmailed has kind of taken away my appetite." Casey glared at him across the table. There was a raw spot on his bottom lip from where he'd been chewing at it.

"It's not blackmail." Was it? Laurel's heart sank, even though he had no reason to feel bad. He changed the subject. "You'll see. It'll be the event of the year. We just need to figure out the, uh, chafing dishes."

"We're not doing chafing dishes. A buffet would be too declass é."

"Why did you make me look at them, then, if we're not—" Casey's expression said it all. He was taking a perverse pleasure in overloading Laurel with all these extraneous details. Probably hoping it would scare him away. But it wouldn't. Laurel leaned back against the kitchen counter, massaging his neck. "You know what? It doesn't matter. I get it, event planning is a lot of work, and this is probably my cosmic punishment for ruining my twelfth birthday party when I was a kid." Casey looked like he couldn't be less interested in what had happened, but Laurel blundered on, just for something to talk about, just so that the word blackmail didn't keep knocking

around in his brain. “My birthday is right near Christmas, so mom thought it would be fun if I did, like, a solo caroling performance. Fun for whom, I’m not sure. Anyway, my voice kept cracking during Silver Bells , and I had a whole meltdown. Ran offstage, knocked the cake over, hid in a kitchen cabinet. They were searching for me for hours.”

“How traumatic,” Casey said, with infinite boredom.

“Oh yeah. Years of therapy.”

Casey sighed. “Can we get back to it?”

Laurel tilted his head, trying on a smile. “You don’t find me amusing, I guess.”

Casey mirrored the expression mockingly, no warmth in his eyes. “Be funnier.”

What would it be like to actually make him laugh? What did Casey even laugh about? Tricking people out of their money, probably. And he’d never laugh in front of Laurel unless he was laughing at him, because he really did hate him. He must, to have targeted Denise like this. “What was it?” Laurel asked casually, though he felt anything but. “What did I do to make you dislike me so badly? What was it that made you seek out my mom as your victim?”

“You really think I did this because of you?” Casey gave him a blank look. “I didn’t even know your name. I forgot about you.”

Laurel’s heart pounded against his ribs. To be despised was one thing, but to be forgotten? Unbearable. He could feel the tension in his neck as he said, “No you didn’t. This is all—”

“Some big plot against you?” Casey shrugged. “Sorry, but it’s not. I was headed

further south, actually. Trying to distance myself from the pirate party fallout. I stopped in town for the spring flower festival. Got to talking with Denise. She said she had always wanted to throw a big annual event like that one, and I saw an opportunity.”

“And you never once made the connection?”

Casey grimaced. “Like I said, I wasn’t thinking about you. There was no connection to make. And the only full-size picture your mom has up is that—”

“Creepy portrait with the haunted eyes? I know.”

“It doesn’t look like you.”

“Thanks for saying that.”

Casey brushed a strand of hair out of his face, saying nothing. Laurel’s eyes tracked his fingers involuntarily. The smell of his scalp, herbal and sweaty and somehow sweet, filled Laurel’s nose. The taste of his mouth, the feeling of his nails digging into Laurel’s hips. How could he have forgotten ? Laurel hadn’t; Casey had been a phantom floating in the forefront of his brain for the last three months. It wasn’t fair that Casey could just discard that night, when it had sunk its hooks into Laurel so irrevocably.

“Can I,” he cleared his throat. “Can I have a glass of water, or something?”

“You invited yourself into my apartment. I think you can help yourself.”

“I guess I can.” Laurel busied himself in the cabinet, noting the lack of dishes: a few chipped coffee mugs—not even fun ones with art or lettering on them, but just solid colors—and a place setting for one. He felt Casey’s cold gaze on his back. “I didn’t

really think about it, but it's an interesting quandary of manners, isn't it. When is it appropriate to barge into someone's home but not appropriate to help oneself to a drink? Are the two always aligned? And if not..."

"I give up." Casey snapped the laptop shut. "Tell Denise. Turn me in. Anything to keep from working with you. I can't stand hearing you talk for another second."

"I mean. You could stop me from talking. You have ways." Laurel smiled at him over the rim of the glass. He felt a little feverish, his equilibrium off, his stomach tight and his ears ringing the way they had when he'd climbed the great pyramid or touched the Eiffel Tower for the first time.

"I told you I'm not going to fuck you again."

"Your fingers are trembling." They were; Laurel could see them jittering against the tabletop. Casey clenched his hand into a fist.

"Too much caffeine."

"Sure." He thought about kissing Casey's knuckles, about uncurling his hand and sucking his index and middle finger into his mouth the way he had before. The salt of Casey's skin and the pressure against his tongue, Casey's breath stirring the tiny hairs on the back of his neck. There you go. Get them ready for me .

"You're bright red," Casey said, snapping him back to the present.

Laurel looked away, taking a sip of water. It was lukewarm, and did nothing to soothe the heat throbbing in his face.

"I think that's the only thing I like about you." Casey tilted his head. He didn't rise from where was, leaning over the table. He didn't approach Laurel, or touch him. He

didn't need to. His gaze was like sugar syrup all over his body, sticky and intimate. "How reactive your skin is. It makes it easy to guess what you're thinking."

"All I'm thinking is—" That I'm doing this for the wrong reasons. That I shouldn't be here. That I'll make sure you don't forget me this time. Laurel cleared his throat. "That I should get home and get some sleep. We have an early morning tomorrow."

"Right." Casey stood fully, stretching. His T-shirt rode up, showing the tan hollow of his belly. Laurel noticed, and Casey noticed him noticing. He kept eye contact as he said, "Well, sleep tight."

"You're not going to run off during the night, are you?"

"I thought about it." Casey kept looking at him. He still hadn't blinked, and Laurel felt an atavistic little shiver, as if he were being held in the eyeline of a leopard, or some other big cat. "But no. A hundred and fifty thousand, remember? You'd better be good for it."

"I'm good for a lot of things. You'll see."

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:20 am

Laurel had insisted on driving, but he didn't look great. His face was a little greenish as he slumped over the wheel of the Land Rover, and there was razor burn on his neck, as if he'd shaved hastily. He reeked of Tom Ford's Tobacco Vanille, which was aggressively cloying and didn't go well on his skin. He'd probably just bought it because it was expensive.

"Rough night?" Casey asked. Outside, the bland, regimented neighborhoods and strip malls of suburbia were giving way to countryside, the sandy soil steaming as the day got hotter. Marshy inlets and glittering stretches of cordgrass turned into tangled greenery as they drove further inland, clapboard buildings and church signs with missing letters fighting against stands of bald cypress and tupelo. He had almost missed how ungovernable the landscape was in this part of the country, missed all of the plants whose names he had learned from that battered old seed catalog in his grandmother's house. Missed how the heat and humidity seeped into the muscles and gave everything an almost luxurious air of lethargy.

"You could say that." Laurel ran his tongue across his teeth. The hair at his temples was damp with sweat. "I don't know what possessed me to drink half a bottle of Midori. It was the only thing left at the beach condo and I thought it might help me sleep."

Casey didn't know liquor names well enough to know what he was talking about. Whatever it was, it hadn't treated Laurel nicely, and Casey felt a little bloom of pleasure that he was driving him to drink, causing him sleepless nights. It was what he deserved.

"I slept like a baby," Casey said, though he hadn't. Several times, he'd gotten up and

started packing, throwing his clothes into garbage bags in a panic. But it wasn't worth it. After paying all the deposits—after Laurel had made him pay all of the deposits—his funds were depleted, and he didn't have nearly enough to justify running. Casey had used an ice mask on his swollen under-eye area, so hopefully his own rough night wasn't too noticeable. "I was dreaming of all the money I'm going to make."

"Yeah, great," Laurel said. "Glad to be of service." He flicked on the turn signal. The sign for Abernathy Farms loomed large on the side of the road, advertising u-pick blueberries, fresh peaches, and a petting zoo. Casey had bought flowers from them wholesale for the dog wedding. It had been cheaper than hiring a florist, and he had liked putting the arrangements together himself. Like many nerdy kids in the early aughts, he and Jamie had gone through a Japan phase. Only one thing had really stuck with Casey to this day: ikebana, the art of flower arrangement. The word itself held a kind of elegance for him, a quiet sense of order. Casey liked the idea of it: treating a bouquet like a sculpture, the tactile sensation of flower stems between his fingers, the way you could build balance out of chaos by adding a bloom here or subtracting a leaf there. The symmetry of lines and the importance of negative space.

In fact, if there was anything good about Laurel's idiotic idea to actually go through with the Halloween ball, it was that Casey already had the flowers planned. None of the tacky orange and black arrangements Denise had sent him from Pinterest would work, of course. It was going to be largely monochromatic, elegant and overwhelming and just a little bit eerie, black dahlias and black calla lilies and creeping trails of morning glory and jasmine to add contrast. Maybe some amaranthus for a bloody pop of crimson. He was so caught up in imagining how he'd drape the pillars and arches of Landry Hall in vines, making the whole event space look like some haunted castle half-reclaimed by the forest, that he didn't notice for a moment that they had parked.

Laurel was staring at him. "Are we just going to sit in the car?"

Casey shook his head, annoyance cracking through him like a whip. He had almost forgotten that this whole thing was Laurel's production now. His ideas for the flowers hardly mattered. Again, he thought about cutting his losses, leaving town. Gritting his teeth, he opened the car door and got out.

The air was full of the sweetness of fresh berries and corn, the green, earthy smell of the Lowcountry and an underlying barnyard odor from the petting zoo. Somewhere nearby, kids—human or goat or both—were yelling. A giant open-air barn had been turned into a fruit and vegetable market, lines of produce gleaming bright as Christmas ornaments in the sunshine. There were hay bales and scarecrows set up along the main path, and the fields behind the barn stretched off into the distance in rows of green. Casey shaded his eyes, looking down the drive. Alice and Gary Abernathy, the owners of the farm, were headed their way on a golf cart, gravel popping under the tires.

"Casey," Alice called, her long box braids piled on top of her head, a visor shielding her eyes from the sun. "We're glad to see you, honey. You had us worried you were going with someone else for the flowers."

"No, no." He waved a hand in the air, keeping his voice level. Tension lingered in his shoulders, the knowledge of Laurel at his back. "There was just a little confusion with the deposits, that's all. But we're ready to go now. And Laurel is helping me. You know Denise's son?"

Gary, a potbellied white man with a face ruddy from years of sun, shook Laurel's hand with eagerness. "Laurel, good to see you, man. It's been years. Are you still singing?"

Laurel massaged the back of his neck, a self-deprecating smile on his face. "In the shower, maybe."

“That’s a shame. You had a voice for the stage, I’m telling you.”

“Oh, no, I still kill it at karaoke, don’t worry.”

They all laughed, the Abernathys and Laurel, and Casey felt like he had just bitten into something sour. It was so easy for Laurel. He’d slid back into everyone’s lives like a missing puzzle piece, jostling Casey to the side. “I’d like to see that,” he said sweetly, fixing Laurel with a glare hotter than the sun bouncing off the windshield of the golf cart. “You doing karaoke. I’m sure it’s an unforgettable experience.”

Laurel’s smile widened. “Stick around. You might get lucky.”

Gary slapped the back seat of the golf cart. “Load ‘er up, boys. We’ll take y’all out to the flower fields.” He jumped up front next to Alice, and Casey resigned himself to being stuck next to Laurel on the shiny, sun-baked vinyl. As they wedged themselves in, thighs touching, Gary turned, handing a red solo cup to Laurel and then another one to Casey. “A little refreshment for the drive,” he explained. “It’s our fresh peach cider. We make it on-site.”

The liquid in the cup was bubbly and vaguely sour-smelling, so Casey knew it had alcohol in it. He took a small sip. It was sweet, and sweet things were always dangerous. Intoxicants, even more so. He’d seen his dad stumble around zombie-like on various cocktails of pills enough times to know that addiction ran in his blood. Casey wondered if the cider would help him relax, or just make him feel weird and disassociated. It was always a toss-up between hating how it made him feel and liking it way too much.

“It’s hard cider,” Laurel said unnecessarily, and Casey barely kept from sneering at him.

“I know that.”

“I’ll drink it if you don’t want to.”

Casey handed him the cup wordlessly, not offering any thanks.

*

A headache was percolating behind Laurel’s eyes, and he wanted to blame the heat and all the flower pollen, but it was probably the Midori, and the peach cider on top of it, candy-sweet, making the backs of his molars ache. Either that or all the cologne he’d put on in a fit of panic that morning. He didn’t really like it; it had smelled different in Heathrow, or else the whole airport had just reeked so strongly of the Burberry store that he’d been nose blind and had bought it sight unseen—scent unsmelled?

He dragged a hand over his face. His thoughts were especially imbecilic today, chittering around in his head. He looked down at his hands, clasped around the now-empty solo cups that he had stacked inside of each other. Casey’s thigh was glued to his, clammy heat building where their bodies touched. Laurel could feel every single rattle and vibration of the seat as the golf cart pattered around the farm.

“... and black calla lilies for a kind of alien-planet-feel,” Casey was saying. He’d been talking to Alice for the last half-hour, rattling off plant names that Laurel had never heard of.

“Love it,” Alice said.

“We’ll need a lot of tree branches, too. The creepier the better.”

“We can definitely do that. I think some of the flowers we’ll have to outsource.”

“Most folks around here just want sunflowers and hay bales for fall,” Gary agreed.

“But Casey has a vision ,” Alice said, flashing him a smile over her shoulder.

He did, Laurel, thought, sneaking a glance at him. Casey’s face was almost serene, and he looked perfect as always, not a hair out of place. He smelled nice, too, and not like a cigar store had exploded all over him. There were little birds embroidered on his shirt. Laurel envied their closeness to his skin. He thought of the apartment the night before, seeing Casey undone, the way the waist of his worn-out sweatpants had clung to his hip bones.

What was going on Casey’s head? His dark eyes sparkled as he spoke, his artistic hands making shapes in the air. Was it an act? No one would memorize that many types of flowers just for a scam. So then, did he actually like event planning? Laurel searched his expression for some sign of contempt, for an indication that he was secretly judging the Abernathys, their folksiness, the goats and the scarecrows and the chintzy hand-painted murals on either side of the barn (one said Life’s a Peach ; the other said, Keep Calm and Berry On). But maybe Laurel was the snob, because here he was picking apart this charming little slice of Americana while Casey seemed to be having a blast.

“You’re good at this,” he said finally, when the consultation was over, the timeline finalized and a tentative budget set. They were sitting in the car, hot leather seats baking against Laurel’s back and legs, and he couldn’t help saying it. The thought had been heavy on his tongue for the last half of the visit.

The look of quiet contentment dropped off Casey’s face as quickly as a curtain falling. “I think you should let me drive.”

“I’m not even buzzed,” Laurel said, though his brain felt a little wobbly. He was unsettled, and he wasn’t sure if it was because of the alcohol. He probably should let Casey drive. If only so he wouldn’t feel like a hypocrite for worrying about Melody behind the wheel. But he didn’t want Casey touching his car; it felt too intimate

somehow. The Land Rover had been in storage for months, and he'd missed it, and the open Lowcountry roads. He didn't get to drive a lot in Europe.

He turned the key in the ignition. "I mean it. You're good at this. I don't know why you don't just do it as a real job. Being a party planner could be super lucrative."

"Being a party planner is bullshit." Casey twisted the dial on the AC all the way up, and Laurel felt annoyance needling at his spine. "Being at someone's beck and call all the time. Existing just to make sure someone else has a perfect experience."

Laurel bit his lip. "I get it."

"You don't. Have you ever had to send back an entire cupcake tower because the royal purple icing didn't look royal enough? Or taken a poodle to get fitted for a Swarovski crystal-encrusted eyepatch?"

He shrugged, trying for humor. "I bet you could write a hell of a memoir."

Casey rolled his eyes. "It's not a funny story. It's being treated like an accessory. It's seeing absolutely disgusting amounts of money change hands and knowing all of it is going towards the stupidest shit, when you don't even have dental insurance."

Laurel looked out at the road. "Well, what are you going to do with your disgusting amount of money when this is over?"

"I don't know." Casey was messing with the window control, opening it a crack and then rolling it back up. Laurel pressed the child lock button. Casey flung himself back into the seat, scowling.

A red, white, and blue sign for Wayon Bonard, "The People's Congressman," whizzed by in Laurel's periphery. It was an eyesore, taking up half the sky, Wayon

Bonard's piggy little eyes boring into him. He grimaced, the sour feeling in his stomach getting stronger.

"So why are you really doing this?" Casey asked.

"What?"

"It doesn't even seem like you like your mom that much. So why are you insisting on going through with this ball, instead of just turning me in? Got something to prove?"

Laurel wasn't sure he should tell him. He wasn't sure he even knew, himself. He was probably just being stupid and had, once again, thrown himself headfirst into something without thinking about the consequences. He pressed his lips together, fiddling with the air conditioning.

"Is it just for the pleasure of my company?"

"Don't flatter yourself." Laurel's hands tightened on the wheel. He was going a little too fast for the rutted gravel road, the car shuddering around them. "Regardless of how much I do or don't like her, I don't want to see her humiliated." That much was true, at least. Theoretically. Maybe-probably.

"Huh. Well, I guess as long as you're paying me, it doesn't matter." Casey leaned back, folding his arms behind his head.

"That's right, it doesn't."

An electronic ringing noise filled the car as Laurel's bluetooth sparked to life. Denise's name flashed across the screen, and he groaned. He didn't want to talk to her. But he also didn't want Casey in his head, digging up the past, questioning his reasoning. Laurel's collar felt hot, irritation weighing him down. He didn't like

feeling this way, like all the varnish had been sanded off his emotions.

“Mom,” he said, his thumb pressing too hard against the answer icon. He forced a smile into his voice. “Hi.”

“Laurel, honey.” Denise’s voice came blaring out of the speaker. “Are you out at the Abernathy farm? Sarah Ann Copeland said she saw you there with Casey.”

God, there was no privacy in this town. Laurel pinched the bridge of his nose, headache thudding dully against his skull. “Yeah, mom. He, uh.” Suddenly Laurel couldn’t think of a good reason why he’d be spending time with Casey.

“Laurel offered to give me a ride,” Casey said, his voice smooth as butter. “My car is in the shop. But I don’t think he’s going to develop an interest in floral arrangements anytime soon.”

Denise laughed, and Laurel shot Casey a look, not sure whether to be grateful or perturbed. He’d changed registers so easily, like shrugging on a new jacket.

“Casey, sweetheart!” Denise sounded delighted to hear his voice. Much more delighted than she was to speak to her own son. “Well, get me caught up. What have you figured out?”

“It’s going to be glorious, Denise. Don’t worry,” Casey said. “Old Hollywood glam meets haunted castle meets Art Nouveau. Dracula, but in the Jazz Age. Make it spooky, but make it classy. Black and white. Pops of color.”

“And you’ll have my pumpkins?” Denise sounded dubious. Laurel wanted to spit out whatever word salad Casey had just tried to feed them. Absurdly, he pictured Dracula doing Jazz hands, and felt a little ill.

“We will absolutely have your pumpkins,” said Casey, who had just told Alice that under no circumstances would pumpkins be allowed.

“And my flower wall.”

“A flower wall for the gods, Denise. I couldn’t let you pose for pictures in front of any old thing, now could I? But don’t worry, it won’t outshine your gorgeous self. As if anything could.”

Denise giggled. “I’m sure it’ll be wonderful, Casey. And how’s Laurel doing? Is he being good? Not giving you too much trouble, I hope.”

Casey looked at Laurel, eyes flat, a smile frozen on his face. “As good as he can be,” he said.

“Thanks for calling, mom.” Laurel stabbed the screen with his finger, hanging up.

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The call disconnected, and the car was filled with a hot, uncomfortable silence as Laurel pulled onto the highway. His knuckles were white on the wheel. He fumbled at the radio for a moment, and a blast of music, startling and discordant, made Casey tense up in his seat. Laurel punched the knob again, turning it off. Something ticked in his jaw as he said, “You really are fake as fuck, aren’t you.”

“What?” Casey felt a heaviness in the back of his throat.

“Melody was right. All that talk about how you can’t stand to be at anyone’s beck and call, but you’re sucking up to my mom like she’s the greatest damn person in the world. A flower wall for the gods? How fabulous . Yass, queen.” Laurel’s voice was a sarcastic sneer as he stared Casey down. One strand of hair had come loose,

plastered across his damp forehead, and his eyes were dilated and a little wild.

“Watch the road, please,” Casey said primly. Unease was crawling through his gut. He thought involuntarily of his dad’s noisy old classic car lurching around country roads, the staticky buzz of the Country station or the drone of the prayer channel. His dad’s gray skin and gritted teeth as he tried to not nod off at the wheel.

“It’s creepy. Like you’re putting on a costume.”

“Me? Let’s talk about what costumes you’re wearing, Laurel .” Casey crossed his arms.

“You’re a hypocrite,” Laurel said, not looking away. He was going too fast, air roaring past the windows. “I’m sure you think you’re some kind of Robin Hood, stealing from the rich, but what about those nice people at the farm? You would have scammed them too.”

Casey bristled. Laurel didn’t get it. He’d never worked multiple minimum wage jobs, never come home with nothing but a pocket full of grubby tip money, aching feet, and a profound longing for death. He’d probably never even worked at all. Casey was only doing what he had to do to get ahead.

“Pull over,” Casey said. “You shouldn’t be driving.”

“Oh, right. Because you’re such a voice of reason.” Laurel swiped at his hair angrily, again not managing to push it back. “Lying to everyone, laughing behind their backs. You think you’re better than us, but you’re not, you know that? Being a liar doesn’t make you different or special, it just—”

“And what about you?” Casey asked. His hands were sweaty on the edge of his seat, and now he wasn’t watching the road either, because let’s be honest, if Laurel drove

this fucking luxury vehicle that probably cost more than Casey's entire existence into a ditch, he could just laugh it off and get a new one. There were no consequences for people like him, ever. "You're some paradigm of honesty?"

"Paragon," Laurel said, like he couldn't help himself. "Paragon of honesty."

"Fucking seriously?" Casey could feel a vein ticking in his temple. He wanted to stuff paragon and all of Laurel's other five thousand damn SAT words back down his throat. "You're not as smart as you think you are, you know. And you've been hiding big chunks of your life from your mom, pretending to be the perfect son when—"

"Don't." Laurel's face drained of color. "Don't you dare. You don't understand."

"I think I understand too well, Laurel. You're just as fake as me." Casey hit the button for the hazard lights, his palm tingling. He grabbed Laurel's wrist. "Pull over, or I'll make you. I'm going to drive."

Laurel let out a groan of frustration and swerved onto the shoulder, hitting the brakes so hard that the car nearly skidded out. The windows rattled and Casey's teeth clacked together as gravel sprayed up from the wheels, pinging against the Land Rover's underbelly. His heart was fluttering in his chest like a moth in a jar, and his tendons, his veins, felt like live wires as he tried to pry the keys out of Laurel's hand.

Laurel wouldn't let go, and Casey was undoing his seatbelt and leaning across the center console. He had Laurel's wrist pinned against the headrest, and his other hand had somehow landed on his thigh. Casey could feel Laurel's muscle twitch beneath his palm like the flank of a trapped deer, and the hazard lights were clicking on and off in his head, and he didn't really know who kissed who first, just that Laurel's lips were suddenly on his.

Laurel's mouth was sticky-sweet from the cider, hot and decadent as the center of a

peach cobbler, and Casey wanted more of it, wanted to kiss his way to the core of him. The horn let out a plaintive bleat as his elbow hit it, and then he was half in the driver's seat, Laurel already yanking at his belt buckle, and he could feel the blood pounding beneath Laurel's skin as he ran a hand over his throat, up across his jaw and into the lush thickness of his hair.

"Fuck," Laurel said into Casey's mouth, unable to stop talking even now. Casey tugged on his hair a little bit, which made him shudder invitingly, red blooming across his face, lighting up the shells of his ears like neon. His hand was in Casey's pants, skillful and familiar, stroking him, making trails of light swim behind Casey's eyes, flowers unfurl in his head, and how he had lied, Casey thought, as he bit into Laurel's shoulder through his shirt, tasting clean cotton and the tang of his sweat. How he had lied, because of course he hadn't forgotten him; he'd just put him away for safekeeping, and—

Something was trilling, an annoying, computerized sound. The same monotone female voice from before came over the speakers. "Incoming call."

"Your mom again?" Casey asked, against the pulse pounding in Laurel's neck. He wrapped his hand around Laurel's where it had stilled on his cock, squeezing slightly. His ears were ringing as he said, "Go on, answer it."

Laurel made a strange, wounded sound and started stroking him faster, pressing kisses to Casey's throat, his chin. He was trembling, his whole body tense beneath Casey's touch. A semi-truck drove past in a rush of sound, and the car rocked alarmingly on its wheels, spilling Casey fully into Laurel's lap. Their teeth clashed, Laurel nipping at his lower lip, and Casey tore at the collar of his shirt, wanting his palm flush against Laurel's skin, wanting to feel the rise and fall of his chest. They could die like this. Another truck might swing too close, crumple the car like a tin can. Casey couldn't make himself care. He pulled back, watching Laurel's face, the dark fan of his lashes, his dazed, almost indignant expression. As if he were the one

receiving pleasure, even though Casey hadn't touched the very obvious erection straining against his fly, hadn't so much as acknowledged it. Laurel's lips were swollen, and he leaned forward, brushing them against Casey's.

"Stop thinking ," he murmured, with the trace of a smile. "I can see you doing it."

"I want to see your face," Casey said. Birds were taking flight in his head, and pressure was building in his groin, his nails leaving indentations in Laurel's chest. The phone was still ringing, on and on.

"I want to see yours. I want to taste you again. I want—"

" Incoming call ."

"Jesus fuck," Casey said. "How do you shut that thing off?" His car didn't even have a working CD player, much less a bluetooth.

"I've got it, I'll just—" Laurel reached over his shoulder for the console, and stilled. "It's Melody."

"So?" Casey's tongue, his balls, the soles of his feet, were throbbing. He kissed Laurel's temple, his cheek, but all the dreamy intoxication of the previous moment was gone. Instead of melting into him, Laurel pulled back, shaking his head.

"I promised her I'd never miss a call. I'm so sorry." Laurel started, awkwardly, to zip up Casey's fly, and Casey shoved his hand away in annoyance.

"I can do that myself."

"Well, I'm sorry. I have to—I have to take this. I'll go outside so you don't have to listen." His face was blotchy, the red flush starting to fade, and his hair was a mass of

brambles, standing on end. Laurel tried unsuccessfully to smooth it down. His shirt was still unbuttoned, five lunar crescents from Casey's nails embedded starkly in his flesh. "God. Shit. Be—be right back, I guess." He snatched up his phone from the center console and slid out into the heat of the day, shutting the door behind him. Casey could hear his steps crunching across the gravel as he walked back behind the car.

Casey's hands were shaking. There was a half-empty bottle of water in the cupholder, and he reached for it, gulping it down. It was bathtub-warm and tasted like plastic, and it churned around uncomfortably in his stomach. Every inch of him was still on fire, nerves sparking like exposed wires, and his dick hadn't had the good manners to go down yet. God, what was he even doing? It was too hot out, and Laurel was inescapable, and he could feel himself sliding down a hill, sliding toward something he couldn't imagine. Sighing, he held the bottle to his head and leaned back against the seat.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:20 am

“God, what happened to you?” Melody asked, taking him in. Laurel smoothed a self-conscious hand over the front of his shirt. The fabric was stiff with dried sweat, and his hair felt greasy and disheveled, the phantom trace of Casey’s fingertips still dancing along his scalp. They hadn’t talked on the way back to Casey’s apartment. Laurel had hardly even been able to put a thought together over the rush of blood in his head, the pulsing heat beneath his skin. He’d ruined everything, of course. He had been so sure it was an emergency, that this, finally, was the call, and Melody was in the hospital or in jail or in a ditch somewhere. But she wasn’t, and Laurel was an idiot, and the silence in the car had felt almost as heavy as the memory of Casey’s hands all over him. When they’d parked, he had turned to Casey, hoping to catch his eye, hoping—let’s be honest—to invite himself in. But Casey had thrown the keys into his lap and rushed inside without a word.

He licked his lips. The slightest hint of sweetness lingered on his tongue, heady and nostalgic. He hadn’t had time to go home and change. Or brush his teeth. Or jerk off. Or anything. “Nothing. I’ve been out in the heat. What happened to you ?” As Melody stepped back from the door, he could see that her right foot was in some kind of supportive plastic and velcro boot.

“Oh, this?” She waved a hand in the air. “I’m fine. But the cat hates it.” She shuffled backwards unevenly, making enough space for Laurel to come into the condo. The boot made a hair-raising noise against the hardwoods, and Laurel sympathized with Luna. He kind of wanted to put his ears back and creep under the sofa, too. “Where have you been? You haven’t been answering my texts.”

Investigating fraud. Giving incomplete handjobs on the side of the road . Laurel scratched reflexively at his neck. “Melody, your foot—”

“I told you, it’s no problem. I just dropped a handle of bourbon on it, that’s all. Don’t worry, it didn’t break. I mean, the bottle didn’t. The foot was less lucky.”

“She keeps making that joke,” Chip said, looking up from where he was sitting on the sofa. “It’s not as funny as she thinks it is.”

“I didn’t think it was funny, period.” A familiar woman was in one of Melody’s armchairs, and Laurel did a double-take, seeing her in this context. She didn’t seem to have aged at all; in fact, she almost looked younger here, in a bright sundress and statement earrings instead of her usual slacks and button-up, her dark skin glowing, her eyes sharp and perceptive. Laurel’s last memory of her was her slipping him a copy of the complete poems of Arthur Rimbaud and congratulating him on his graduation. By being too sensitive I have wasted my life. He had highlighted that line, dogeared the page. The papery smell of books filled his nose suddenly, peaceful and comforting.

“Ms. Nelson?” He felt all the more self-conscious under the gaze of his high school librarian. Her expression was the same, too, the fond but slightly ironic look of having to deal with these kids .

“You know, you can call me Kierra now. How have you been, Laurel?”

“Great, yeah.” He thought of trying to fix his hair, but decided it was a lost cause. There was a shivery sensation in his lower belly as he thought of how Casey had yanked on it, pulling his head back, exposing his neck as if for the kill. “Sorry I’m late. If I am late. I didn’t really know we were meeting. Or, um, that you would be here, or—” God, what was he doing? Laurel hoped he wasn’t turning red again. He’d never really been aware of how easily he blushed until Casey had brought it to his attention. Fucking Casey. He needed to think of something, anything else. Needed to remember his manners. “Uh. How are you?” he tried. “It’s been a long time.”

Kierra Nelson shrugged. “Oh, I could complain, but I won’t. What have you been up to, Laurel? You look a little ruffled.”

“Hot day,” he said. “I’m not acclimated yet. I’ve been in Europe, visiting my dad. And before that, just traveling a lot. Wow, it’s great to see you. It’s been so long.” He hadn’t been back to the high school since he’d graduated. That building held a lot of shiny, oddly hollow memories, and he wasn’t sure how to talk to most of his friends from that time. He’d been in town for the ten-year reunion a few years ago, had meant to go, but he and Melody had ended up in a gay bar in Charleston instead, and after that, the night had turned into a black hole. “Are you still at McClellan?”

She made a face. “I am, Lord help me. It’s good to see you again, Laurel.”

“It’s good to see you, too,” Laurel said, still not sure what he was doing here. His brain felt like a rag that had been wrung out, and when Melody placed a cold drink in his hand, he took a gulp gratefully before spitting it back into the glass. Vodka was the last thing he needed. “Do you have coffee?” he asked her. “Or anything that doesn’t taste like paint thinner?”

“It’s book club,” Melody said, as if that explained everything. Her eyes were a little wobbly, her cheeks flushed.

“I’m sorry?”

“Book club,” Chip explained. “A monthly tradition. We rotate who chooses the book. Last time it was Octavia Butler.”

“This time it’s a book about an alien swamp monster and a human woman, but the swamp monster is the one who gets pregnant and has to carry the lady’s eggs!” Melody exclaimed. Chip let out a sigh.

“We’ve been on a sci-fi kick,” Kierra added.

Book club. He had rushed all the way over here for book club. By now he could have had Casey’s clothes entirely off; they could have been under the cool spray of the shower, doing all manner of things to each other. Relearning every inch of skin, every dip and hollow. Laurel sank into a chair like a deflated balloon. “I didn’t realize y’all had been hanging out together.”

“Melody started it,” Chip said. “She was volunteering at the library, and got back in touch with Kierra. I’m kind of just along for the ride. Against my will, some months.”

“Well, I don’t want to interrupt,” Laurel said.

“Don’t be silly. I don’t think Chip actually read the book this month, anyway.” Melody plopped herself down onto the couch. “Besides, it feels like we’ve hardly gotten to hang out since you got back into town. I guess you’re too busy driving around with your new boyfriend—”

“Boyfriend?” Chip asked. “I didn’t know you’d met someone. That’s great!”

“Oh, Laurel.” Kierra smiled. “Congratulations, honey. I mean, I kind of knew, but—”

“Jesus Christ.” Laurel knotted his fingers in his hair, squeezing his eyes shut. He’d made the mistake of telling Melody on the phone that he was with Casey. He should never have said anything. “He’s not my boyfriend. I hooked up with him once. It’s very embarrassing and I’d rather not talk about it. And my mom doesn’t know. About Casey, or about me liking guys, or any of it, so—”

“Casey?” Chip frowned. “Wait, the party planner?”

“And don’t worry,” Laurel barrelled on, heat creeping up his neck, his cheeks

tingling, “he’s a total asshole and I don’t like him and nothing else is going to happen, and—Melody, I changed my mind, can I have some vodka after all?”

“I think I’ll take some too,” Kierra said. “You kids are even messier than I remember.” She leaned back, watching Melody wobble off into the kitchen. “So what’s going on with this party planner?”

“I’m just helping him with my mom’s Halloween ball. He needed some extra input. And his car was in the shop,” Laurel added, using Casey’s lie from earlier that day.

“And he’s an ex of yours, or something? Oh, thanks, honey,” Kierra added, as Melody came thundering unevenly back into the room, a mixed drink sloshing around in either hand.

“Something like that. But really, I don’t want my mom to know, so—”

“I understand.” Kierra squeezed his shoulder, and Laurel felt his eyes prickle unexpectedly. “It’s hard to be different around here. But I hope you’ve been well, Laurel.”

Well great, now he felt even worse. Of the four of them, he was the only one who could hide his differences. “I have,” he said. At least he had been, until he’d come back into town. Now, he wasn’t so sure. “And you?”

She shrugged, earrings swinging. “Still fighting with the school board. I keep telling them these kids need books with passion and grit, books that reflect their actual experiences. But of course, that would be inappropriate.”

Laurel grinned. “So does this sexy swamp monster book have passion and grit?”

“You know, it’s innovative,” Kierra said.

“Well, speaking of innovative, this party is going to be amazing.” Laurel looked at Melody, trying to catch her eye. “I mean, Casey has a gift with flowers. You should see it. I thought I had a big vocabulary, but he knows plant names I’ve never heard of, and...” Laurel trailed off, aware that everyone else in the room was staring at him. Kierra had a speculative smile on her face. Chip and Melody just looked confused.

“Casey,” Chip said, “who’s a complete asshole.”

“An asshole who’s good at floral arrangements,” Laurel amended.

“Right. Well, it doesn’t really sound like my kind of scene, but you’ll have to take plenty of pictures,” Chip said.

“I can get you an invitation. All of you, actually. Melody?” Laurel tried not to look too nakedly hopeful, his eyes focused on her face. His palms were sweaty. He had the urge to pull out his phone, see if Casey had texted. To make sure he hadn’t scared him into calling everything off.

Melody chewed her lip. “I don’t think your mom would like that.”

“Who cares? I want you there.”

“I don’t know. The last ball I was at, I spilled a whole platter of deviled eggs onto the floor and called Lavinia Bonard a hypocritical cow.”

“Ooh, I would have paid money to see that,” Kierra remarked. (Lavinia Bonard basically was the school board.)

“You don’t want to come?” Laurel asked, his stomach sinking. He sure hoped she did. He had only promised Casey a hundred and fifty thousand dollars and made out with him in a car about it.

“It’s not a good idea,” Melody said. “Even if this stupid thing is off my foot by then, I—I wouldn’t know what to say to people. And what if Howie’s there? I just—”

“He might not be, though,” Kierra said. “Actually, if the restraining order’s in effect, he can’t be, right? So it might be a good opportunity...” she trailed off, glancing at Laurel, whose face must have indicated his surprise.

“Restraining order?” Laurel’s heart fluttered, a mix of hope and anxiety.

“I’m trying to get one.” Melody looked away, tapping a nail against her glass. “He’s been texting me awful things. And showing up at the library when I’m volunteering there. Kierra has seen it, so we’re hoping, with her as a witness—”

“It’s not just her he’s been bothering,” Kierra added darkly. “I could mention several former students whose DMs he has slid into. But no one wants to speak out against him.”

“We do,” Chip said. “We will. I’m friends with a couple of local judges. We should be able to accomplish something .” He knocked on the coffee table for luck, and Kierra followed suit.

“I didn’t know about any of this,” Laurel said, feeling all too aware of the dried film of sweat on his neck, the imprint of Casey’s hand on his thigh. “I could have helped.”

“I didn’t want to bother you. You’re so busy.” Melody looked away. The translation was clear. Laurel was never around, at least not often enough to be reliable. He’d gone from her best friend to a side character in her life, and he couldn’t exactly place when or how it had happened. Laurel swallowed, lungs feeling tight. He squeezed Melody’s arm.

“At least come to the party.” God, was that all he had to offer her? A stupid

Halloween party?

She sighed, making a reluctant grimace.

“It could be fun, Melody,” Chip said. “You could dress up as a sexy swamp monster.”

“Oh, please. You could dress up as a sexy swamp monster. You’ve got the legs for it.” She rolled her eyes, but she was laughing. “I’ll think about it. You’re right, it would be good to get out somewhere he isn’t. And Halloween’s a good time to reinvent yourself. It’s worth a try.”

*

They were lying on the floor, in that kind of buzzed, easy intimacy that made Laurel think of stargazing and sleepovers, his fingers playing through the wool strands of the carpet and his thoughts feeling comfortably submerged. Kierra and Chip had left hours ago, and Melody was splayed out on her stomach, one hand under the couch, trying to coax Luna out into the open with baby talk and nasty-smelling tubes of pureed meat.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and for a moment, he thought she was talking to the cat. Laurel turned to see Melody staring at him, her expression stark, her eyes glimmering.

“Melody, what—”

“I’m awful, I really am. You must hate me.” She curled in on herself, hugging her knees to her chest. “I didn’t mean to out you to Ms. Nelson. God, I’m a piece of shit. I—I was drinking, and I didn’t even think.” Her voice was muffled, her spine protruding through her blouse, a fragile, bent thing.

“Oh, I don’t care,” Laurel said. Maybe you shouldn’t drink so often , he thought about saying, but pushed it away. He was the one who’d been sweating out Midori all day, after all. “She’s great. I trust her. It’s not like you told my mom.”

“You know I would never.” Melody looked up, eyes hollow. There were crumbs of mascara on her cheeks, and her skin was slick with tears. “And I was just trying to be funny—I didn’t think—I mean, I don’t think he’s your boyfriend. I mean, is he? Are you, like—I would be happy for you, you know I would, even if I don’t really like him and—oh my God, I’m sorry. I’m such a dumb bitch.” She covered her face with her hands. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Just ignore me. God.” Her shoulders shook, and Laurel couldn’t tell if she was laughing or sobbing.

“It’s okay.” It wasn’t really, but he’d get over it. He swallowed. “Look, let’s talk about something else.”

“Yeah, okay.” She lay back on the carpet, looking up at the ceiling. Laurel could see her chest rise and fall. The air conditioner was a consistent rush of white noise. When Melody spoke again, her voice was almost too quiet to hear.

“I was doing fine, you know. I quit drinking and—and everything else. But then it just—with his brother, and the campaign ads everywhere, and suddenly I couldn’t avoid it anymore.” She sighed. “I’m a mess.”

“You can’t let him get into your head.”

“I can’t help it. I tried to ignore him, even the texts, I really did. He always starts out so nice. And then I don’t write back, and then he’s calling me a whore and a bitch and a worthless piece of shit.”

Laurel could feel his nails digging into his palm. “Can’t you block him?”

“He gets new numbers. Or uses different apps.” Melody bit her lip. “Do you really think it’ll work? With Chip’s help, do you think—do you think I can get him to finally leave me alone?”

“Of course,” Laurel promised, though he didn’t really know. Guilt simmered in his chest, guilt for all his carefree sunlit days spent elsewhere, while she’d been stuck in this town. Why hadn’t he checked in more often? Why had he just assumed everything was okay?

“I just keep thinking, maybe if I had been better, maybe if I had been a good girl from the start, no one could blame me. But I was in bars at fifteen with a fake ID, you know. I wasn’t a debutante, or some shit.”

“You were a kid,” Laurel insisted. His jaw hurt, and he realized he was clenching it too hard. “And I was right there with you.” They’d both been raised religious, but Melody’s parents’ version had been especially fire-and-brimstone-heavy. He remembered how intoxicating those years had been, once they’d realized it was all bullshit. Breaking curfew, Melody the only person he trusted. The two of them had both had secrets. Her with a much-older boyfriend, and him with his Old Hollywood crushes, his slow realization that he would never like girls. The world had felt like a wide-open road, and they’d been barreling down it without seatbelts. He should have watched out for her better. He should have been there during all the years between then and now.

Melody looked away, running a hand through her hair. “Do you remember going to Raleigh?” she asked. “For the—the thing?”

“I remember. We couldn’t read the directions.”

“I know, man, I—I printed them out, but I cried so much and they were all smeared.” She let out a little giggle, rubbing her eyes. “And I remember going to Waffle House

after. Of all places. Like, to this day I can't taste syrup without thinking about getting a damn abortion." She giggled again, and it sounded a little hysterical. "And you kept playing the worst shit on the radio. I swear that Pitbull song came on like ten times."

"I mean, I've always thought that Pitbull possessed a certain base charm."

Melody didn't respond to his attempt at humor, which was probably for the best. "I never told Howie. That was one of the only things that he didn't get to have, I guess." Melody turned to look at him, a beached mermaid, her hair spreading out across the floor like seaweed. "You know, he never hit me. He took care of me. And sometimes he was sweet. And I thought—I thought maybe that was what it was supposed to be like, you know?" She gnawed at her lower lip, looking so tired, so childlike and also so ancient.

Laurel put a hand on her leg, but his fingers were numb, and in his head there was a dull buzzing. He wouldn't call what Bonard had done taking care of her, but he didn't know what to say. Every adult in her life had failed her as a kid, from her parents to Howie Bonard, and now Laurel was failing, too. He felt very, very isolated, very far away, stranded here on the shore of her pain.

"Maybe that's why no one will listen. Why no one believes the bad parts."

"I'm listening," Laurel said. "And Kierra and Chip are, too, it sounds like." He squeezed her ankle, hoping she could feel the beat of his heart, all the fierceness he had for her. He wanted to make noise, to crack the room open and let sunlight in, to do anything that would peel away the heaviness draped over everything.

"Yeah." Melody sighed.

"I'm glad you have them. Since I—I haven't been around."

She gave him a look that was hard to read, her lips pressed together. “I can’t tell them everything. Not the way I can with you.” Rolling onto her back, she looked up at the ceiling. “I still don’t know what it’s actually supposed to be like. Do you?”

“Know what?”

“Love. What it’s supposed to be like.”

“Nah.” He wiped a glittery smudge of eyeshadow off her cheek. “I’m a no-strings gal. Emotionally stunted. The field in which I grow my romantic notions is barren.”

“Wow.” Melody took a deep, shuddering breath. A tiny smile crossed her face. “Stone-cold.”

“That’s me,” Laurel said, something shivering in his lower belly. He was lying to her again. The truth was, he had been in love before. Disastrously, whole-heartedly in love. But it had happened so long ago. And it had been brief, and stupid, and not worth burdening her with. “Want to get out of here?”

“With this thing?” She made a pouty face, picking her right foot up and stomping it against the carpet. “I can’t go anywhere.”

“I could carry you. Or get you one of those jaunty little carts?”

Melody rolled her eyes, but she was smiling for real now, and Laurel felt his heartbeat slow, the warmth come back into his hands and feet. He hadn’t been holding his breath, but it felt like he had. “Let’s just stay in. We can order food and watch old movies.”

“Musicals?”

“You know it.”

Laurel hoisted himself up onto the couch. “Only if you let me sing the high parts.”

Later, as the credits of *West Side Story* were rolling and they had both had a good cry and had agreed, as they always did, that Rita Moreno was the only woman either of them would make an exception for, Melody asked, “So what actually is going on with the party planner?”

“Nothing.” Her head was resting on his shoulder, and Laurel was glad he didn’t have to meet her eyes. He watched as the words scrawled across the screen, his vision blurry. In his mind he saw Casey looking down at him, lips parted, sweat standing out on his brow. Guilt lurched around in his stomach. “We’re keeping things professional,” he said.

“It’s not going to be awkward?”

He wanted to tell her. He didn’t want to bother her. He probably didn’t even deserve to confide in her, at this point. Laurel took a deep breath, feeling all of a sudden like he couldn’t get enough air. “I’m sure it will be, a little. But it’s fine.”

Melody looked up at him. “You can talk to me, you know. If you need to.”

He couldn’t. But he didn’t say that. He just put an arm around her shoulder, and pulled up another movie.

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He had no desire to be at Wayon Bonard's campaign fundraiser, but he found himself there nevertheless, swept along in a kind of helpless lassitude. Laurel's insides felt all jumbled up, his thoughts still raw. He made nice and shook hands through clenched teeth, hoping nothing showed on his face. A panoply of society folks passed by, squeezing his sweaty palm and clapping him on the shoulder. His mom was there, and her friend Meredith, not quite included in everything but lurking on the periphery. There were former classmates and team members with insincere promises to catch up. There was the congressional candidate himself, a stout man with veiny jowls and a nose like an overripe strawberry, who pumped Laurel's hand with unnecessary vigor and said he hoped he could count on his vote. (He very much could not.) There was Howie Bonard, working his way through the crowd with his salesman's smile. Laurel had managed for most of the night to be everywhere that he wasn't. He couldn't stand to speak to him tonight, or ever. There was the matriarch of the family, Lavinia Bonard, and the church ladies, Sarah Ann Copeland, Mary Devereux, and Birdie Callaway, all fussing over him, asking if they could expect him next Sunday and regaling him with stories of how adorable he had been as a child. Laurel didn't really remember that version of himself; he remembered performing, remembered jumping through hoops and checking boxes. A trained dog, a dressage horse, executing a routine, while inside his head, he was miles away.

He was miles away now, wandering through the room in a fog. In addition to their country estate, the Bonards had multiple properties in town. This was one of them, an Italianate villa on the corner of Third and Main, one of the largest antebellum buildings still standing in downtown Bonard, with a spiral staircase, an elaborate garden, and a fully staged carriage house in back. It was on the national register of historic places, and tours were given every weekend. Laurel's sixth-grade class had been subjected to several field trips here as part of an American History unit, hearing

what he would learn later was a very skewed version of events. Of course, now it was considered a little more gauche to openly celebrate one's racist ancestors, but the Bonards had kept up all the family portraits and Civil War memorabilia. Unlike Denise's house, which hammered visitors over the head with a confusing collection of beauty pageant paraphernalia and dubious antiques, the Bonard House whispered silkily of money and power. People whose names should probably be scrubbed from the history books stared down from the walls. Sofas that had seated presidents and dignitaries were laid out as casually as if they'd been from Walmart. All of the wood paneling in the main ballroom, Laurel knew (again, from the sixth-grade field trips), was from a forest that no longer existed, and was irreplaceable.

Someone had given him a cup of sherry punch, but he'd hardly touched it. The liquid was warm, the cut-glass vessel digging into his skin. Laurel knew if he allowed himself to drink tonight, it would be a disaster, because he could feel a familiar restlessness in his head, a sort of panic at the back of his brain. It had been stupid to come. Chip wasn't here, quietly refusing to show his support, and neither was Melody, for obvious reasons. There were dozens of people who wanted to talk to him, but no one Laurel wanted to talk to.

No one, that was, except Casey, who Denise had brought along as her date. It had only been a few days since the trip to Abernathy farms, and they hadn't spoken. Laurel wasn't even sure what he wanted to say, just that he wanted—craved—Casey's attention. But Casey, across the room, seemed to be looking everywhere except at him.

He looked immaculate, as always, in a pastel suit and a shirt that had some kind of pattern on it, subtle enough to be fun but not tacky. Laurel wondered how long Casey spent putting together his outfits. (Let's talk about what costumes you're wearing, Laurel .) There was something a little bit otherworldly about him, something that drew one's gaze, and Laurel didn't seem to be the only one who thought so. The church ladies had descended upon Casey, evidently finding him to be a source of

fascination, or else trying to save his soul. Birdie Callaway was squeezing his arm, her cheeks rosy, an expression of dire importance on her face.

Of course, it was all an act. The colorful suits, the bowtie, the hair. The indulgent smile as he pretended to listen to what Birdie was saying. Whatever thoughts were actually going on behind Casey's eyes were his alone.

Laurel turned away, looking for some fresh air.

Even though night had fallen, walking out onto the veranda felt like being submerged, the hot air enfolding him in a blanket of lethargy. The garden stretched out before him, brick-lined paths illuminated by in-ground lights, the vague suggestion of orderly lines and boxy shrubs competing with palmettos and flowering vines. By day, Laurel knew (again, from the field trips), it was a tame, manicured, English-style garden, with stone benches and mossy cherubs and a three-tiered marble fountain. In the dark, it seemed wilder and more lush, its shapes less distinct. Out in the distance, he saw lighting bugs, little lighter-flicks above the hedgerows. The night was busy with the sound of insects and trickling water, and the smell of jasmine was heavy on the air, along with other plants that Casey probably would have known the name of.

He had hoped that no one else would brave the heat, and he'd be alone, but the sound of the door opening and closing at his back made Laurel's shoulders tense up. Praying that it was just someone else who wanted some privacy, he didn't turn, but the voice, when it came, made his stomach flush with cold and his jaw clench, molars grinding together.

"Well, well, the prodigal son returns. Le baronet, bonjour." Laurel turned to see Howie Bonard standing behind him, a glass in his hand, his full head of dark hair shining under the porch lights. Fifty-something and he still hadn't been struck by male pattern baldness, or even many grays. There was truly no justice in his world.

His All-American boyish good looks hadn't faded, though his skin was leathery from years of sun. He'd gotten new veneers at some point, and Laurel noticed with a twinge of pleasure that they were too large for his mouth. "I heard you were back in town. I was hoping we'd run into each other."

I wasn't . Laurel didn't know if he could do it. In his head he saw Melody lying on the floor, face puffy from crying. Why had he come here? Because his mom had told him to? Why had he even come home in the first place? He had the absurd urge to run off into the garden, hide behind a hedgerow. Climb a magnolia tree.

Instead, helplessly, he let his hand be shaken by Howie Bonard, stomach simmering.

"How was Europe?" Howie's smile was sharp, his pupils ringed in white. He'd been drinking. Or something else.

"Wonderful," Laurel muttered.

"I'll bet. Girls, galas, and fox hunting? Discotheques?" Howie Bonard's arm was around his shoulder before Laurel could react, enfolding him in a bubble of mint and bourbon and overly-strong cologne. "Red Light districts? What did you get up to over there?"

Laurel held himself perfectly still. The hairs on his arms and legs were standing up. "Not much. Drinking port with my dad. Enjoying the weather."

"Oh, come on. Didn't you have any fun? No femmes dangereuses ? It's a lawless land over there, I'll tell you." Howie Bonard poked him in the chest with one finger, the liquid in his glass nearly spilling. "A man can find all sorts of entertainment."

"I really didn't get up to much."

“So modest. With a pedigree like yours, I’m sure you were drowning in European pussy.”

Laurel felt disgust rise in the back of his throat. “And what about you? How have you been?” he asked, trying to free himself. Bonard’s arm felt heavy and boneless around his shoulders, and the back of his neck was getting clammy.

“It has been trying , my boy. Absolutely trying.” Bonard poked him in the chest again. “With the campaign and all, I have to be on my best behavior. Not that I’m ever not,” he added, with a sloppy wink. “You know that little trouble I had with the law was bullshit. I mean, I don’t even like cocaine. I’m just partial to the smell of it.”

He laughed. God, those teeth were like fence slats.

Laurel creased his face into what he thought was a smile. “Sure. Of course.”

“But you know what they say. You are the company you keep. So I have to be a good boy until Wayon gets elected. Speaking of the company you keep...” Howie grinned even wider, his face a carnival mask in the darkness. “I heard you’ve been spending time with Melody again. Heard she showed up uninvited to a party, made a big scene. What is it about these crazy women, Laurel? They get their talons into us and just don’t let go.”

Laurel had the vague sensation of needing to throw up, just like he had every time his mom had made him sing in front of an audience. He could feel the pulse fluttering in his temple like a moth, an ache starting up behind his eyes. “She’s my friend,” he said weakly. “She’s only ever been my friend.” And Howie was the one texting her. Tormenting her. Not letting her go after all these years.

“Oh, come on. No one’s ever just friends with a girl like that. You and that Mexican lawyer kid have been panting after her for years.”

Chip's family was Colombian-American, but Howie Bonard had apparently never met a microaggression he didn't like. "I need—" Some air. A drink. To scream. Something red-hot and unformed was scrabbling its way up his throat, and Laurel was worried he was about to do something stupid.

"Unless you've switched teams," Howie said slyly. "I heard you were hanging out with that party planner, too."

"Why are you so fucking interested in my sex life, Howie?" Laurel hissed, finally wrenching himself out from under Bonard's arm.

Bonard held up a hand. "Woah, just making friendly conversation, son."

"I'm not your son. Or your friend." Laurel's fist was too tight around the punch glass, and he set it down on a railing, afraid he would throw it otherwise. "Neither is Melody. Stay away from her. Stop texting her."

"I think you should calm down." Bonard's eyes were flat, reptilian. He took a slow sip of his drink. Behind him, Laurel could see people moving back and forth in the windows, hear the sounds of music and conversation. He knew everyone in there, but he had never felt more alone.

He swallowed. Turning away, Laurel fled down the steps and into the garden.

*

Casey was still here. Okay, maybe he had freaked out a little after the moment in the car, sat trembling under the cold spray of the shower, a catalog of Laurel's expressions playing through his head, his red face and the tortured little gasps he'd made and the long, taut line of his throat. The candy-sweet taste of his lips. Maybe those same lips had visited him once or twice in his dreams since then. But Casey

was still in control. He had a high tolerance for uncomfortable situations, and he could tolerate this one for as long as it took to get paid. Like Jamie had said, Casey wasn't going to fall for Laurel. He didn't even like him as a person, didn't like his undeserved optimism and his annoying exuberance and how damn nosy he was. How he just seemed to assume things would go his way. How he thought he was the smartest person in the room, and how he made Casey's self-control want to jump out a window. There was really nothing appealing about him at all, besides his trust fund—

And his pretty eyes, Casey's brain whispered, and how amazing his ass looked tonight, in that pair of slacks—

The trust fund. Which was, again, the only reason Casey was sticking around. He was in this for the money. He told himself it would be worth it. He told himself that the sizzling, anxious sense of anticipation he felt in his palms, in his lower belly, was because of the one hundred and fifty thousand dollars and not because Laurel was here in the room with him.

It was going to be a long night.

He shouldn't have let Denise drag him along to this event. Casey was an expert at performing, and he was used to being trotted out and shown off; his dad had used him as a prop in various sob stories before Casey had even been able to talk. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have minded being here, fielding probing questions and getting his arm squeezed, playing the gay bff to a bunch of achingly sweet ladies who he was fairly sure all expected that he was going to Hell. Being a source of fascination and mild horror. In its own way, it was interesting. People told you all sorts of things when they considered you a novelty. It was just that he was tired . He'd felt Laurel's eyes on him all night, and keeping up the party planner persona was hard when his mind was back in the Land Rover, in that little pocket of urgency and heat.

Luckily, right now he didn't have to do much more than smile and nod. Birdie Callaway, who had apparently been hitting the sherry punch pretty hard, had gotten on a tangent about how women hadn't even been allowed to wear pants in some of the clubs in Charleston, back when she was young.

"But of course now everyone wears whatever they want. Boys are going around wearing skirts, and the girls are out in the tiniest little tops, I mean, just showing everything, without a thought for the effect they have on people. How is anyone supposed to get anything done when all these young women have their stomachs out like that, I ask you?"

Casey was half-tempted to reassure Birdie that it was totally fine if women's midriff was making her have some previously-undiscovered feelings, but he just smiled sympathetically, holding his tongue.

At last, she fluttered back off to the punch bowl, and Casey was able to make his exit, slinking out the back door and onto the veranda. He needed to get away. Not just from the ladies, but from Laurel, who had been staring at him from across the room like a starving puppy. Although now he was nowhere to be seen. Good. Casey really didn't want to talk to him about what had happened in the car. He didn't even want to make eye contact, because then he would want to kiss him again. Which was annoying and not smart.

There was a light on in the carriage house, a little square of orange in the humid night, and he set off toward it, thinking maybe it would provide some shelter from the midges and mosquitoes. To tell the truth, he was kind of curious about what a carriage house actually was. Casey had always liked exploring other people's homes, gaining impressions of their personalities from how they lived and decorated. It was one of the only perks of working in the service industry.

As he got closer, he could see that it was actually a collection of buildings: an

English-style cottage, incongruously cozy for the punishing summer heat; a covered area that did actually house two carriages, shiny and free of dust or leaves, though they obviously hadn't been used in decades; and a long line of stables. The door to the cottage was locked, but he peeked inside. This was where the light had come from. The room was illuminated, and it was full of furniture from an earlier time, a modest table setting laid out and logs on the hearth, as if the groundskeeper would be back at any time. This must be what "fully staged" meant (Casey had checked the Bonard House's Wikipedia page before coming here). So strange, to cling to the past so much that they'd installed a little snapshot of it on the grounds of their estate. Casey had never had much use for the past, his own or anyone else's.

He wandered into the stables, feet nearly silent on the cobbled floor. It was dark and muggy in here, the symmetrical lines of the stalls stretching off into obscurity. The air smelled like jasmine and magnolia blossoms from the garden, the faint, dusty scent of old hay and a ghostly whiff of sickly-sweet ammonia from long-ago horses. Shadows pooled across the floor, and Casey felt an uncomfortable tingle between his shoulder blades, not liking how little visibility there was, how anything could be moving around out there in the dark—

Shock jolted through him and he heard himself let out a curse as he realized that something was moving, one of the shadows was elongating and standing up, and Casey fumbled for his phone, heart pounding—

And he cursed again, for different reasons. Because it was Laurel. Laurel had turned on the flashlight on his own phone, and was standing there in the bright white beam, his face washed out and a little blotchy, freckles stark against his pale skin. He looked like he might have been crying, and Casey nearly turned and ran back out into the garden, because he wanted exactly nothing to do with that. He licked his lips, not sure what to say. His heart still hadn't slowed down, and he felt a corresponding pulse start up in his groin, a shiver work its way through his thighs, as he took in Laurel's messy hair, the cords standing out in his neck, the way his sweaty shirt had molded

itself to his chest.

“Oh good,” Laurel said. “You’re here.”

“I didn’t mean t—” Casey started to say, but Laurel had surged forward out of the darkness, and his hand was on Casey’s chest and his tongue was in Casey’s mouth, and from far away, Casey heard the clatter of Laurel’s phone dropping to the ground as the flashlight beam swung wildly around the room before going out entirely, and they were kissing up against the door of one of the stalls, kissing in the dark with the smells of flowers and hay and old leather all around them, uneven wood paneling digging into Casey’s shoulder blades through his jacket, stars bursting behind his eyes.

Laurel kissed with desperation, with a kind of panicked hunger, and Casey felt himself sink into the kiss with the heady, luxurious pleasure of giving in to a craving. Slowly, almost lazily, he ran his hands over Laurel’s body, appreciating the lines of him. The night air was like molasses, sticking to their bodies, and Laurel was trembling under his touch like a nervous animal, muscles fluttering in his lower back. He made an amazing little sound when Casey squeezed his ass, so Casey dug his fingers in, pulling him closer, making Laurel fall against him. Laurel had a great ass, round and plump, with adorable little twin dimples in his lower back. He had strong thighs, too, and even though Casey was slightly taller, he felt wonderfully small and delicate with Laurel’s weight on him, pinned here against the wood in this pocket of darkness and heat. He ground his hips against Laurel’s, face buried in his hair, breathing in the familiar scent of him. Laurel groaned, nuzzling and mouthing at his neck, sucking on his earlobe until the hairs on his nape stood on end.

When Laurel’s shaky fingers began to undo Casey’s belt buckle, he heard himself say, not at all convincingly, “It’s a bad idea.” But really, he couldn’t get himself to give a shit. Something at this rich people party had put Laurel in a state, and Casey was just along for the ride. This had been in the cards for them since they’d kissed in

the car, or maybe even since Laurel had winked at him in Denise's kitchen, and it was hot out and Casey was too tired to resist.

"I don't care," Laurel muttered against his shoulder. "Please, I just want—I want—"

Casey meant to shrug, but all the nonchalance dropped out of him as Laurel fell to his knees. It looked a little painful; cobblestones were bad for your kneecaps, and he heard Laurel let out a muffled curse against his leg.

"Are you okay? You're so dramatic. You could have just—"

"Shut up. Please ."

Laurel was undoing his pants, and Casey felt the warm air enveloping his bare legs, felt Laurel's hot breath stir the hairs on his lower belly. He could barely see Laurel's face, but he could tell he was looking up at him. The light caught in his eyes sent a silver-bright thrill rippling through Casey, from his scalp to his belly to the soles of his feet. He let out a breath, reaching down to caress Laurel's cheek as Laurel bent his head, kissing his way along Casey's hip bone, his abdomen, soft, lavish kisses that got wetter and more eager the lower he went. His thumb was rubbing circles on Casey's thigh, and the brush of his hair against Casey's skin felt electric, almost painful, setting his teeth on edge. His cock leapt against Laurel's lips, and Laurel smiled, kissing the tip of it. Casey babbled to keep from gasping, his voice sounding strange and waterlogged to his own ears.

"You know, I like the pleading. And I like you quiet like this, it's—"

Oh, God, he couldn't stop himself from gasping after all, because Laurel sank his teeth into the meat of Casey's inner thigh. Shock and pleasure arced through him, his hand scrabbling across the wood behind them, his mouth falling open. Laurel's grip on his leg had turned forceful, holding him in place, and Casey gasped again as Laurel took his cock fully into his mouth. He was sucking him deeper even before Casey was fully hard, his mouth velvet and lush as the darkness around them. Casey

let his head fall back, his eyes half-closed, the smell of jasmine in his sinuses, on his tongue. Laurel's hair was rough between his fingers. His other hand had wrapped itself around one of the posts behind him, his palm sweaty, his equilibrium gone. He felt almost drunk on it, on him, his thoughts swaying like branches in the wind, his body liquid. He could hear the chittering of insects in the garden and the slick, fevered sound of Laurel's lips sliding around him, and every time his cock hit the back of Laurel's throat, his brain burst into dazzling shards of glass. It had been like this before, too, this raw and uninhibited, Laurel throwing himself into their encounter with luxurious abandon. Casey almost admired it, the way he got lost to the ungovernable strength of his wants.

"I guess—I guess I did miss you after all," he admitted. Here in the darkness, it felt safe to say it. Casey's legs were shaking, his skin stinging where Laurel had bitten him, stinging everywhere, red-hot and unbearably sensitive. "I guess I did think about you a little. I guess I—oh, fuck—" and he was coming with a garbled sound, as Laurel groaned and took him even deeper, his nails digging into Casey's hip, his sweaty forehead flush against his stomach.

Casey was still leaning against the wall, trying to remember how to use his arms and legs, when Laurel pulled away. He heard him laugh softly, shuffling around in the dark.

"I think I broke my phone."

I think you broke me, Casey didn't say. He collected himself, pulling up his pants and finding his own phone. Laurel's eyes were dilated in the light from the screen, his eyelashes damp and stuck together. He was still on his hands and knees, and Casey reached down, handing him his pocket square. "Here."

"What's this for?"

“If you—want to wipe your mouth. Or your face. You’re sweaty.”

“So are you,” Laurel said, but he dragged the fabric over his face and neck before giving it back. Casey wasn’t sure if he wanted to fling the handkerchief away or never wash it. “Of course you’d have a pocket square. What’s that color, anyway, is it pink?”

“Can’t you tell?”

“Well, no. Asshole. I’m a little bit colorblind.” Laurel scratched his cheek. “Probably why I run headfirst toward red flags.”

Casey let out a surprised puff of laughter. Shit, why did he have to be funny, on top of everything else? “I—how many times have you told that joke?”

“To you? Only once.” Laurel smiled. His eyes were shining, teeth slick and bright, and Casey’s heart thudded against his ribs. “Did you drive here with my mom?”

“I did.”

“Make up an excuse. Come home with me.”

“This isn’t going to turn into anything, you know.”

Laurel snuck a look at Casey in the light from the dashboard. His skin was washed out, his dark eyes focused on the road ahead. A light mist had begun to fall, settling onto the windshield in lacy patterns and making the cab of the Land Rover seem hushed and intimate.

“I don’t expect it to,” Laurel said, trying to sound flippant. He could feel his pulse fluttering in his throat, feel the ghost of Casey’s hands in his hair. He had been half-hard for what felt like the last hour, blood pounding in his groin, teetering on the edge of desire. He licked his lips. “I don’t do relationships.”

“Me neither.”

“Besides, you’re scamming my mom.”

“Am I?” Casey made a face. “I’m not really sure what I’m doing anymore.” He ran a hand through his hair, looking out the window. For a moment, he looked unbearably young, and Laurel realized he didn’t even know how old Casey was. He’d assumed from his confidence that they were at least the same age.

He thought about asking, but instead he reached across the center console, squeezing Casey’s thigh. His hand traveled higher, and Casey met his eyes, smiling. Whatever expression had crossed his face moments earlier was gone, replaced by a look of challenge.

“How about you focus on driving?” he said smoothly.

Laurel smiled back. “I’m impatient.”

“I can tell. Get us back to your place. I’ll make it worth the wait.”

Rain had started to fall in earnest by the time Laurel pulled up to the beach condo, warm, satiny sheets that enveloped them as soon as they got out of the car. Laurel hardly had time to click the lock button on the key fob before Casey’s hand was on his belt buckle, yanking him up the stairs like he owned the place, pressing Laurel up against the front door and kissing him luxuriantly, rainwater sweet on his lips.

“Aren’t you going to let me in?” Casey whispered, grinding his hips against Laurel’s.

“I kind of need my hands.” They were pinned above his head.

Casey laughed, letting him go, and then they were stumbling in through the door. Casey smacked his ass as they crossed the threshold, saying, “I like these pants,” and Laurel wasn’t sure if he wanted to laugh or beg him for more, caught between hilarity and heat, self-consciousness beginning to creep in. This condo, with all its bland coastal bric-a-brac and themed linens, held no trace of Laurel’s personality, and he found himself wondering suddenly if anywhere did. It shouldn’t matter; Casey was undoing his shirt, scattering kisses over his shoulders and collarbone, and Laurel closed his eyes, breathing in the rain-damp smell of his hair.

They were in the kitchen somehow, no illumination but a hall light that one of them had turned on as they’d fumbled their way through the house, leaving a trail of wet clothes. Laurel was completely naked, but Casey had only lost his jacket, and Laurel felt himself tremble as Casey’s hand slid over the vulnerable curve of his ass.

“Do you have condoms?” he asked.

Laurel’s stomach sank, his face heating up. “No, I—we should have stopped at the

Piggly Wiggly or something, I—”

“I am not being seen with you, buying condoms, at the Piggly Wiggly in the middle of the night.”

Casey was right, of course. Everyone knew everyone around here. But part of him wanted it, the tawdry rush of buying condoms together under fluorescent lights. “Good point. What do we do?”

“Improvise, I guess.”

There was the clink of a bottle on the counter. Laurel wondered who had staged this place, and who kept the olive oil container currently in Casey’s hand so pristine, if Denise hired people to dust the kitchen and stock it with cute little labeled bottles even though no one had ever cooked in here, and God, he hoped it wasn’t Miss Mina, because he’d probably never be able to look her in the eye again; he’d probably never be able to go to an Italian restaurant again, either, because Casey was sliding two fingers into him, his skin silky with oil, and there was something timeless and filthy and decadent and downright—Babylonian about it, as if Casey were a spoiled prince in a villa somewhere and Laurel his concubine.

A vein pulsed in Laurel’s neck, and Casey pressed a soft, sucking kiss to it.

“Stop thinking. I can see you doing it.”

He did. All the thoughts in his mind were like books tumbling off shelves, and it was just the hot press of Casey’s fingers inside him and the scrape of Casey’s teeth against his bare shoulder and Laurel’s hands, scrabbling against the edge of the countertop. He felt Casey undo his own belt buckle, and the metal scraping against Laurel’s tender skin sent currents of panicked desire rushing through him. His body was alight, like the Eiffel Tower at night, like the whole city of Paris, bright enough

to be seen from space, his cock hard and bobbing untouched out in front of him as he moved his hips to the rhythm Casey had set. He turned his head, nuzzling against Casey's throat.

"You can—you can—"

"No I can't," Casey said. "Don't be stupid." But he punctuated it with a kiss to Laurel's temple, his jaw. Laurel could feel the hard press of Casey's erection against his ass, could tell from the slick sounds of his other hand that he was jerking himself off, even as he continued to make Laurel see stars. Laurel was pleading, babbling, saying things that would make his mother faint dead away. All the need and want and rage of the past few hours was pounding in his chest, his balls, his brain, blotting out everything else. The edges of his mind had started to go white and staticky, and his thighs were shaking, his teeth on edge, his fingernails bending against the tiled edge of the counter, and he leaned back and their lips met in a shuddering kiss, Casey whispering into his mouth, "Go ahead. Touch yourself."

It barely took two strokes of his own hand before Laurel was coming, slumping forward with a groan. He felt Casey finish a few moments later, across his lower back, his lips pressed to Laurel's nape.

Casey started to pull away, and Laurel fumbled behind him, grabbing his hand, wrapping his arm around him and pressing it to his belly. Making Casey feel how he was still trembling.

"I'm not staying the night," Casey murmured, his breath quick against Laurel's skin.

"I know. Just hold me up for a second. You made me weak in the knees."

Casey chuckled, but didn't reply. The pad of his thumb traveled over Laurel's shoulder and down his back, leaving behind shivery trails of delight.

“What are you doing?”

“Just—” Laurel heard Casey sigh. “Counting your freckles.” Untangling his other hand from Laurel’s, he stepped away. “I need to use your shower,” he said, as Laurel turned to face him. “And your dryer, I think. My clothes are still wet.”

“It’s all yours.”

He took a long time in the shower, so long that Laurel was on the verge of sleep when Casey came in, smelling of dryer sheets and Laurel’s soap. Laurel hadn’t showered, content to just wipe himself down with a towel and fall, still naked, into bed. He’d told himself he was too exhausted to clean up, but really, he hadn’t wanted to get rid of the evidence of what they’d done, not yet. His skin was still tingling, and his breath caught as he felt Casey sit down on the bed. Laurel didn’t open his eyes, not sure what kind of goodbye he could expect.

Casey’s hand brushed his cheek. “I know you’re awake, Sleeping Beauty.”

Laurel said nothing, his heart pounding. He ached, suddenly, for the soft press of Casey’s mouth on his, for Casey to curl up next to him and hold him through the night. But Casey hadn’t been able to wash him off fast enough. And as Laurel himself had said, he didn’t do relationships.

After a moment, he heard the sheets rustle as Casey stood up. “Well, get some rest,” he said. “I’ll see you in a few days.”

Laurel stayed rigid in the bed, hardly daring to breathe, as he listened to Casey’s steps disappear off down the hall. The front door closed, and then there was only the sound of the surf and the rain.

*

Casey pinched a salmon egg between the tines of his fork, daring it to burst. It didn't, continuing to stare up at him like some gelatinous, orange, alien eye. He swallowed, wondering if anyone would notice that he'd just been pushing around the food on his tasting plate, not trying any of it.

Probably not. Even though Casey was, ostensibly, in charge of this whole thing, no one was paying attention to him right now. It was barely past noon and the consultation with Landry Hall's event manager had already plunged from awkward into excruciating. Denise had insisted on coming, and there was a weird, prickly coldness between her and Laurel that was sucking all other energy out of the room.

"I just don't know," Denise said for the thousandth time, examining a piece of shrimp. She had not known about a lot of things Casey had thought were locked in. The black-and-white color scheme. The types of flowers. Basically all the aspects of the ball that he had actually been looking forward to.

"It's just a little forbidding, isn't it?" she'd asked, as Casey had shown her mockups of how he'd drape the arch at the head of the ballroom in ivy and black hollyhock. And, "I don't understand why it would be so difficult to get a wall of sunflowers. You know, something colorful. People love color, Casey." And, "What flowers did Lavinia Bonard have at their Carolina Day celebration? Can't we do something like that? Very classy, very light and airy."

Lavinia Bonard had had hydrangeas and peonies, which didn't exactly scream Halloween. "We've already locked in the floral order with the Abernathys."

"Oh, I know, Casey, but we're still almost two months out. I don't see how hard it would be to just modify it."

I don't see how hard it would be. No, of course she didn't, because nothing was too hard, not if you had money to throw at it. They could get sunflowers, and pumpkins,

and corn husk dolls and whatever else Denise's basic, basic heart desired. It was just annoying. Casey could feel the pressure of a pimple building along the line of his jaw. He shouldn't have used whatever cheap facial scrub it was that Laurel kept at the beach house. He pressed the edge of his thumbnail into his skin, willing the blemish to go away.

"Mom, why don't you just let Casey do his job? He knows what he's doing." Laurel took a swig of the signature cocktail Landry Hall's caterers had mocked up for them. Some kind of pumpkin spice espresso martini, it was sweet, laced with nutmeg and surprisingly good. Casey had only allowed himself a sip, but now he watched how it left Laurel's lips wet and sticky, and imagined tasting it on him.

That was another problem: Laurel's lips and his flushed skin, the smooth plane of his back and the way he had pulsed and shuddered around Casey's fingers. The dusting of his eyelashes against his cheek. The plush softness of his mouth as he'd lain in bed, just begging to be kissed goodbye. Casey looked away, back to the unappetizing assortment of seafood pieces on his plate. The blood was roaring in his ears, and he felt heat rise in his face.

"Laurel, sweetie, I'm not even sure why you're here," Denise said. "This can't be interesting for you."

Even without looking up, Casey could hear the shrug in Laurel's voice. "Free food."

It was true that Laurel had seemed to enjoy each of the dishes, from the weird potato appetizer that was supposed to evoke a Lowcountry boil, to the she-crab soup fritters, to the caramelized pumpkin tartlets. But he'd been raised on this; Laurel knew how to pronounce amuse-bouche without sounding obnoxious and didn't balk at the idea of a langoustine foam. (What the hell even was that? Casey longed for some crackers, or a Cup o' Noodles.) Now he was happily peeling the shell off a prawn, his fingers red and gritty with seasoning, as Denise looked on in dismay.

“It just seems messy,” Denise said.

It did, didn’t it? Hooking up in the kitchen, getting a blow job at a party, throwing all caution to the wind. God, he’d even thought about spending the night, and Casey never did that. He’d stood in the shower and wondered what it would be like to cuddle up with Laurel, their hands tangled together, his face buried in Laurel’s hair.

What would Denise say if she knew? Casey had no problem keeping secrets from her. He had no problem lying to her face. But just now, he couldn’t seem to look her way, not without his stomach clenching. He watched Laurel suck a knuckle into his mouth. Why did this man and his appetites make Casey’s heart pound so hard? And when had Laurel’s little idiosyncrasies stopped being annoying and started being oddly adorable?

“Right, Casey? People aren’t going to want peel n’ eat shrimp at a ball.”

“We can definitely elevate it,” said the event manager. Her name, Casey remembered, was Jeanette. “Eliminate the finger food element, but keep the down-home feel.”

“Uh.” Casey pinched the bridge of his nose. Right, the shrimp were what was messy. “Yes, perfect. Finger food is a big no. People will be in costume.”

“What costume are you going to wear, Casey?” Laurel asked brightly.

“I’m not.” He met his eyes, daring him to react, to blush. “I’m sure you’ll come up with a great one, though.”

“Right.” Laurel smiled, a tantalizing hint of teeth. “I’m good at costumes, or so I’ve been told.”

“Oh, Casey, that reminds me. Do we have everything ordered for my outfit?” Casey

startled as Denise put a hand on his arm.

“Yes. Of course.” No, we did not. Denise was going as Audrey Hepburn from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and Casey hadn’t even started looking for a dress, let alone a little suit and tie for Jasper, which the poor dog would probably try to eat. Casey’s jaw was throbbing, and he suppressed the urge to run into the bathroom and examine his face, see if the zit had gotten bigger. He would have to call around and make sure no one else was planning the same costume. Denise wouldn’t want to be upstaged.

“Can we go over the design for the seafood towers?” Jeanette asked. Denise had requested one per table. Thousands of dollars of expensive seafood getting warm and rubbery under Landry Hall’s overhead lights as the night went on. Casey wondered if anyone would eat any of it. The fish egg on his plate stared up at him accusingly.

“The crab legs were delicious,” Laurel said. “You’ve got to include those.” He was leaning back in his chair, chewing on a skewer from one of the appetizers. Casual, careless. Maddeningly gorgeous. How did he do it? Casey spent hours on his appearance every morning, but Laurel seemed to just roll out of bed looking amazing. Involuntarily, Casey thought back to the night they’d met. Scrolling on his phone, bored in the casino, he had felt someone sit down next to him. He’d looked up. Laurel’s face had been like a punch in the chest.

Oh God damn it, he had thought.

He was thinking basically the same thing right now, watching Laurel across the table, remembering his freckles in the moonlight. Jeanette was showing Denise pictures of something on her tablet, but Casey had completely forgotten what they were talking about. Something to do with fish, right? Oh, the seafood towers.

He licked his lips, meaning to say something, but they seemed to be doing fine without him. Casey looked down into the well of his martini glass. He thought about

draining it.

“So we’ve got a couple of mockups here for you,” Jeanette said.

Laurel leaned in, taking a look. “I like the one with the baby octopus.”

“Oh, Laurel, no. They’re creepy .” Denise shuddered.

“Isn’t that the idea? It’s Halloween. Don’t you want Sarah Ann Copeland to feel a little shiver down her spine?”

Denise crossed her arms. “This is a classy, elegant ball. Not some—some haunted house party.”

Denise’s tone and the thin line of her mouth made sweat break out on Casey’s forehead, but Laurel continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “Although to really scare Sarah Ann, you’d probably have to hire only nonbinary servers with purple hair, and pass out pamphlets on Critical Race Theory—”

“Laurel . This isn’t funny.” Denise leaned forward in her chair, fingers clamped so tightly around the stem of her glass that Casey thought she might break it. “What has gotten into you? First I hear that you’re picking fights with Howie Bonard—at his brother’s fundraiser, no less—and now you’re making tasteless jokes.”

“What’s tasteless is your guest list,” Laurel muttered, looking down at the tablecloth like a scolded child. A line of tension stood out in his neck. Casey felt a little stab of curiosity, hearing about the fundraiser. It seemed out of character for Laurel to be picking fights with anyone. Was Howie Bonard what had set him off, made him so desperate? Had he actually been crying, out there in the stable? Casey bit his lip, stomach twisting. He didn’t want to get involved, not in any of it. He could feel something hostile building between Laurel and Denise, making the back of his neck

itchy and uncomfortable.

The ballroom had gotten oddly silent, even the white-noise buzz of the air conditioner seeming muted. Denise's lips were pressed together, her nostrils flared. Her usually-warm brown eyes were flat and hard. "I have been trying for years to get the people here to take me seriously, and nothing is ever good enough and Lavinia Bonard has taken all of the best holidays for herself. Halloween is the only one left, and by God, I am going to make it an event to remember."

Laurel sighed. "Mom—"

"This is not your business." Her voice was getting louder, more piercing. Casey cringed. "Don't you have anything better to do? Why don't you go cause trouble with that friend of yours?"

"Why don't you listen to your party planner, instead of trying to change everything last-minute? He's been working really hard on this, you know."

Casey's heart thudded, and he had the urge to hunch his shoulders, make himself smaller. He really wanted to stay out of this, and he wasn't sure how he felt about Laurel defending him for the second time that day. Jeanette caught his eye, making a sympathetic grimace. She was clutching her tablet like she might need to hide behind it.

"This is my event," Denise hissed, neck stretched long and taut like an angry swan. One manicured nail tapped on the table. "You don't live here, Laurel. You don't hear how people talk."

"It's literally just a party—"

"It's my moment . Maybe you don't care what people think, Laurel, but I do. And I

am not going to let you just waltz into town and ruin this for me, like you've ruined everything else. You'd think you would have some sense of—of loyalty, or at least guilt, that you would let me have this, after the divorce and the singing lessons and all the money I spent on that stupid horse of yours—you'd think that if I can't have an engagement and a white wedding and some grandchildren then at least I can throw a Halloween ball—”

The scrape of Laurel's chair against the floor as he pushed back from the table was so loud that Casey bit back a gasp. He realized that he had been holding his breath.

“I—” Laurel shook his head. His face was red and blotchy, his mouth a trembling line. He stood, darting at glance at Jeanette. “I'm sorry. Everything was excellent. I have to go.” Tossing his napkin onto the table, he turned and hurried out of the room.

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Jamie: So I haven't heard from you in awhile.

That either means everything is good, or everything is really bad.

Casey groaned, leaning his forehead against the steering wheel. He needed to write Jamie back. The texts had been sitting on his phone for a week, the knowledge of them itching at the back of his mind. But he wasn't sure what to say. Not the truth. God, no. It was too complicated, and Casey himself didn't really know how to sort through it.

I'm depressed , he typed, before he could think better of it. Party is turning into a shitshow. Send raccoon pics.

Sighing, he put the phone down. Three little dots on the screen indicated that Jamie was typing. Casey looked at the keys in the ignition, thought about starting the car,

backing out of the parking lot, getting onto I-95 and driving until he hit Jacksonville, or Palm Beach, or until he dropped off the edge of the United States entirely and into the ocean.

Casey had never felt fake, despite the fact that he lied for a living. He'd always believed that he kept some core, valuable part of him uncompromised, no matter who he pretended to be on the outside. So why did he have a bad taste in the back of his mouth? Why was the scene from that morning still knocking around in his head, the way he hadn't gotten up when Laurel had rushed out, the soulless smile he'd plastered on after Denise had sighed dramatically at Laurel's retreating back and said, "I just don't know what to do with that boy sometimes. I swear he has no consideration for others."

He was getting paid to agree with her. That was part of the arrangement. But at that moment, Casey had wanted to shove his plate of untouched seafood into Denise's lap and run after her son.

Casey's stomach felt cold and slimy. He was paralyzed, couldn't seem to move, sitting here in Laurel's parking lot, dreading seeing him and wanting to make sure he was okay.

He should just leave him alone. He was probably the last person Laurel wanted to see right now, and Casey could handle the next appointment just fine on his own. But Laurel had looked so miserable—

His phone dinged. It was a picture of a raccoon double-fisting what looked like an Oreo cookie and a slice of ham, and it did admittedly make him feel better.

Jamie: why shitshow? What's happening?

Casey sighed. She's just super demanding , he typed. And horrible to her son , he

thought about adding, but didn't. He wondered if Laurel liked raccoon pictures. Not that it mattered.

Jamie: so maybe time to cut your losses? How long are you going to milk this thing?

Casey: idk

Casey: ...

Ugh, he couldn't come up with anything to say, not without getting into the Laurel of it all. His head felt heavy, the air pressure getting to him even in the cab of the car. The barometer had been climbing steadily all day, echoing the tension in his body. Not much longer, he wrote finally. It's a lot of money tho. worth it, I think.

Jamie: hope so

He could feel the weight behind the statement, as if his phone had suddenly turned to lead. As Jamie had told him many times, scamming people wasn't a very solid or sustainable business model. Eventually, he would get in trouble.

Like he wasn't already.

As if reading his mind, Jamie wrote, so no more drama with hot adult son? And he added insult to injury with a couple of eyeball emojis.

Casey: Nope. no problem. His stomach dipped as he switched his phone to silent. Taking a deep breath, he opened the car door and got out.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:20 am

Casey heard music radiating out from the house as soon as he set foot on Laurel's front walkway. He recognized the tune: it was some 80's torch song about a lady who had a one-night stand with a stranger in a bar. Something his grandma would have sung her heart out to while washing dishes, a parakeet bobbing along on her shoulder. But it wasn't a woman singing this time. Casey didn't really know enough about music to know if it was a baritone or tenor or what, but the voice was beautiful, no other word for it, making his scalp prickle and a little shiver travel down his spine. Huh. He'd almost hoped that after all the build-up, Laurel wouldn't be as good as everybody said. He wasn't sure he could handle another reason to—not dislike him.

The song switched off after Casey had been pounding on the door for several minutes, and Laurel answered, his face flushed, sweaty hair pushed back from his forehead. His eyes were a little wobbly, and there was a smell of alcohol emanating from him.

“Are you just day drinking and doing karaoke by yourself?”

Laurel shrugged. “Sometimes it makes me feel better.”

“How embarrassing for you.”

“Yeah, well.” Laurel crossed his arms, the flush on his face deepening, and something twisted in Casey's stomach. “Why are you here? Did I forget we had another meeting? Or is this just a random booty call?”

“No, I—” suddenly Casey was the flustered one. “Yes, we had a meeting. We still need to go to the Halloween store and figure out all the shit your mom wants for the

party.”

“Fuck the Halloween store,” Laurel said languidly. “Why don’t you come in?”

Casey bit his lip. “It really isn’t a booty call. And who even uses that phrase anymore? You’re so—”

“Look, I’m in no shape to go to a Halloween store. Or any kind of store.” Laurel stepped back, holding the door open. “Keep me company. I ordered takeout.”

Casey eyed the TV in the background, neon lyrics still plastered across the screen. One night of love was all we knew , it read. A little too on-the-nose for his comfort. But maybe he could just sit down for a second. The scarecrows and plastic skeletons and other chintzy props that Denise had insisted upon weren’t going anywhere, anyway. “I’m not hungry,” he warned. “And I’m leaving if you make me listen to a one-man concert of cheesy love songs.”

“How dare you. Ann and Nancy Wilson are consummate badasses, and I will accept no slander of them or their music.”

“Okay,” Casey said, not knowing who he was talking about. His own musical tastes tended toward early 2000s R of course it was nice. Tastefully if unimaginatively decorated with coastal tchotchkes and clapboard signs that advertised the beach. No real hint of Laurel’s personality except for the karaoke setup. A set of bay windows overlooked the beach, the sand a muted ivory, the sea dark under an overcast sky. No one was out today, and the ocean had an eerie glassiness to it. Hurricane season. They’d been lucky not to get hit by anything so far, but he felt a little trickle of unease, looking at the leaden color of the clouds. “Don’t your neighbors mind the noise?”

“I don’t have a lot of neighbors this time of year,” Laurel said. “Most of these are

vacation rentals. Besides,” he added, with a crooked grin, “I’ve been told I have the voice of an angel.”

“I mean, sure,” Casey said begrudgingly. There was a familiar green Krispy Kreme box on the table, next to a half-empty bottle of some brown liquor, and he tried to keep his eyes off of it. Laurel hadn’t said that the takeout was donuts, and now he felt prickly and off-balance, alone with not one but two things he found hard to resist. “It wasn’t bad. Sounded like a professional cover.”

Laurel sat down across from him, and Casey’s heart clenched a little at the genuine expression of happiness on his face. “Thank you. Do you want one?” he added, grabbing a donut. He took a large bite. “Or wait, you don’t eat sugar. Right?”

“It’s bad for my skin.”

“That’s a myth.” Laurel studied him, smiling slightly. There were crumbs of sugar glaze stuck to his lower lip. “It wouldn’t hurt you to indulge once in a while.”

Casey bristled. “It’s really none of your business.” His phone vibrated, and he took it out, hoping for a distraction from the heavy curiosity in Laurel’s gaze. Another raccoon picture from Jamie. This one was climbing a tree, a hot dog dangling from its mouth.

“My mom?” Laurel asked.

“No, it’s my friend, Jamie. He—“ Casey could feel his cheeks getting hot, and for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why this was somehow more embarrassing than Laurel seeing him naked. “He feeds feral raccoons. There’s a colony of them near his house. Sometimes he sends me pictures.”

“Oh my God, can I see?” Laurel leaned forward delightedly.

Casey stuffed the phone back into his pocket.

“You know, I never really imagined you having friends,” Laurel said. He reached for another donut, then, seeming to think better of it, took a drink from the bottle on the table instead. “You seem so—impenetrable.”

Casey shrugged, not sure what he meant by that, and not sure it was a compliment. It didn’t matter what Laurel thought about him, anyway.

“But I’m not surprised you like raccoons.” Laurel grinned. “They’re scrappy and cute. And a little sinister. Seems fitting.”

Casey picked at a stray thread on the couch cushion. The furniture was a sea of beige and pale pink, and he guessed Laurel hadn’t chosen it, because he couldn’t see pink or red very well. He wondered what it was like to live a life without all of the colors. He wondered how Laurel got dressed in the morning, and what sunsets looked like to him, and, weirdly, he felt a little sad. “Why don’t you sing more?” he asked. “I know you sang in choir as a kid. Did you ever try out for anything? You would have been the right age for American Idol.”

“Yeah.” The smile dropped off Laurel’s face, replaced by a look of exhaustion. “My mom wanted me to.” He grabbed another donut. “I filled out all the paperwork. Told her I had mailed it in. But actually, I just threw it away.” He sighed, looking out the window. “She wanted me to do a lot of things.”

“I know.” Casey pulled another thread out of the sofa. There was some ugly seashell pattern embroidered on it, so really, he was doing Laurel a favor by tearing it up. He shouldn’t stay, though. He needed to make up an excuse to leave, because he didn’t care about Laurel’s fractured relationship with Denise. He didn’t care about anything except getting paid. Right?

Rain had started to fall outside, fat droplets hitting the deck. Casey gave in, breaking a corner off of a cruller from the donut box and popping it into his mouth.

“Honestly, I dodged a bullet,” Laurel said. “Amber, the girl from college I was supposed to propose to? She’s some super-conservative mommy blogger now. I guess I should have known. But at the time, I was just grateful that she wanted to save everything for marriage. It took a lot of the pressure off me.”

“I can see why you haven’t told Denise,” Casey said. “That you’re gay. Or, whatever. Shouldn’t assume.”

Laurel waved a hand in the air. “No, you’re fine. But you’re right. She’d make it all about her, in one way or another. Like she does with everything.” He shook his head. “Honestly, she probably already knows, or at least suspects something. I only had the one serious girlfriend, which she holds over my head. As you’ve seen. Do you know, she was taking Amber ring shopping without me? I think she cared more about an engagement than either of us did. And I was just supposed to follow along, I guess. Check the boxes for her.” He ran a hand through his hair. “If I ever did come out, it would be the same thing. She’d be the most performative ally ever, while still voting against my rights every November. I’d be some—some kind of novelty. To show off to people. I don’t know how you put up with it.”

Casey shrugged. “I guess scheming behind her back helps.”

Laurel didn’t laugh. “I just don’t want to deal. Is that wrong of me? Probably. Whenever I come back here, I feel like I’m not myself.”

“Why even come back to begin with?” He didn’t get it.

Laurel took another drink. “Because she asks me to, I guess. And because my friends are here.”

“What about your dad?” Casey heard himself ask.

“Oh, he’s great. Doesn’t speak a lot of English, but when I told him, he was really cool about it. He just said, ‘ A chacun son gout . Many tastes make beautiful the world.’ And then he poured me a big glass of brandy.”

The sugary taste of the cruller seemed to have curdled in Casey’s mouth. He cleared his throat. “That’s sweet.”

“It was. I’m lucky. I kind of got my heart stomped on by this older guy, in my mid-twenties. And my dad could tell something was wrong, so I ended up confiding in him. It was weird. Like a dam broke between us. He wasn’t really, like, active in my childhood. I didn’t actually visit him much until I was an adult. I guess I had myself convinced that he didn’t like me. But we’ve been getting closer.” He leaned back, staring out the window. After a moment, he let out a little laugh. “You know what’s funny? I’ve never told anyone else that story. Not even Melody.”

Laurel didn’t add anything else, and the room descended into silence. Outside, it was raining in earnest, and the living room felt hushed and intimate, a cocoon. Casey’s heart was pounding. He imagined asking about Belgium. He didn’t know anything about it, pictured cobbled streets and old buildings and maybe beer? Was beer a big thing in Belgium? Pretzels? Windmills? No, wrong country. He had never been outside of the US, didn’t have a passport.

What if we just got out of here? The words were on the tip of his tongue, but he would never say them. They had agreed that this wouldn’t turn into anything. And Casey didn’t have anything to offer someone like Laurel, not really. He wasn’t sure he had anything to offer anyone, period. He’d been solitary for so long that he would have no idea how to be part of a pair.

“So, do you have parents?” Laurel asked, after a while. “I mean, you must.”

Casey sighed. The whole saga really wasn't worth telling. Just one more ugly, banal story of childhood trauma, worse than some and better than others. The years of moving around. The cons and get-rich-quick schemes. Being dropped off at his grandma's whenever his dad was in trouble. The slow realization that his only parent wasn't a very good person, or in his right mind.

"My mom left when I was a baby." He'd seen one picture of her, so bleached out by sun and the years that her face was barely distinguishable. A nervous smile and a big halo of over-treated blonde hair, like every other white woman in the early '90s. "I was raised by my dad, but I'm not close with him. I was at one point. But he got really religious after he stopped using." He didn't add that he had only gotten clean for good after his third stint in prison. Laurel didn't need to know that.

"That sucks." Laurel chewed his lip. Casey couldn't read the look in his eyes—affection, or pity, or fascination—whatever it was, it made him uncomfortable. He turned back to the box of donuts, slowly dismantling one into a pile of crumbs.

"Yeah, well. I don't miss him. For all his talk about virtue, he put my grandma in the cheapest home he could find. It flooded during Hurricane Michael, and they couldn't evacuate fast enough. She got hypothermia." Hypothermia in filthy, bathtub-warm water. It was insulting. Grandma Terri hadn't deserved that. Casey realized that his hand was trembling, and he clenched it into a fist.

"Jesus. The grandma with the birds? Was she—"

"Okay?" Casey shook his head. He was surprised Laurel had remembered the birds. Who knew what had happened to them. His dad had probably dumped them at a pet store, or just let them out of their cages to fend for themselves. His throat felt tight.

"Casey—"

“So what’s happening with the Halloween ball?” he asked, more harshly than he’d meant to. “I can tell you don’t actually care that much about Denise finally getting accepted into society, so why go through with it? Why promise me all this money? Because I’m fine with just dropping the whole thing at this point. In fact, I’d be happy to. It’s what she deserves.”

“You want to drop the whole thing?” Laurel said slowly.

Casey shrugged, not meeting his eyes. “Why not? It’s more trouble than it’s worth.”

“And what happens then, you just leave town?”

Casey shrugged again. He would go somewhere where the humidity didn’t make his head feel like it was going to explode. Somewhere with snow and mountains. Colorado, or Washington State.

He imagined driving across the country, leaving Laurel here, alone, in this characterless room, and a pit opened up in his stomach.

“You’re right,” Laurel said, and Casey felt even worse. “It was a stupid idea. And it—it wasn’t for my mom. My friend Melody, she hasn’t been doing great for a while now.”

“Right.” Casey remembered Miss Mina in the kitchen, saying, Howie Bonard sucked all the life out of that girl. “She has history with Howie Bonard, doesn’t she? Was that why you got in a fight with him?”

Laurel scratched his nose, turning red. “It wasn’t a fight, not really. But yeah.”

“What did he do?” Casey asked, but really, he could guess. The story was always the same. Men like Howie Bonard always wanted to be with beautiful women, but they

didn't treat them well, or even seem to like them very much.

"According to everyone around here? Nothing." Laurel set out a long, exhausted sigh. "You heard my mom. 'Girls like that grow up fast.' The whole town thinks she was asking for it. But in reality, he groomed her, got her into drugs and shit. Controlled her and messed with her head for years. She got away for a little bit in college, but then she dropped out and went right back to him."

Casey said nothing, keeping his face neutral. He knew about addicts, after all.

"A while ago, she finally broke up with him for good. Tried to sue for emotional damages. But it went nowhere, and she's completely ostracized because of him and his family. But she's going to get a restraining order, so he won't be able to torment her anymore. And I thought—I don't know. I thought that maybe if she showed up at the party, it would prove everyone wrong, you know? Show that he's the bad guy, and that she deserves to be here."

"Right." Casey felt a little pang of—something. Sympathy, maybe, or embarrassment that Laurel could somehow manage to be so optimistic. Restraining orders weren't magic, and parties didn't get people clean. He'd seen the bruises on Melody's legs at the dog wedding, the way she had stumbled across the lawn. The glassy look in her eyes at the Fourth of July Jamboree. "You were going to drop one hundred and fifty thousand dollars just so that your friend could, what, have a moment?"

Laurel gave him a sheepish smile. "I'm not known for making good decisions."

"No shit. Is she even—" Casey chewed his lip, trying to be delicate. "Does she know that you're planning this? And would she even be up for it?"

"She does, but you're right, it's a stupid idea." Laurel sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I guess it wasn't just about her. I panicked a little when you said you'd

forgotten me. Wanted any excuse to make you stick around.”

Casey heard himself make a little noise. He wasn't sure if it was a laugh or a sigh. His palms were sweaty, and he went to wipe them on his shirtfront before realizing one was still covered in donut crumbs. “I don't really know what to say to that.”

“You don't have to say anything. And you don't have to stay, either. I'll understand.”

Something was bubbling under Casey's skin. He couldn't identify it, wasn't sure if he felt guilty or nervous or pleased. His heart still hadn't slowed down. “Why did you approach me that night in Vegas? What were you thinking?”

“I don't know,” Laurel said softly. “You stood out. It seemed like maybe you had something I needed. What were you thinking?”

Casey studied him, his warm brown eyes, his open, honest face. The spattering of freckles across his cheeks. Any other night, Casey wouldn't have been there. He didn't gamble, or drink much. But he'd been on his way out of California with a lot of money, and he had wanted to see what a real casino was like. He'd wanted to do something reckless and extravagant.

And he had, even though he hadn't ended up betting a single chip. That night had only been about Laurel, the white-hot connection between their bodies and the sounds he'd made and the lost, helpless look of pleasure on his face.

Casey cleared his throat. “That I wanted you. And maybe that I hated you a little.”

“Do you still hate me?” Laurel's stricken, needy expression was almost too much to bear, but Casey didn't look away.

“No,” he admitted.

“Do you still want me?”

Casey felt his heart thud in his chest, the soles of his feet tingling. His gaze dropped, intentionally, to Laurel’s lips. “I think I’ve made it pretty obvious what I want.”

There was a rustle of upholstery as Laurel leaned forward, and then he had shoved the coffee table out of the way and was on his knees in front of the couch, sucking Casey’s fingers deep into his mouth, cleaning the sugar off them one-by-one, the scrape of his teeth and the hot insistence of his tongue eclipsing everything else in the room. Casey’s vision went fuzzy at the edges and his skin felt hot and too tight, his thighs tensing up, his other hand coming to rest on the flushed nape of Laurel’s neck as Laurel kissed his palm, his knuckles, the throbbing pulse point in his wrist, lush, lingering kisses that made his nerves sing with pleasure. Casey traced the line of Laurel’s part, the curve of his ear. He could hear rain peppering the window, the rush of the surf outside, or maybe it was the rush of the blood in his head.

“I have condoms this time,” Laurel murmured against Casey’s skin, making the hairs on his arm stand up.

“Aren’t you a good little boy scout.” Somehow Casey kept his voice level. He cupped Laurel’s face, raising his chin so that he could look down at him. Laurel’s cheeks were strawberry-red, his lips plush and wet. Casey traced a thumb over the scattered constellations of his freckles, feeling the heat radiating from his skin. “So prepared.”

“But not too presumptuous, I hope.”

“Just presumptuous enough.” He brushed a strand of hair off Laurel’s forehead. God, it was impossible not to be fond of him, the way his face betrayed his feelings, his big stupid words and his big stupid heart and the way he was looking at Casey right now as if he could unlock the world. “Come here.”

Laurel settled over him, Casey falling back against the couch cushions. Their lips came together lazily, the taste of cinnamon sugar washing over Casey's palate as Laurel's tongue stroked his, followed by the bite of whatever he'd been drinking, a spark of fire against the sweetness. It felt good to touch him, to explore all the parts of Laurel that he had missed, to take his time rediscovering the spots that made him tremble. The way he moaned when Casey sucked on his lower lip and the way he gasped helpless curses into Casey's mouth as Casey's fingers found one of his nipples, teasing and pinching through the thin fabric of his shirt. The way he smelled, salt and earthy sweetness, the solid feel of his hip in Casey's hand, his hip, which was—

Buzzing, his hip was buzzing. Casey fumbled in Laurel's pocket, pulling out his phone. The screen was still shattered, he noticed, with a pleased little thrill. The name was barely readable, but it seemed like only one person ever called Laurel at the worst possible times.

"Jesus, does your friend ever not cock block you?"

"Fuck, is it Melody?" Laurel groaned into the couch cushions. "I swear to God, if it's fucking book club again—"

Casey let the phone fall out of his hand and onto the floor, kissing his way down Laurel's throat, sucking at the petal-soft skin where his neck met his collar. "Book club. Sounds important." His other hand was on Laurel's belt, loosening the buckle, Laurel's cock already hard and promising behind his fly, and Casey's tongue was heavy with the need to taste him.

"I should answer," Laurel said weakly.

"You should, you really should." His fingers were scraping through the coarse hair on Laurel's lower belly now, Laurel's pulse pounding against his lips. The phone

stopped, then started again, a panicky static drone coming up from the carpet.

Casey felt Laurel sigh. “I actually should, for real.”

“Can’t she wait?”

“I—“ Laurel pulled back, blushing invitingly. His pupils were huge, his expression a little bleary. “I’ll worry. If I don’t answer. And I don’t want to be worried. I want to be—all yours. I want to give you my undivided attention.”

Casey cast a pointed look at Laurel’s groin. He tugged slightly at one of his belt loops. He could use the belt to tie Laurel’s hands up. Take his time re-learning every inch of him. It had driven him wild before, and Casey wanted that again. “Undivided, huh?” He found himself smiling, his fingertips tingling, his body feeling warm and languid as if he were back in the hot tub in Vegas.

“Promise.” Laurel kissed his cheek. “I’ll just be a second.”

But the moment he looked at the screen, Casey knew something was wrong. The hopeful expression on Laurel’s face wilted and confusion swam across his features, then concern. “Shit. I—I missed three calls from her hours ago. I never miss a call.” He answered the phone, fingers trembling. “Melody?” Laurel asked. “Slow down, sweetie. Who’s—what? Well tell him to—no, no, don’t go anywhere with him. Stay put, I’ll be there in a second.” He stood, fumbling around in his pocket. “Fuck, where are my keys?”

Casey swallowed, an icy feeling in the back of his throat. Undivided attention, my ass. He was nothing to Laurel but a hookup; of course his friends were more important. It didn’t hurt, because it had been painfully obvious all along. “What’s going on?”

“Melody’s downtown.” Laurel grabbed a jacket off the hanger by the door, his

movements tight and jerky. “I don’t know what’s happening, but it sounds like Howie Bonard is there. I need to go get her. She can’t drive herself. Shit. I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I didn’t check my phone earlier. I can’t believe I just left her hanging. This is—this is a mess, I’m a mess. I really wanted—“

Casey didn’t want to hear what he had wanted. It would make it worse. “You’ve been drinking. Can’t she get an Uber, or something?”

Laurel shook his head. “No, she needs me. I guess I can get an Uber, but it’ll take forever.”

Rain was hammering the window now, the sky outside steel-gray, and the light had an ominous quality to it, like someone had put a shroud over the sun. Casey thought of the winding country roads between here and downtown Bonard, the slick pavement and the growing gloom of the day. He didn’t want to get caught up in this. He needed to be alone. Needed some space between him and Laurel, a chance to think.

“We’ll have to take my car,” he heard himself say.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:20 am

Laurel jumped out of the car as soon as the familiar facade of the Belmont Inn resolved itself from out of the rain, his feet sinking into the soggy grass of the parking strip, feet soaked through before Casey had even fully parked. No ghost dogs in sight, but Melody was huddled on the front porch like a cat left out in a storm, jacketless, arms wrapped around her abdomen like it pained her. Howie Bonard stood next to her, talking to her hunched back. He put a hand on her shoulder as Laurel watched. Something about that pale hand on her bare skin made Laurel's chest fill with roaring panic, made his throat clench. He broke into a run, rushing up the front steps of the hotel.

"Melody!"

"She's fine," Bonard said. There was a proprietary smugness in his voice.

Laurel could see that she wasn't; Melody's eyes were wet, her hands shaking so badly that the vape in her fist clattered against her phone, sounding like castanets in the enclosed area of the porch. There was a deep indent in her lower lip from where she'd been gnawing on it. The supporting boot was still on her foot, weighing her down. "Laurel, I need to go home."

"Silly thing's been out drinking all day with a broken foot, and no jacket. I tried to give her mine, but I guess chivalry is dead." Howie massaged Melody's shoulder. Laurel imagined snapping his fingers like twigs, thought of how loud and satisfying it would be.

"Melody, come on," he said, trying to keep his voice from trembling. "Let's go."

Bonard continued as if he hadn't heard him. "Not a drop of sense in her pretty little head, is there, Mellie?" She flinched. Laurel knew she hated that nickname. "She can't take care of herself. I offered, you know. I've been more than generous. But she's pissed at me, as usual." He gave Laurel a pained look, as if he were the victim here. The expression didn't reach his eyes, which remained flat and predatory and somehow pleased. "Making herself crazy about a little piece of paper."

Laurel bit into the inside of his cheek, heart pounding. The restraining order obviously hadn't worked. Something sour slithered through his stomach.

"Howie, let her go."

"As if a piece of paper could keep us apart. As if anyone would ever sign it."

He leaned down, speaking into Melody's ear. "You've got to stop embarrassing yourself with these antics, Mellie."

"Fuck off," she said weakly. Howie Bonard chuckled.

"Melody, come on," Laurel said through gritted teeth. "I've got a car waiting. Let's get you out of here." He could see her trembling, and it made him want to break something, made him want to peel the grin off of Bonard's face.

Bonard put an arm around Melody's shoulders. "She doesn't need to leave with you. She's fine right where she is, aren't you, Mellie?"

"I told you to let her go." Laurel's heartbeat was clanging in his head like a tin drum, and the edges of everything seemed to have gotten sharper, Howie Bonard's face standing out in dramatic relief, the cords of tension starkly defined in Melody's neck. He felt dizzy and sick, like there was something molten stuck in his throat, trying to get out. He wanted to run. He wanted to reach out and smash through the world as if

it were the pane of a window. Laurel licked his lips, mouth dry.

“Why don’t you run along, Laurel?” Howie was still smiling.

Run along. Right, like he always did, leaving Melody by herself. Guilt lurched in his chest, and his eyes felt heavy, like he might cry. His voice cracked as he said, “Why don’t you stop fucking touching her.” He reached out to pull Bonard’s arm off of Melody, and Bonard shrugged him off.

Laurel grabbed for him again, and Bonard put a hand on his chest, shoving him backward. Laurel didn’t really know what happened after that. He had the vague impression of his head knocking back against one of the porch pillars, and then he had a handful of Howie Bonard’s jacket and his fist was raised and all he could see were those shining, overlong teeth, that stupid grin, and Melody was shouting and—

“Laurel! Laurel, Jesus. Calm down. What are you doing?” It was Casey, Casey’s warm hand on his shoulder, and Laurel sank against him before he could think better of it, stomach going soft, relief flooding through him. Melody was clutching Laurel’s arm. His fist was still clenched so tightly that the knuckles hurt, his muscles taut and shaking, but he no longer had a hold of Bonard, who had retreated back against the wall, a look of contempt on his face.

“You’d better learn to control yourself, boy,” he sneered.

“Is everything okay out here?” The front desk clerk at the hotel had come outside. It was Jessica Fuller, née Copeland, daughter of Sarah Ann and a peer of Laurel and Melody’s; she had been in the same graduating class. Laurel felt himself deflate like a crushed paper bag, unable to meet her eyes.

“Fine,” said Howie Bonard. He smoothed the front of his jacket. “They were just leaving.”

“Laurel, come on.” Melody tugged on his arm. Great, now she was the one comforting him, her voice soft and reasonable, because Laurel had lost it. Casey was no longer touching him, but Laurel could feel him at his back, feel the cold absence where his hand had been. He cleared his throat.

“Yeah,” Casey said, echoing Melody. “Come on.”

Laurel saw Howie Bonard notice Casey, eyes narrowing. The smile slid back across his face, and for just a second, Laurel really, really wished he had succeeded in knocking at least one of his teeth out. “Casey, was it? You’re planning that party for Denise? I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to hear how cozy you’ve gotten with her son.”

*

Melody started crying as soon as they got into the car, big, whooping sobs that sounded like they hurt coming out. Her face was pressed into Laurel’s shirtfront, her whole body shuddering. Rain pounded on the roof, the windows, making Laurel feel like they were in a tin can. He murmured platitudes, hand anchored in her wet hair, at once suffocated by her nearness and feeling strangely isolated, watching his pathetic attempts at comfort with a kind of bemused contempt. One-handed, he fumbled for his phone. “Can you take us back to her place? I’ve got the address.”

“Sure.” Casey glanced over his shoulder at the two of them in the backseat. His expression was unreadable, but he was oddly pale. Or maybe it was just the rain on the windshield, washing him out. “Are you okay?”

“Me?” Laurel attempted a laugh. “I think so.”

“I never took you for a fighter.”

“Yeah. Me neither.” Shame flooded Laurel’s stomach as he thought about how stupid

he must have looked. Casey would probably want nothing to do with him after all this.

But Casey sounded almost amused when he spoke again. “Did he really just call you boy ? Like some Old South Foghorn Leghorn douchebag?”

“Sure did.” Laurel pushed a sodden lock of hair out of his face. “That whole family thinks they’re characters in a Tennessee Williams play.”

“God, I’m so sorry,” Melody groaned, in a waterlogged voice. “I’m sorry, Laurel, I shouldn’t have called—”

“Don’t. It’s my fault. If I hadn’t missed your first phone call—”

She shook her head. “Now I’ve just gotten you into trouble, and your mom will hear, and—”

He sighed. “I don’t really give a shit what my mom hears. I wasn’t letting you go home with him.”

Melody broke away from him to wipe at her face, makeup running down her cheeks. “He’s right about me,” she said, voice cracking. “He always has been. I’m worthless. I should just give up. I’m stupid and crazy and even my own fucking cat hates me and—and—” She began to tear furiously at the velcro straps on the supportive boot on her foot. “And this fucking thing doesn’t help, I—”

“Melody. Melody, come on, sweetie. You need that.”

“Just dump me on the side of the road somewhere, I’m serious. Let me out. I don’t deserve to be here, I—” foot free from the boot, she started scrabbling at the door handle. Laurel grabbed for her hand, panic rising in his chest. They were pulling out

onto one of the many bridges that crisscrossed the town, and the little car shuddered on the slick, uneven pavement.

“Hey.” Casey, from the front seat. He still sounded completely calm. Laurel heard the snick of the door lock sliding to. “Melody, right? Stop fucking with my car, please.”

“I—” Melody swallowed, seeming to truly notice him for the first time. She ran a hand through her wet hair. “Casey Bright? What are you even doing here?”

“Laurel couldn’t drive. You’re welcome, by the way.”

Melody frowned. “You two are—”

“Doesn’t matter.” Laurel caught the flash of Casey’s eyes in the rearview mirror, then he was back to looking out over the road. “Why don’t you tell us what happened? It can’t really be worth throwing yourself into traffic about.”

“Yeah, seconded.” Laurel took a breath, putting his hand over Melody’s where it rested on the seat. His heart was still pounding, his stomach tight. He studied the nape of Casey’s neck, the clean line of his collar, wondering what he was thinking.

“Nothing happened.” Melody huddled against the window, her good foot tucked under her opposite thigh. “I mean, it was the same as always. I was out for brunch with Kierra. She went home and I stayed out. And then he showed up, and he wouldn’t let me leave. He kept feeding me drinks even though I didn’t want them, and he was g-gloating about how his brother had gotten the restraining order thrown out and h-how—how I’ll never get away from him—” She closed her eyes, tears spilling out from under her lashes. “It’s always the same shit.”

“It’s not your fault,” Laurel said quietly.

Melody shook her head. “It is . I’m—I’m a mess. Everything he says about me is right. I’m so disgusted by myself, Laurel.”

“Wrong. He’s the disgusting one.”

“I don’t know.” She leaned back against the seat, eyes closed. “God, I’m sorry. Casey, I’m sorry you had to be here. How embarrassing.”

“It’s okay,” he said tightly.

“I really did want to get to know you better. I can’t imagine what you must think of me.”

“Really, it’s fine. I hope you feel better.” They were coming into Melody’s neighborhood, the streets slick with water, the marsh behind the housing development a dark mass, stretching out toward the sea. Sheet lighting flickered somewhere far up in the clouds, and Laurel could see in its eerie light that Casey’s hands were tight on the wheel, his knuckles pale. “I’ll just drop y’all off,” he said.

“No.” Laurel bit his lip, not sure what he meant to say, only sure that he didn’t want to let Casey out of his sight, not yet. Melody gave him a look. Despite the smeared makeup and the glaze of alcohol, her eyes were curious and perceptive.

“Please come in,” she said. “Let me get you a drink, or something. It’s the least I can do.”

“I don’t—” Casey said, but Melody was already clambering out of the car, unsteady and chaotic in one heeled wedge and one bare foot. Laurel rushed after her, worried she would trip on the stairs. He didn’t have time to see if Casey was following, but he didn’t hear the engine start back up, either.

In the kitchen, Melody was clattering around, yanking a bottle of vodka out of the freezer and pulling glasses out of cupboards. “Do you want something?” she asked.

Laurel looked at her helplessly. “Honey. It’s the last thing you need.”

He felt awful for saying it, because her face fell, and the tears returned to her eyes. “Fuck,” Melody said after a moment. “You’re right. Fine.” She pulled the stopper out of the bottle and started emptying it down the sink. The air in the little kitchen took on an acrid, flammable quality that made Laurel’s eyes sting. “I should quit anyway. It’s not helping. There are beers in the fridge, too. Would you help me get rid of those?”

He had just picked up a can when he heard Casey’s voice over his shoulder. “You can’t.”

Laurel turned around. Casey was standing in the middle of the dining room, his eyes ringed in white, his hands at his sides.

“What do you mean?” Laurel asked.

Casey looked past him, at Melody, who was wiping down the sink. He crossed his arms. “Look, I don’t know you. I don’t know how much you drink. But it’s not safe to just quit anything cold turkey, not if you’ve been doing it for a long time.”

Melody offered him a wobbly smile. “I’ll be fine.”

Casey shook his head. “You should go to the hospital.”

“No way. They’d recognize me. It’s humiliating.” Melody sighed. “Besides, this isn’t the problem, not really. Everything has to go.” She pushed past him, down the hall toward her bedroom. Laurel heard her rummaging around in there, pulling out dresser

drawers.

He bit his lip, looking at Casey. Had it really just been an hour ago that they had been tangled up with each other on the sofa, Casey's hand on his belt buckle and the taste of cinnamon sugar on his lips? He opened his mouth to say something, to apologize, maybe, but Casey cut him off.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yeah." He was exhausted, the can of beer in his hand suddenly feeling like it was made of lead. For a moment, he almost wanted to cry. "She'll be okay. It's not—it's not to that point, you know?"

And then he felt like a dizzy little idiot, because Melody came back into the room with two baggies in her hand, one containing a little bit of cocaine and one bulging with what could only be called a shit-ton of assorted pills.

"Jesus, Melody," Laurel said, before he could stop himself.

"It's prescription. Well, some of it. And some is recreational. And I needed the Xanax to come down from the Adderall, but then I needed the Adderall for—and oh my God, Laurel." She threw her hands up in the air. "You have nothing to say."

Laurel glanced guiltily at Casey, who was probably regretting every choice that had led him into this den of degenerates. "Sure. Ok. But how do we even get rid of this stuff?" His neck felt clammy, and he could hear his own voice teetering on hilarity. He was quickly swinging from the depths of exhaustion into some kind of absurd humor, and he couldn't seem to control it. "Do we wash it down the sink, too? What about the water table? Melody, what about the fish? What about all the little frogs?" He pictured the denizens of the marsh getting disastrously high on Melody's supply, and a giggle escaped him.

Somehow, Melody was laughing, too. “I don’t know. I think we flush it down the toilet. Right? Like in a movie?”

“Let me do it,” Casey said. He slid the bags gently off the table. “I need—I need to go to the bathroom, anyway. The smell in here is making me lightheaded.”

He was right; the sour-sweet smell of alcohol in the kitchen was overpowering, and it didn’t get any better as Laurel and Melody emptied out the rest of the beer cans. They ran the water for a long time, but an acrid odor remained. Laurel offered to make coffee, as much to sober Melody up as to cover the smell. He had to stay awake, too. He wasn’t sure what time it was, but it had gotten dark out, and he would need to spend the night watching out for Melody.

The rain had lessened to a drizzle. Casey was still in the bathroom, so maybe the pills didn’t flush well. Or maybe he was just avoiding them. Laurel suggested taking their mugs out into the balcony.

The night air was syrupy and thick, full of frog and cricket song. A heavy mist hung over the marsh and wove through the trees, illuminated by the light from nearby windows. High up in the clouds, there was another brief pulse of lighting.

“Do you think we’ll get any hurricanes this year?” Melody asked, cradling her coffee, face upturned to the sky.

“We might. It’s the right weather for it.” Laurel remembered seeing something on TV about a tropical storm forming further south, but he hadn’t really been paying attention.

“I wonder if it’ll ruin your mom’s soiree.” She pronounced the word sarcastically.

Laurel scrubbed a hand over his face, feeling foolish. “Maybe. Are you still going to

come?”

“I don’t know.” Melody clicked her nails against her coffee cup. “It doesn’t seem like a great idea. Not if I’m, you know, trying to make healthier decisions.”

“Right.” What even were healthy decisions, anyway? Clearly Laurel had no idea. “Melody, I’m sorry I haven’t been there. And—and when I have, it’s just been to party. I’m a fair-weather friend at best, and an enabler at worst.”

“And I’m a hopeless sad sack who can’t get over her ex and trauma-dumps on her best friend.” She made a face.

“Best friend, Hell. I can’t believe I missed your calls.” He couldn’t get over it; it was twisting around and around like a corkscrew in his chest, hot and sharp.

She shrugged. “I shouldn’t have bothered you. I should have dealt with it on my own, or—or called Chip, maybe. But I got all in my head about it, you know? I didn’t want him to see me that way. I didn’t want him to know about the restraining order, not after he worked so hard on it.”

Laurel put a hand on her shoulder. “He does care about you. You know that, right?”

She shrugged. “Do I? I try to. I’m grateful for Chip, and for Kierra, but—sometimes I feel like they’re just here out of pity. Or, like, if they actually knew how awful I am, they’d want nothing to do with me.” Melody shuddered, despite the warm mug of coffee in her hands. “He used to tell me that, too. That he was the only one who understood me. That no one else would love me if they knew how much was wrong with me.”

“Girl.” Laurel groaned. “We’ve all got things wrong with us.”

“Yeah, I guess.” She chewed her lip. “Anyway, he seems nice.”

“What?”

“Casey, silly.” She turned to look at him, hair tangled, twin half-moons of smeared mascara under her eyes, and Laurel felt a soft, helpless pang of affection for her. “He’s sweet. A little bitchy, maybe, but sweet underneath.”

Laurel swallowed. It was at the tip of his tongue, all of it, the party and the scam and how it didn’t feel casual, not anymore, and how this dumb, Byzantine scheme of his had turned around and sunk its teeth into him and now all he wanted was for Casey to stay.

Melody put a hand on his. “It’s alright, you don’t have to say anything.”

He sighed. “Melody, are you going to be okay?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“I don’t know, either.”

She stretched, loosening up her shoulders and neck. “Want to go inside and sing along to the live version of Silver Springs over and over again?”

“God, I thought you’d never ask.”

*

Casey startled, biting back a curse as the sliding door to the balcony opened. Whatever Laurel and Melody had been talking about out there, they seemed to both be in a much better mood, and the easy familiarity between them made a little thorn

of bitterness lodge in his chest. He didn't want to be here. There was a sour taste in his mouth and his stomach hurt, and his sinuses were all clogged up from the friendly cat that followed him into the bathroom, disrespecting his need for privacy. It had been weaving its sleek little velvet body around his ankles for the last fifteen minutes.

"Hey," Laurel said. The cautious smile on his face made Casey's stomach clench. He could feel his phone burning in his pocket like it was radioactive. Five missed calls from Denise, all in the last hour.

"I—" he tried to think of something to say. Laurel's eyes were big and luminous, and suddenly Casey couldn't stand the thought of seeing him unhappy again. "I have to go." He sniffled. "Allergy attack."

"Oh gosh, I'm so sorry," Melody said, her face turning pink. "Luna has, like, a sixth sense for that. She loves bothering anyone who doesn't want to pet her."

It was a cute name for a cat. Melody was cute, too, somehow. Messy as hell and almost too pretty, and he found her, much like he had the cat, oddly endearing and wanted nothing to do with her. But she and Laurel seemed almost like brother and sister, so if he wanted to get close to Laurel, he would have to—

(He wasn't going to get close to Laurel. What was he thinking?)

His phone was ringing again, setting his teeth on edge.

"I have to get this," he said, pulling it out of his pocket. And he added, "Sorry," not sure what he was apologizing for but sure that whatever was on the other end of the line wouldn't be good, not for him and probably not for Laurel. He shot Laurel one last look, trying to soak him up for just a little longer, and then he was darting out the door.

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Denise's voice was in his ear before he even had a chance to get into the car, exasperated and demanding. "Casey? Casey, my goodness. What on earth is going on? It's completely unlike you to miss so many calls."

"Denise, so sorry." Casey tried to turn on the regular charm, but he felt like a kid sitting in the principal's office. His heart was pounding, his hand clamped around the steering wheel. "It was on silent."

"Well, that's unacceptable. You know I need to be able to reach you."

"Of course." He looked up at the lit kitchen window of Melody's condo, searching for movement. No one seemed to be watching.

"To be honest, Casey, I haven't been very pleased with your performance lately."

Casey leaned back in the seat, closing his eyes. His brain conjured up a rude comment about what her son seemed to think of his performance , and he nearly giggled, even though that was the last thing he should be doing right now. God, he was exhausted, and it felt like he had no control over his emotions. Every nerve was raw, and things were bubbling up in the back of his head that he hadn't thought about in years.

Denise continued. "We don't seem to be on the same page about the ball at all, even though I was very clear on my expectations for the decor."

Your expectations for the decor were fugly . He ground his teeth. "I apologize, I must not have understood—"

“And that isn’t all. I heard some very concerning news just now about your behavior downtown.”

Casey’s stomach dropped, and he realized his fingers were shaking on the wheel, though he wasn’t sure if it was from anxiety or anger. His behavior , like he was a child instead of thirty-fucking-two-years old. God, no wonder Laurel couldn’t stand this woman. He thought about hanging up. Racing back up Melody’s stairs and hammering on the door until Laurel answered, grabbing him by the shirtfront and kissing him as hard as he could.

But you couldn’t exactly do that to someone when they were helping their best friend through a mental breakdown. Melody needed Laurel. Laurel didn’t need Casey.

“Denise, whatever you heard—”

“I really don’t think it’s appropriate for you to be spending so much time around my son.” He could picture her narrowed eyes, the nail of her index finger tapping the table. “Especially when he and his friend are causing scenes out in public. To be honest, you’ve seemed distracted since he came into town, and I don’t like it. You’re working for me , so there’s no reason you should be concerned with him at all. People assume things around here, Casey, and when Laurel is seen with—with—”

“With what?” he asked flatly.

“It’s just inappropriate,” she said.

“Right.” Casey didn’t recognize his own voice. He squeezed his eyes shut, sparks popping behind his eyelids. “Well, Denise, if you actually gave a fuck about Laurel, instead of just caring about what the local gossip mill thinks of him, you’d know that he’s got a huge heart, and he was just helping his friend, and that Howie Bonard is a massive shitbag who started the whole thing, and—”

“You’re fired, Casey,” Denise said tightly. “I’m sorry.” She hung up.

*

Casey drove. He wasn’t sure how long he had been in the car. He’d meant to go back to his apartment, but somewhere along the way, he seemed to have forgotten a turn, or taken the wrong one. The night was a long tunnel, lights and highway signs passing occasionally, and though he could look down and see his hands on the wheel, the greenish cast of his knuckles, there was nothing in his head but a kind of dull buzzing. At some point, he had the foggy recollection of stopping for gas, the night air hot and smelling of humidity and exhaust. The rain had stopped, or he’d outrun it.

It wasn’t until he saw the pink fingers of dawn tracing across the surface of Lake Okeechobee that he realized how far he’d gone.

Casey pulled over at a rest area, mouth tasting sour, skin greasy and wan-looking in the rearview. Jesus. He wasn’t sure if he had said it out loud or not. It was quiet in the cab of his little used Volvo, the only sound the ticking of the engine as it cooled.

The clock on the dash read 5:45am. He’d lost hours of the night, and he was back in Florida.

Blearily, he fumbled for his phone. There was nothing new, just the string of missed-call notifications from Denise, which made him turn the phone off with more force than was necessary. Laurel didn’t know he was gone, and he was probably sleeping, anyway. There was no reason for him to have called.

Unless something had happened with Melody, unless she was in the hospital after all and Laurel needed help and—

And what? Casey would ride in on a white horse and tell him, Sorry, your mom fired

me and now the party you were counting on to repair your friend's reputation is fucked?

He could go back. He could be in Bonard by that afternoon. But it wasn't like Laurel would welcome him with open arms, right? Without the party, Casey had no purpose. They had agreed to keep everything casual, and it made his skin crawl and his heart hurt to think of hanging around town, just waiting for Laurel to occasionally hook up with him again. No, there was no reason to go back. No reason besides his expensive skincare products and the nice clothes he'd spent so much time finding. But he could find more. He always did. He always managed, somehow.

Casey pulled back onto the highway, heading south.

*

Jamie was doing Tai Chi on his deck when Casey pulled up, in a silk bonnet and what Casey knew were very expensive prescription sunglasses, the swamp behind him sparkling in the early morning light, lily pads and algae crowding the dark surface of the water. As Casey got out of the car, he straightened up to his full height of roughly five-six, waving.

"I knew you were coming, CJ," Jamie called. "I can always tell. You start ignoring my texts, and then you tell me everything is going fine, and the next thing I know, you're on my doorstep."

"Oh my God." Casey made a face. "I told you not to call me that."

"You're CJ when you fuck up," Jamie said, hopping off the deck of the houseboat and onto the shore. Casey saw how the marshy ground sank under his feet and said a brief prayer for his own nice loafers. Jamie was wearing those weird toe-shoe things that were half athleisure and half sci-fi.

“I hate your shoes,” Casey said.

“I hate your choices. Come here.” Jamie swept him into a hug, and Casey allowed himself to sink into it for a moment, breathing in his familiar smell and the bright green scent of the swamp, his chin resting against the top of Jamie’s head. The difference in their heights had always been a source of unwelcome irony growing up, everyone thinking it was hilarious to comment on how it was the white kid who would be good at basketball. As if there was a single sporty bone in Casey’s body.

“So what happened?” Jamie asked, pulling back.

“I got fired.”

“Fired!” Jamie raised his eyebrows. “Not what I was expecting. Did she figure out the scam?”

Casey rolled his eyes. “Please. No, she didn’t like that I was hanging out with her son.”

“Hanging out.” Jamie put air quotes around the phrase.

Casey rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, well.” He was already getting sweaty, and the bugs were coming out, midges circling in his peripheral vision. “Can we go inside? I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Sure.” Jamie clapped him on the back one last time. “Do you like kombucha? It’s home-brewed.”

“Of course it is.” Walking gingerly across the spongy soil, Casey followed him onto the houseboat.

*

“He still hasn’t answered his phone.” Laurel glared down at his cracked screen, trying not to think about the feeling of Casey’s fingernails against his scalp, the hot smell of jasmine. It had been a week, and he was sure that Casey was avoiding him. Laurel’s messiness had been too much, probably. He squeezed his eyes shut in embarrassment, heat creeping up his neck. There was a reason he didn’t do relationships. He didn’t seem to be built for them.

“Could it be a family thing? He seemed stressed about that phone call he got.” Melody was cuddled up on the couch, hair piled on top of her head, Luna a round, purring lump on her lap. She had been alright so far, just some mild stomach problems and headaches. The largest issue had been keeping her busy; she got anxious when she had nothing to do, and there were hours of the day to fill. They had done a lot of puzzles and watched a lot of True Crime documentaries.

Laurel shook his head. “I don’t think he has any family to speak of.” On his last food run, he had even—shamefully, desperately—driven past Casey’s apartment complex, hoping to catch a glimpse of his car, but it hadn’t been there.

“He might just be super busy. It’s getting down to the wire with the party, right?” Chip had come over with a crockpot of soup, his mom’s meatball and rice recipe, and the condo was full of the smells of tomato broth and cilantro.

“Yeah, but—” But I was supposed to be helping him with it. Laurel hadn’t spoken to his mother since that disastrous day at Landry Hall, and he really had no desire to reach out to her. But Chip was right, maybe she had just commandeered all of Casey’s time and attention. He frowned, feeling a little pang of jealousy. Which was silly; Casey had no obligation to spend time with Laurel, because they weren’t anything, not really.

Sighing, he sank into a chair. “I’m being stupid, right? It’s not like we’re dating, or something. He doesn’t have to call me back.”

Melody rolled her eyes. “Laurel, you are thirty-fucking-four-years-old, and I’ve never seen you gaze at someone the way you do at Casey. Even the other night when I was completely plastered, I could feel the chemistry between you two. There’s got to be a reason why he hasn’t been in contact.”

“Chemistry doesn’t—” Laurel tried. The collar of his shirt felt far too tight all of a sudden.

“Uh huh. You like him. Why not give it a try?”

Laurel cast a desperate look at Chip, but he just held his hands up. “Could be worth it. Just saying.”

“Ugh, you two are the worst.” He stood up, running his hands through his hair, a panicked, hopeful little feeling fluttering in his throat. His fingers were trembling. “Okay. Okay fine, I’ll call my mom.”

He went out onto the balcony to do it, but he could feel Melody’s eyes on him through the glass. Denise answered on the first ring, and Laurel’s mind went blank, anything he had planned to say bleached white and scrubbed out of his head.

“Laurel?” Her voice was oddly cold. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I—” Laurel licked his lips, trying to find words. He thought of Casey’s hand on his shoulder at the Belmont Inn, how his touch had infused calmness into him. “I um—I borrowed something from Casey.” Borrowed something ? How stupid could an excuse get? “I haven’t been able to get in touch with him to give it back. I was wondering if you’d seen him?”

“Honey, Casey didn’t work out.” She said it with the same unbothered tone she’d had when she had told him she had sold his horse. “I had to let him go.”

Laurel felt himself sway a little against the balcony railing. “Let him go?”

“Yes. But don’t worry, the ball is still on. Lavinia Bonard has been kind enough to connect me with an agency in Charleston, and they’re just fabulous .”

As if he gave a single shit about the ball! Laurel could hear his voice rising in pitch as he said, “Well, where is he? What—”

“Well, I certainly don’t know.” He could practically feel her shrugging down the line. “I’m surprised he hasn’t been in touch. Since you two are such good friends now.”

Laurel hung up in disgust, stomach churning, a cold sweat breaking out on his lower back. Casey was gone. He must be; his car hadn’t been there. Why hadn’t he said anything? Why hadn’t he told Laurel that Denise had let him go? Did he think that Laurel wouldn’t want him anymore without the ball? Did he think this was purely transactional and now that he wasn’t getting money out of it there was no reason to stay? Laurel didn’t even know Casey’s real name, let alone where he would have gone. He knew that his eyes got soft when he talked about his grandma, and that he liked sugar but didn’t allow himself much of it, and that he could rattle off flower names and varieties with ease and delight. He knew that he took his coffee black and his tea unsweetened, and that when he smiled, really smiled, it was gorgeous enough to rival the sun. And now Laurel might never get to see him smile again. He had fucked up, hadn’t he; he should have said something, he should have been clear about his feelings instead of just dancing around them. He didn’t want it to end this way, whatever it was. Casey showing up in town had felt like a second chance, and Laurel couldn’t just sit back and let it slip through his fingers.

Melody was tapping on the glass, a worried expression on her face. Everything ok?

She mouthed.

Laurel shook his head.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, opening the screen door.

“Denise fired him.” Laurel ran a hand over his face. “And now he’s gone. I don’t know where.”

“So you’re just going to let him disappear?” She crossed her arms.

Laurel felt woozy, his stomach weak. “I have to take care of you. I don’t have time to go looking for him, even if he did want to see me again.”

Melody sighed. “Laurel, no you don’t. I know you feel guilty about not always being here. I feel guilty, too. I haven’t been a great friend to you, either. But I would feel even worse if you missed out on something good out of some misguided sense of obligation.” She put a hand on his arm, squeezing gently. “You don’t need to save me. That’s not your job. And I guess I have more support here than I thought.” She nodded at Chip, back through the glass.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.” She smiled. “Maybe we both need to give ourselves a chance, yeah?”

*

“So what’s your plan?” Jamie asked. They were deep into a Mario Kart tournament, and he tossed it out casually as he steered Princess Daisy around an obstacle, but Casey could hear the edge in his voice.

“Still thinking.”

“Hmm.” He didn’t look pleased by the answer. It had been nice at first, sinking back into the friendship like a warm bath, each of them following their comfortable patterns, giving each other affectionate shit. Now it was starting to pinch, the two of them getting in each other’s way.

He had been there for about a week. Jamie made his own hours, so when he wasn’t working, they played video games, like they had as kids, or drank kombucha and looked out over the swamp. They’d gone on a Walmart run earlier that week to get Casey rubber boots, a toothbrush, fresh produce (Jamie insisted he was going to get scurvy if he kept living on Diet Coke and instant noodles), and pimple patches (he’d been breaking out like crazy without his snail mucin and royal jelly eye cream and other K-beauty products). He had been skeptical about the boots, but they had come in handy when they fed the babies, squelching through the wooded edge of the marsh and watching their eyes light up like lanterns out in the trees. It smoothed something out in Casey’s heart to hear the snuffly smacking noises the raccoons made as they demolished what seemed like truckloads of cat food and hot dogs and grapes.

On days when Jaime was plugged into his work laptop, Casey tried to stay out of his way, reading Jamie’s collection of dogeared vampire novels, trying to fill his head with anything that wasn’t Laurel or Melody or the shitty memories of his dad that had started coming back without his permission. When the restlessness became too much, he picked at his face in the bathroom, or paced around on the dock, the bugs and humidity feeling like some kind of penance. But the houseboat was small, and it was hard to have any privacy.

“You’re going to have to do something.” Jamie glanced at him through his thick glasses, fingers working automatically on the controller. “You know I love you, but I can’t put up with your ass for much longer.”

“I know, I know. You need your space.”

“I’m a solitary creature,” Jamie agreed. When he spoke again, there was a faraway softness in his voice that Casey hardly ever heard. “I thought about it, you know. Well, not really, not a traditional relationship. You know I’m asexual as fuck. But I thought about how nice it would be to have someone to watch the sunset with. Someone’s hand to hold. But then I thought about them being in my space all the time, and I just couldn’t do it.”

Casey chewed his lip, not sure what to say and not sure where this conversation was going. “I mean. I’m sure there’s someone out there who would fit your—unique situation. If that’s what you wanted.”

“And what about you? Did Hot Adult Son fit your unique situation?”

Casey dropped his controller in frustration. He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Can you stop calling him that?”

Jamie leaned back. “The question stands.”

“I don’t know. No. Maybe.” Casey groaned. “But it would never work.”

“Because you were stealing money from his mom.”

“No, he knew about that. It wouldn’t work because—because I’m not the right kind of guy for him.” Casey’s heart sank as he said it, but it was true. There was no way a shitty little white trash kid with a stained past could keep Laurel’s attention, let alone keep up with him. He needed someone whose designer clothes weren’t secondhand, someone who knew the rules of a polo match and could discuss French poetry. He needed a good person, which Casey wasn’t. He was no Robin Hood, no matter how much he tried to justify it to himself. He was no better than his dad: a thief and a

fraud, and apparently not very good at either.

Jamie paused the game, turning to look at him. “I’m sorry, run that past me again? He knew the whole time?”

Casey scratched at a scab on his chin. “Not the whole time, but he figured it out. And then instead of telling his mom, he offered to pay me extra to follow through. So I went along with it.” For the money, he’d told himself. But of course, if it had only been about the money, then why had he involved Laurel in planning the party in the first place? Why had he made excuses to spend time with him? No, he realized now. Casey had wanted to keep him around, because Laurel was special. He’d known it since that first night, as much as he’d tried to pretend otherwise. He sighed.

“Okay.” Jamie pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, frowning. “So this guy finds out your dark secret and is apparently fine with it, and also you’re hooking up with him, so I assume the physical connection is there, but you say it wouldn’t work out?”

“I didn’t mean to hook up with him again,” Casey insisted, though that probably wasn’t true, either. “It just happened. It all just happened, and now it’s out of control and I—I don’t have anything to offer, without the party. I wanted to help him.” Casey hadn’t really heard himself admit it, not even in his own head. “He thinks it’s his friend’s last chance to get her reputation back, to be accepted into society again. He wants her to come and show everyone up, I guess.”

“How weird and elaborate,” Jamie said mildly. “You two sound perfect for each other.”

“We’re not.” Casey pressed his lips together.

“Well, has he tried to get in touch at all?”

“I don’t know.” His phone was dead, had been for days. He hadn’t brought a charger, and although he could have gotten one at Walmart, he almost didn’t want to know. If Laurel hadn’t called, it would be humiliating. But if he had, Casey didn’t see any point in calling him back.

“You’ve got to make a decision, CJ. And stop picking at your face.”

Casey dropped his hand away from his jawline guiltily. “I will,” he said. And he looked at his dumb little avatar in its dumb little pixelated car on the screen, the edges shimmering as the game sat still, and felt just as stuck.

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He would have done something, he really would have. Gotten a hotel room at least, checked his bank accounts. But then the weather changed, the temperature dropping and the humidity soaring, and Casey was filled with a queasy sort of inertia, his skin clammy, his sinuses throbbing. He woke to air as dense as pea soup, the sky bruised and sullen-looking. There was a glassy eeriness to the surface of the swamp, and the constant backdrop of birdsong and squirrel chatter had gone silent. Rain showers came and went, doing nothing to ease the pressure in the air. On TV, they saw that Tropical Storm Cindy had made landfall further south.

“Cindy, huh?” Casey tried for humor. “What a bitch.”

Jamie frowned down at his phone. “I hope flights don’t get canceled.”

“Why? Planning a trip?”

“Not for me.”

Casey scoffed. “What, are you so sick of me that you bought me a ticket to somewhere?”

“Not exactly. But you should probably shower and shave.”

He did it on autopilot, feeling a vague little curl of unease as he studied his own eyes in the mirror. He looked tired, and the dark roots of his hair were beginning to show again. What a pathetic, greasy loser he had turned into, and all over some guy. Maybe the tropical storm would wash away this self-indulgent stint of melancholy, give him a fresh start.

But as the day went on, his anxiety just deepened, tickling at his spine. There was a weird, heavy quality to the light, and the sky seemed to be pressing down on them, a thick cap of shifting clouds. Besides that, Jamie was acting suspicious, glued to his phone and strangely energetic, bustling around the boat in what seemed like an oddly good mood. He didn't even give Casey shit about the half-empty can of Diet Coke he'd left out overnight, which was—disturbing.

“You're plotting something,” Casey remarked, watching him from across the living room.

“No I'm not. I'm just waiting on a delivery.”

“Hm. Something for the babies?”

Jamie shrugged. “Sure.”

A while later, the sound of tires popping on gravel cut through the thick quiet of the day. Jamie's posture seemed deliberately casual as he lounged on the couch, barely glancing up at Casey. “Can you go get that for me?”

“Seriously? You want me to go unload your pallets of hot dogs or whatever?”

“Go on, CJ. Go earn your keep.”

Casey rolled his eyes, but he got up. He was too jittery to sit still anymore, anyway. When he got out on the dock, he was surprised to see that the vehicle pulling up the drive was a taxi, not a delivery truck like he'd expected.

And then could have sworn that the whole swamp quaked beneath him, though it was really just his knees going weak, a sweet, shuddery sensation unfolding in his chest, because Laurel was climbing out of the car, his hair tousled by the humidity, his eyes

hidden behind dark glasses, every smooth, strong line of him solid and graceful and perfect.

Casey didn't rush into his arms. He wasn't sure he trusted his legs to take a single step. Laurel was smiling, and the sunglasses were oddly intimidating, making him look a little unreal, like a still in a magazine.

"I had a lot of clever lines planned," Laurel called. God, he was beautiful, breezy and careless and just a little bit mussed, a flush creeping up from beneath his collar. How had Casey ever convinced himself that he was only average-looking? "Something about coming to rescue you. Something else about only being here for the raccoons. But really, I just missed you."

"I—" Casey cleared his throat. The sound of his own heartbeat was deafening, and he was having a hard time coming up with words.

"God, Casey, say something. Is it okay that I'm here?" Laurel pushed his sunglasses up onto his head, and the aching earnestness in his eyes finally unlocked whatever had been keeping Casey frozen at the top of the steps. He crossed the yard in an instant, and then his hands were on Laurel's face, his jaw, shaping the lines of his shoulders and back, and he was kissing his forehead and scalp, clumsy, frantic closed-mouthed kisses as if he'd forgotten how to do anything else.

"Shit," he said against Laurel's hair, breathing him in, filling his lungs with him. "I guess I missed you too. How embarrassing."

"Come here." Laurel nuzzled at his cheek until Casey turned his head, and their mouths slid together like companion puzzle pieces. Casey forgot what he had been planning to say, forgot anything but the gentle heat of Laurel's mouth as Laurel kissed him softly, almost carefully, his lips clinging to Casey's for a long time before he finally broke away. He looked him up and down with a shy smile. Then the smile

turned mischievous.

“What’s embarrassing is this rubber-boot-and-sweatpants combo,” Laurel murmured. He snapped the elastic of his waistband, and delighted heat fluttered through Casey’s groin. “What exactly is happening here? I thought you were the fashionable one.”

For a second, his fingers twitched, and he wanted to check his skin, ashamed that he’d let himself fall apart so badly. But Laurel was looking up at him guilelessly, and he hadn’t recoiled in horror at the sight of him. He was just teasing. And so Casey let his hand travel down Laurel’s neck, toying with the top button of his shirt. Teasing back.

“Shows what you know,” he said. “These here are raccoon-feeding clothes.”

“Oh dear, I apologize. It seems I’m overdressed.” Laurel’s eyes were sparkling, his lips wet and lush, and it was on the tip of Casey’s tongue to offer to help him become less dressed, when the screen door creaked open.

Casey sighed. “I should probably introduce you to Jamie. Unless you’ve already met.” Jamie had obviously been in on this, though he wasn’t sure how.

“Only on Instagram,” Laurel said. “I found him in your followers list and messaged him. I was kind of desperate to get in touch with you.”

“I thought you’d never want to see me again.”

“Funny. I thought the same about you.” Laurel made a little face.

“I didn’t mean to run off without saying anything.” Casey smoothed a strand of hair off of Laurel’s forehead. “I kind of lost it after your mom fired me. And then I figured it was too late to take anything back. But I’m glad—I’m glad—” Behind

them, he could hear Jamie being as loud as possible on the dock, but he didn't want to invite anyone else into this moment just yet. And he really didn't want to have to tell Jamie that he'd been right. Apparently Laurel still wanted him.

The thought made his insides squeeze and his heart patter dizzily, and he couldn't really bear to look at it fully, so he tucked it away. "I guess I'm glad you cyber-stalked me," he finished lamely. "And conspired with my best friend. You obsessive weirdo."

Laurel winked. "Anytime, sweetheart. Now tell me more about these raccoons."

*

The thing about dressing to impress was that it assumed a nice location. An indoor, non-swamp location. Laurel had worn his crispest linen shirt and the slacks that molded to his ass just right (the slacks he knew Casey liked), but now he was soaked in sweat, in mud up to his ankles, little bits of moss and bark and who knew what else stuck to his arms and the back of his neck.

Still, Casey didn't seem to mind. As they stumbled along the edge of the water, following the swinging beam of Jamie's flashlight, Laurel felt the weight of his gaze. He seemed unable to stop looking at him, and Laurel felt the same, his eyes drawn to Casey again and again, like maybe he would wink out of existence if Laurel wasn't watching. It was hard to believe he was here, hard to believe that Casey had missed him, that he'd held him, clung to him and breathed out trembly words against his hair. Laurel would probably still be in Casey's arms right now, except that he was carrying a bucket of cat dry food, which wasn't exactly romantic or very conducive to hugging.

"It's just a little further," Jamie called over his shoulder, his thick glasses flashing in the gloom of early evening. He was an interesting individual, unapologetically

straightforward and oddly zen, and he and Casey seemed to know each other's personalities by heart. Laurel had messaged him in a fit of panic, hoping desperately that @j_raccoonboi was, in fact, the friend Casey had told him about. He hadn't really expected a response, much less that Jamie would invite him down here. Laurel had imagined it would be a fool's errand, that Casey wouldn't want to see him, or that whatever chemistry had existed between them would have dried up. Even now, there was a nervous edge to his buoyant mood. So many things remained uncertain. But as his eyes met Casey's for the thousandth time, his heart flip-flopping and warmth spreading through his chest, Laurel tried to tell himself that everything would be alright.

There were three large troughs set up at the edge of the trees, and Jamie instructed Laurel to empty the bucket of cat food into one of them. Casey dumped his own bucket, which contained a mixture of hot dogs and grapes, into another. His forearms were strong and wiry in the fading light, and Laurel forgot for a moment why they were there, lost in thoughts of tasting his skin, licking his way from the pulse point at Casey's wrist to the crook of his elbow. Casey's tan had deepened since the last time Laurel had seen him, and there was an adorable rosiness to his cheeks and the nape of his neck.

The red cast of Casey's skin deepened as he noticed Laurel looking at him. He straightened up, an ironic expression on his face. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Oh, definitely." But not in front of Jamie and the raccoons. Laurel cleared his throat, turning to Casey's friend, who was filling up the third trough with bottled water. "So, do you do this every night?"

"Yeah, but they don't always come out. If the weather's bad, or something spooks them, they'll wait until I leave. But I've got a trail cam set up, so I can watch them." Jamie stepped back, hands on his hips. "They might not come out tonight. They can

always tell when a storm is coming.”

A light breeze had sprung up, tickling the back of Laurel’s neck, and he looked reflectively up at the sky. Piles of dark, dramatic clouds indicated that Tropical Storm Cindy was on its way, but he wasn’t sure how many hours out it was. He hadn’t really spared a thought for the weather, getting down here. Now he realized how stagnant the air felt, the humidity pressing down on them. Laurel wondered if they’d be able to outrun the storm, or if they would have to find somewhere to shelter. Either way, he wasn’t sure he minded, as long as Casey was with him.

He slid his hand into Casey’s, squeezing gently. Casey squeezed back.

They waited in silence as darkness settled over the swamp, the air thick and syrupy, full of the sounds of crickets and frogs. Casey’s thumb was making small circles on his palm, and every cell in Laurel’s body leaned into the touch like a cat being petted. He was so lost in the sensation, soothed by Casey’s nearness and the cozy little pocket of the night, that he almost started to nod off—he hadn’t really slept well the previous night—but then Casey’s fingers tightened around his, startling him.

“What—”

“Shh,” Casey whispered. “Look .”

A furry, amorphous shape was shuffling out of the trees, its eyes flashing neon in the beam of Jamie’s flashlight. As Laurel watched, the shape resolved itself into an absolute unit of a raccoon, ears back, nose snuffling eagerly along the ground. Another one followed, and then a third and a fourth, slowly approaching the troughs of food with hesitant, bobbing movements. He almost let out a delighted peal of laughter, because they were just so round , their bodies fluffy marshmallows, their snouts outstretched, glossy fur rippling, nostrils working earnestly as they sniffed out the food. Laurel had a primal, almost visceral need to give them a big squeeze and

bury his face in their fur, and his fingers twitched.

“Oh my God,” he whispered to Casey. “I love them so much.”

“They’re pretty great. There’s usually more of them. I think they’re hiding from the storm.” Casey pressed a kiss to his temple, and Laurel’s breath caught in his throat at how easy and natural it had been.

There was an altercation as two of the raccoons reached the hot dogs at the same time, colliding like two fluffy mack trucks in a brief show of growling and teeth, but then all seemed to be forgiven as they each found their respective handfuls of food. Laurel watched as they skittered back and forth between the food and the water, dunking their spoils to wash them off, then shoving soggy grapes and hotdogs and cat food pellets into their mouths in a chorus of chomping and wet smacking noises. They were surprisingly loud, the sounds of their chewing and snuffling and chittering overpowering the noise of the insects and the whisper of the wind. Every so often, one would raise its nose and sniff in the direction of the three humans, eyes bright and intelligent. In general, though, they seemed more preoccupied with eating than they were worried about being watched.

It felt like a gift, something Laurel would hold close to his heart, and he knew that years from now, whatever happened, he would remember this moment. The steady pressure of Casey’s hand in his and the hushed sounds of the night, the mossy, verdant smell of the swamp and the way the raccoons’ noses flexed, the white gleam of their wicked teeth and the clutching fingers on their creepy little hands. The simple happiness of watching these wild creatures exist, of feeling like a wild creature himself, out under the stormy sky with the air sticking to his skin and mud between his toes, unfettered, no one asking anything of him except to be there.

Eventually it began to sprinkle, and there was a purplish flash of lighting overhead. A corresponding rumble of thunder sounded from far away. The raccoons, seeming to

sense the change in the weather, shoveled down a last few handfuls of food before retreating back into the trees, the round shapes of their bodies growing less and less distinct until they finally faded into the shadows and out of sight.

Part of Laurel wanted to stay there. Casey's hand had slipped out of his and was now around his waist, and he was leaning against Casey's shoulder, cheek pressed to the rough cotton of his sweatshirt. He could hear his heartbeat, the slow rhythm of his breaths.

"Okey dokey, folks, the raccoon buffet is officially closed!" Jamie bellowed, clapping his hands, and Laurel startled, nearly losing his balance. "Everybody out. Time to go."

"Jesus, J," Casey said, rolling his eyes. He massaged Laurel's shoulder, adding, "Sorry. Subtlety isn't one of his strengths."

"You two need to get on the road," Jamie told them, crossing his arms. "I don't have enough space for three people in the houseboat. Laurel, it was lovely to meet you. I still don't know you very well, but it seems like you and CJ have a special connection, and I'm rooting for you. But I will not be hosting your passionate reunion, so you have to get going. No offense."

"We'll go, we'll go." Casey sighed. He looked at Laurel, and Laurel felt a little shiver of—nerves, or anticipation, at the thought of being alone with him. What would they talk about? Did they need to talk at all? They still hardly knew each other, and suddenly his heart was pounding, all the easy familiarity of the previous moments replaced by a creeping sense of awkwardness.

"You want me to drive?"

Laurel swallowed. "Please? I'm exhausted."

“Be safe,” Jamie said. “Storm’s almost here.”

“Yeah.” Casey gave Jamie a hug, clapping him on the back. It was incongruous and also sweet, seeing him be affectionate with someone. “You too. You’ll be okay out here?”

“Oh, sure.” Jamie shrugged. “I’ve got a generator and tons of food.”

“Jamie.” Laurel chewed his lip, wanting to say something but not sure of the right words. He needs someone to wake him up , Jamie had written, when Laurel had messaged him on Instagram. But really, Laurel had been the one sleepwalking. He felt wide awake now, despite his fatigue, nerves tingling, pulse beating a tattoo in his throat. Maybe it was the ozone in the air, or the gathering pressure of the storm, but he felt more alive than he had in a long time, aware of the blood rushing through his veins, his tongue swiping across his teeth. “Thank you,” he said finally.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:20 am

There was a pregnant silence in the car, punctuated only by the sound of the rain, which was pouring down, clattering against the windshield like pebbles. Laurel studied Casey as he steered them along pitch-black country roads, the only light the gleam of the dashboard and the occasional strip of reflective tape on a mailbox or a shot-up deer crossing sign. The odd shyness that had come over him at the swap hadn't dissipated, and Laurel felt jittery and desperate, literally wringing his hands, trying to think of something to say.

The buzz of his phone saved him.

Melody: any luck?

Laurel wrote back, yeah, with him now.

Melody sent back a string of hearts and sparkles and eyeball emojis and lipstick kisses.

Laurel leaned back in the seat, sighing. Casey glanced at him.

“Denise?” he asked.

“No, it’s Melody. She—“ Laurel groaned as a vaguely suggestive gif about cowboys and riding popped up on his phone, and then another one, and a third, and a git ‘er done reference. “Man, she must be bored.”

“Is she doing okay?” Casey’s voice was tight. “It must be hard being away from her. I—I assume I’m taking you home?”

“She’s good,” Laurel said. “I think I would never have heard the end of it if I hadn’t come. Our friend Chip is hanging out with her right now, so she’s not alone.”

“Chip.” Casey chuckled slightly.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, just these douchey southern names always crack me up.” Casey shrugged. “Sorry to your friend. I’m sure he’s perfectly nice.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t love it. If you ask him, he’ll say his parents wanted him to have the most American-sounding name they could think of. They’re from Colombia. Actually,” Laurel’s frantic brain seized on the idea of names, jumped down the rabbit hole after it. “What’s your name?” he asked. “Your real one? I heard Jamie calling you CJ.”

Casey made a face.

“Come on. It can’t be worse than mine. My middle name is Gustaaf.”

“No it’s not.”

“Deadass.” Laurel crossed his heart.

Casey sighed. “It’s Charles Jefferson Walker. And I hate it, so don’t—“

“Oh, come on. That’s not bad at all. Very presidential.” But it didn’t fit him, not really. Laurel couldn’t imagine whispering it in bed, or writing it on a birthday present, or giving Charles Jefferson Walker a goodnight kiss.

Casey shot him a withering look, but it didn’t do anything to silence him. Laurel was

invested now, and the intimate little capsule of the car seemed like the perfect place to unpeel all of Casey's layers. It was cozy in here, inches away from each other, the rain pounding on the roof overhead, the noise of the storm and the inky darkness of the night making it seem like they were the only two people in existence.

"Tell me something else about you," he said, raising his voice to be heard over the rain, which was only getting stronger. A tornado siren was going off somewhere nearby, eerie and insistent. "All I know is that you like flowers. And that your grandma had birds."

"And I know that you're good at singing. And have basically no gag reflex," Casey said, with a hint of a smile.

Laurel felt heat flooding his face, but he persisted. "What's your favorite color?"

"Hm." Casey tapped his fingers against the wheel. "There are too many. I like teal. And mint green. And burnt orange. What about you?"

"Out of the ones I can see? Blue, I guess."

"Bo-ring," Casey intoned, but he was smiling.

Laurel smiled back. "I wish I knew what burnt orange looked like."

"Huh." Casey frowned. "I don't know how to describe it. I guess it's a warm color. It makes me think of campfires and Fall."

"What about the other two?"

"Teal makes me think of the beach. And mint green makes me think of, like, retro furniture and rotary phones."

Laurel leaned back in the seat. “I still have no idea what any of them look like. But I love hearing you talk about them.”

Casey snorted. “Well, I did my best. Actually, I feel kind of bad. It must suck not to be able to see all the colors.”

“It’s okay. You can’t miss what you’ve never had, right?”

Casey was silent for a moment, staring out at the path the wipers made across the windshield. A sign flashed by in their periphery, almost too overgrown with vines to be seen. They were approaching the limits of some city, or town, a cluster of lights dotting the night up ahead. Casey slowed as a collection of shabby buildings came into view, battered by the rain. Streetlights washed across the asphalt, showing that it was already slick with about an inch of standing water.

“I always hated these crappy little towns,” Casey said, as the countryside bled into suburbia, more lights appearing, housing developments and churches and the familiar signs of Walmart and Chick-fil-A floating overhead in the darkness like UFOs. “I feel like I’ve been in a thousand of them.” He flicked on his blinker, following signs for the highway. “Last chance, by the way. Let me know if you don’t want to head north.” Was Laurel mistaken, or was there something a little wistful in his voice? “We could go anywhere. Wherever you want.”

“I do need to get back to Melody.”

“Yeah.” Casey sighed.

“She wants to meet you, you know. Or, re-meet you under better circumstances. Chip does too.”

“Wow, we’re meeting each other’s friends.” Casey steered them onto an entrance

ramp, hands tight on the wheel. The tires skidded briefly, water spraying up on either side of them. “So what does that make us?”

“I don’t know,” Laurel admitted. He peered out into the darkness. Only a few other cars were out. Visibility was awful, the lines on the road shimmering in and out of existence. Rain swept across the windshield in sheets, the wipers doing barely anything to displace it. “It was nice to meet Jamie, though. He’s not really who I would picture you being friends with. Or I guess, he is and he isn’t.”

“He’s eccentric,” Casey said. “But we understand each other.”

“I’d say you’re pretty eccentric, too.” Laurel put a hand on Casey’s thigh. Wind buffeted the car, and for a brief, vertiginous instant, it seemed like they would be airborne. He gasped, digging his nails into Casey’s leg. The little Volvo shuddered on the wet pavement, tires squealing and windowpanes rattling. “God. It’s shitty out here.”

“Yeah, I—” Casey swerved suddenly to avoid a branch that had blown into the road, and Laurel was thrown against the window, teeth rattling. “Fuck. I—it’s not that I’m not enjoying talking to you, Laurel. But I think I need to focus on driving.”

“Why don’t we stop somewhere?” Laurel pulled out his phone, looking at the map. “We can wait it out.”

“Are you sure?” Casey looked at him, jaw tense. “I’m fine, I just need to concentrate. And you have to get back to Melody.”

He knew Casey probably could manage. He was from Florida, after all; they had both grown up with weather like this. People here didn’t always take hurricanes seriously, and scoffed at a tropical storm. The general rule stated that if the Waffle House was still open, it was safe to drive. But everything that had happened since he had gotten

on the airplane this morning seemed unbearably fragile, and Laurel found himself not wanting to take any chances. Not with Casey precious and alive and actually smiling and laughing with him. “She wouldn’t want us to get into an accident. There’s a hotel two exits away. What do you say?”

*

Under the fluorescent lights of a 7-11 next to the hotel, they threw together a pathetic attempt at dinner: instant noodles, Takis, Bugles, corn nuts, American cheese, and a brightly-colored kool aid pickle. Laurel’s stomach was churning, but Casey looked like a kid given an unlimited candy budget as he loaded more artificially-flavored delights into their basket.

“I don’t usually eat like this,” he said sheepishly, grabbing a crinkly cellophane package of moon pies. “A tropical storm is a special occasion, right?”

“No shame if you do. I love a good kool aid pickle. But do we really need all of it? There’s got to be half the store in—” Laurel rummaged around in the basket, pausing as his hand settled on a sleek, familiar box. Condoms. He felt his face turning red as he said, “Why, Mr. Walker, I do declare.”

Casey shrugged, raising his eyebrows. “Too presumptuous?”

“No,” Laurel said, heart pounding, palms beginning to tingle. “Not at all.”

*

They were soaked through in the short walk from the car to the door of the hotel room, buckets of warm rain dumping onto them, the wind threatening to pull them apart as they clung to each other, to steal away their bags of groceries. They tumbled into the unlit room, the door nearly coming off its hinges after them, yanked by the

wind, and they had to wrestle it back into place, panting, fumbling for the lock with slick fingers. Laurel was vaguely aware of the silence, the smell of mildewy carpet and the popping of his ears, and then Casey's hands were on him, and the bags were on the floor, all the junk food from the corner store scattering across the carpet in a cascade. He thought they might have stepped on some Doritos on the way to the bathroom, but it didn't matter. The light was on, Laurel blinking against the brightness of it, and he heard the drone of the fan coming on and the sound of the faucet, and Casey was peeling the wet clothes off of him and his whole world was just skin and slickness and the steam from the shower and the hot, sucking kisses Casey was pressing to his neck, his shoulders, his chest.

They stumbled into the tub, and he barked his shin on something and Casey nearly collided with the showerhead, almost too tall for the entire stall, and there was a really worrying crack across the ceiling and a weird little rubber grippy mat sticking to the soles of his feet, but Casey's lips were on his, his tongue spearing deep into Laurel's mouth, hot and forceful and consuming, and Laurel let himself be consumed, moaning into the kiss, his hands anchoring in Casey's hair as his shoulder blades came into contact with the cold wall of the shower. For once, he couldn't think of anything to say; in fact, it was Casey talking, murmuring against his lips between kisses, curses and compliments and nonsense things. A floral, powdery smell rose from the hotel soap as Casey began to wash him off, his fingers taking every liberty they could, teasing his nipples, shaping the curve of his ass and sliding between his cheeks to play with him there. Laurel startled involuntarily at the touch, throwing his head back and accidentally banging it against the wall, and white spots danced behind his eyes and he almost laughed, feeling stupid and desperate and desperately stupid.

"Ow. Shit."

"You're so accident-prone." Casey chuckled, smoothing a strand of hair off his forehead. "Everything okay?"

“Yes. Don’t stop. Never stop.”

Casey gave him a careful kiss on the cheek, then another on the tip of his nose. His pupils were dilated, a heavy, intoxicated look in his eyes. “God,” he said, stroking a hand down Laurel’s chest. “Look at you.”

Laurel looked down at the soapy planes of their bodies, pressed against each other. Somehow he couldn’t get himself to care that his stomach wasn’t as flat as he wanted it to be, or that he had too many freckles and too much chest hair. All he saw was the melding of their hips and the intimate, obscene way Casey’s cock was trapped against his, and he let out a helpless curse and squeezed his eyes shut, slamming his mouth into Casey’s for another deep, devouring kiss, because he knew that if he kept looking, this would all be over too soon.

Casey maneuvered him back under the spray of the shower, water peppering Laurel’s back, his skin hot and already unbearably sensitive. He was turning him around, pressing soft little kisses to his shoulders and the nape of his neck, and Laurel caught his breath as he heard the bathtub creak, Casey sinking to his knees, and then his cheek and his palms were pressed against the humid, steamy fiberglass of the shower wall, holding himself up, and Casey was kissing his spine, his lower back.

“It’s so cute that you have these dimples here,” Casey muttered, running his thumb over one of them. Laurel sighed and relaxed into his touch. His thighs were trembling, and his hands had begun to slip, unable to find purchase, but Casey grabbed a firm hold of his hips, pushing him solidly against the wall, and Laurel let out a sweet, shuddering gasp as Casey nuzzled between his legs, kissing his way down the cleft of his ass.

Laurel lost himself for a moment. Galaxies were spinning in his brain, the tips of his fingers feeling fuzzy and numb, and he wasn’t sure he even knew how to breathe anymore, but he could count every stroke of Casey’s tongue, every wicked movement

it made against his skin. There was nothing in his consciousness but the wet, melting sensation of Casey's mouth and the shivery heat in his thighs and the way his every nerve sizzled as Casey licked into him. It could have been hours, or only seconds; he wasn't sure. Time had turned glassy and meaningless, and he was barely aware of who he was or what he was doing, his hips moving on their own, thrusting back against Casey's mouth. When Casey replaced his tongue with—some number of fingers, Laurel had no idea, but it felt just right—stretching him out, filling him up, he started making strange noises, hands squeaking against the wet fiberglass. He wanted more, though how there could be more when everything already felt so good, he wasn't sure, and he was begging, saying Casey's name over and over again. He was a shooting star, about to crash through the atmosphere, and he wanted Casey to crash with him.

“Casey. Baby.” God, was that his voice? So raw and needy and shameless? “I want—I want—”

“I know.” Casey was standing, and he kissed Laurel's neck, and he was leading him out of the bathroom, droplets of water still clinging to both of their bodies, and Laurel had the brief thought that the shower was still going, but then Casey's hand was on his lower back again, and Laurel was bent over the bed, open and vulnerable and delighted, and he assumed Casey had found the condoms because he heard the crinkle of foil, and God, it had been months, it had been dreams and sweat and fights and frustration and he had been craving this with every particle of his being, and he almost sobbed as Casey slid into him, a little too fast, a little painful and eager at first, taking the air out of his lungs and making him clutch the bedspread.

He must have made a noise, because Casey paused, thumb making slow circles on Laurel's hip. He kissed Laurel's hair, rubbing his nose against his scalp. “You okay?” he asked.

“Yes!” Laurel almost shouted. No clever comebacks came to mind, just the red-hot

need in his head, his body. All those years at Duke had apparently meant fucking nothing, because he couldn't piece together any love sonnets or anything witty or anything at all except, "Yes—fucking—keep going."

And Casey did, his nails digging into Laurel's hip, breath hot against the back of his neck, the filthy slapping noise of their bodies as they moved together filling up the room, almost louder than the sound of the rain. Laurel's dick was rutting against the bedspread, and his hair was in his eyes, the muscles in his back pulled taut, and when he came, it was almost a surprise, because he had already been immersed in pleasure for so long that it was like a dream without an end.

He turned his head, kissing what he could reach of Casey, his jaw, his neck, as the last paroxysms traveled through him, as Casey sucked in a breath and buried his face in Laurel's hair and came, too, silently, his mouth open, his fingers laced through Laurel's on the bed.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:20 am

The storm was still going, hitting the windows so hard that the shutters clattered, pounding on the walls like a giant was trying to get inside. Tornado sirens whined throughout the night, but Laurel had no way of knowing how close they were. Every so often, the door would creak and groan, and the deadbolt would rattle. Water had begun to seep in from beneath the doorjamb, staining the carpet, which was already in bad shape, threadbare in places and dotted with little burns from cigarettes or—something. Laurel thought of the crack across the bathroom ceiling and counted them lucky that the entire roof hadn't fallen in. It was probably the worst hotel he had ever stayed in, because—let's face it—he was an elitist snob, but with Casey here at his side, it felt like a little pocket of heaven.

“Here you go.” Casey handed him a steaming styrofoam container, then climbed up onto the bed next to him. They were both still naked, their clothes draped over the shower rod in an effort to dry them off, and Laurel checked him out unabashedly, the long lines of his body, his smooth lower belly and the vulnerable softness of his cock.

Casey noticed him looking. He raised an eyebrow. “I don't think I can go again yet, if that's what you're wondering.”

“I can't either. I'm just enjoying looking at you.” He stoked a hand up Casey's leg. “You're so tan. Do you go to tanning beds?”

Casey shook his head. He scooped a forkful of noodles from his own cup, blowing on them. “I've always been like this. My dad used to make up stories, say we were creole, or his grandmother was a Cherokee princess, or some other bullshit. But I'm probably just very Swedish. Or Italian.”

“You might be secret Italian royalty,” Laurel said. Casey scoffed, but Laurel insisted. “No, really. I met a guy in Europe that that happened to. He inherited a castle. He and his boyfriend were super cute,” he added. From what he remembered. They had met in a club in Milan, and the undetermined number of Aperol spritzes he’d had made everything from that night warm and golden and a little fuzzy. He wondered if Casey would ever want to go to Milan, pictured him there, elegant and timelessly beautiful and just a little bit extra, just like the architecture of the city itself.

“Right.” Casey took a bite. Motioning with his fork, he said, “Try your noodles.”

Laurel looked down into the cup dubiously. The noodles were floating in some creamy-looking slurry, drops of hot sauce dotting the surface. “This is your secret recipe?” he asked.

“The shitty hotel room special. A taste of my childhood.”

Laurel felt obliged to try it, if only to keep Casey talking. Information about his past seemed to come out in bits and pieces, and this was the most he’d said in awhile. The soup was surprisingly good, even if it did mostly taste like salt, and Laurel’s stomach growled aggressively after the first bite. He hadn’t realized how hungry he was. “It’s good,” he said. “What’s in here?”

“Just cheese and hot sauce.” Casey shrugged. “I had to get creative. We lived off of convenience store and gas station food for a long time. I think crappy food was, like, my only friend. I was a chubby kid,” he added, with an embarrassed laugh.

“You grew up just fine,” Laurel said. Honestly, Casey could probably stand to gain some weight.

“Yeah, well. It wasn’t like we couldn’t afford better, but my dad spent his money on other things. Luxury cars, fancy suits. Pain pills.” Casey chewed on the tines of his

plastic fork, staring off into the distance. “He had to look the part.”

Laurel stroked his foot along Casey’s calf, watching him. It was like watching a wild rabbit at the edge of a briar patch, and he was afraid that if he made any sudden movements, or asked too much, Casey would dart back inside himself. “What did he do for a living?” Laurel asked.

“Lied to people,” Casey said flippantly, but there was tension in his jaw, his shoulders. “He wrote fake checks, talked people into get-rich-quick schemes and never delivered. Sold products that didn’t exist. Sometimes we pretended that I was tragically sick with childhood leukemia, or something else. I don’t even remember what all he did.” He set his cup of noodles down, picking at a loose thread on the bedspread. “He got caught eventually, and I got to live with my grandma while he was in prison. That was probably the only time I had any stability. The last I heard, he’s back out, and still at it. Tricking people on Facebook into fake Go-fund-mes and selling prayers on eBay.” He looked at Laurel, lips pressed together, face pale. “I guess you’re wondering why I decided to follow in his footsteps.”

Laurel didn’t say anything, just scooted closer to him, rubbing his shoulder, his neck. Casey relaxed into the touch, sighing.

“I don’t think I’m a very good person, to be honest,” he said.

“Eh. I’ve met worse.” Laurel’s heart was thudding against his ribs, and his tongue felt heavy. He knew he had to be honest, even though it was terrifying. But he had talked to Melody about the drinking, so maybe he could do this, too. His stomach dropped, and he said in a rush, “But I—I don’t want you to do it again. I mean, I guess in the grand scheme of things, it doesn’t really matter if some rich lady doesn’t get the perfect birthday party. But what about all the little people, the caterers and florists and other staff? They’re losing money, too, and they actually need it, and—it just makes me uncomfortable, Casey. I mean, if we’re—if we’re dating, or whatever it is

we're doing, then—then—”

“I know.”

“Don't look away. I'm not mad at you.” Laurel took his hand. “I just don't think it's ethical, and I don't want you to get in trouble, either. I mean, if you need money, I have—”

“I don't want a sugar daddy, Laurel,” Casey said harshly. He tried to free his hand, but Laurel hung on tight.

“What do you want, then?”

Casey sighed, collapsing back against the pillows. “I want to get away. I was saving up, and then I was going to go—somewhere, I don't know. British Columbia, maybe. I wanted to open up my own business and actually make an honest living.” He looked at him, eyes full of some unreadable emotion. “It just never seemed like enough.”

Laurel leaned in and kissed him, a soft, decisive kiss. “It'll be enough. We can get away together.”

Casey ran the pad of his thumb over Laurel's lips, studying him. “I want to believe you,” he murmured. Then he closed his eyes, burying his face against Laurel's chest. “I'm tired of talking. Can we watch TV?”

“Sure.” Laurel kissed his temple, breathing him in. His hair smelled like the rain, and like the cheap soap from the shower, and underneath it was the familiar, undefinable smell of Casey himself, herbal and a little bitter and incredibly comforting. Something trembled in Laurel's chest at the thought of maybe making this work, maybe being able to wake up next to him every morning, to nuzzle at his scalp and kiss him awake. “Turner Classic Movie marathon it is.”

“Wait, what? I didn’t—”

“Oh no, too late, I already have the remote! Get ready for fabulous costumes and choreographed dances and for your heart to be filled with song!”

*

Later, as they watched Rex Harrison being a loveable curmudgeon and Audrey Hepburn being her gorgeous, doe-eyed self, Laurel snuck a look at Casey. He had remained stone-faced throughout most of the musical, although Laurel could have sworn he’d caught him tapping his feet occasionally beneath the covers.

Noticing Laurel’s eyes on him, he said, “What?”

“Just curious what you think.”

Casey nibbled on a moon pie. “I mean, it’s just a makeover rom-com, but with singing.”

Laurel sputtered. “Just ? This is the origin of the trope! And—and her hats alone elevate it, I mean—”

“What is it with you and Audrey Hepburn? Your mom is obsessed with her, too. That was supposed to be her Halloween costume.”

“Yeah.” Laurel sighed. “I guess I get it from her. I grew up watching all of these movies. It’s kind of the only thing we have in common. She’s always wanted to be, like, a lady . But she’s not very good at it.” He took the moon pie from Casey’s hand, stealing a bite. The chocolate was warm and melty. “I know, I know. A gay guy who loves musicals. Groundbreaking, right?”

Casey shrugged. “I mean, I have nothing to say. I’ve always leaned into every stereotype I could, as long as it got me ahead. I think it helped me seem—harmless, to your mom.”

Laurel wondered what that would be like, wondered if it had felt any more genuine than what he’d been doing, straddling some weird limbo where he was and wasn’t himself. He considered asking, but then Casey added, “Besides, I’ve kind of always wanted to be a florist. So maybe I’m just as groundbreaking as you are.”

Laurel felt himself smile. “You’d be an amazing florist. Much better than being a party planner. I still can’t believe she fired you.”

“I can. I kind of cussed her out a little bit. And said she didn’t give a shit about you, and that Howie Bonard was an asshole.”

“Oh my God,” Laurel blurted. “I think I love you.”

His stomach went cold as soon as he said it. He hadn’t meant to, and Casey had frozen up on the bed, hand halfway to his mouth. “Laurel,” he said cautiously.

“Shit, forget I said that.” His heart was hammering in his throat, and he was babbling, probably making things worse. Laurel could feel his face getting hot. The thing was, it had felt natural to say. Natural and easy and strangely not terrifying. “I mean—forget I said that now . I will say it. But when I do, it’s going to be romantic and unforgettable and we’ll be in some sweeping, gorgeous location, like a cafe in Venice or something, and—”

“Come here.” Casey put an arm around him, pulling Laurel against his side. “You’re bright red,” he murmured, nuzzling against his blazing-hot neck. “And your hands are covered in chocolate.” He kissed Laurel’s palm, his knuckles, sucking his fingers into his mouth one-by-one, and Laurel’s nervous trembling got an edge of desire to it,

sparks going off in his lower belly. Casey was settling over him on the bed, one hand on his hip, and Laurel gasped as he began to kiss his way down his neck and over his chest with aching slowness, lips plush and lingering. He had the vague thought that he should pause the movie, but when he reached for the remote, he ended up knocking it off the bed, and then he couldn't care anymore, because Casey's mouth had enveloped his cock and it was just the velvet softness of his tongue, the silky strands of his hair between Laurel's fingers and the wind outside battering at the door.

*

The credits were rolling, and Casey looked distinctly unimpressed. Though to be fair, they hadn't really paid attention to all of the movie, so Laurel would have to make him watch it again.

"Not your favorite?" he asked, drawing circles on Casey's chest with his fingers. The hair there was dark brown, and correspondingly dark stubble had started to come in along the line of his jaw. There was something precious about seeing him imperfect like this, without the nice clothes and the skincare regime, his usually slicked-back hair all mussed from Laurel running his hands through it.

Casey made a face. "I just don't understand why she didn't marry Freddie. He was rich, and hot. And he had, like, the most romantic song of all of them. They could have opened a flower shop and had a bunch of hot working-class sex. But instead she went for the grumpy old guy."

"That's because she and the grumpy old guy have an intense, antagonistic connection that's simmering with unresolved sexual tension," Laurel explained. "Besides, Freddie's kind of a doofus."

"Huh." Casey pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "Well, maybe I have a thing for rich

doofuses who can sing.”

Laurel wasn't sure what to say to that, so he retrieved the remote control from the floor and brought up the TV guide menu. “Well, let's watch another one. I'm going to turn you into a musical lover if it kills me. Here, you'll like this one. It's about a con man with a heart of gold, just like you, and an uptight librarian that—”

Casey grabbed for the remote. “I am not a con man with a heart of gold. Can't we just watch Law and Order or someth—”

There was a cracking sound from outside, so loud that Laurel felt it in his chest, and a flash of light too bright and close by to be lightning, and then the TV winked out, the room plunging into darkness.

“Shit,” Laurel said, pulse fluttering in his throat. “Do you think it was a transformer going out?”

“Probably.” He felt Casey's hand against his lower back, smooth and calming, though he couldn't see anything, eyes not yet adjusted to the sudden blackness. Casey's lips touched Laurel's temple as he said, “Well, what do we do now?”

Laurel leaned into him. He was still a little jittery from the shock of the power outage, the sudden explosion of noise. His skin felt tingly and electric, and the brush of Casey's shoulder against his sent a cascade of sparks traveling down his arm. “I don't know.”

“We could try to sleep, I guess.”

The sheets were stiff and rough, and smelled like bleach with an underlying odor of mildew. Laurel didn't really want to fold himself into them, and now that sleep was on the table, he found that the exhaustion of earlier in the day had been replaced by a

kind of giddiness. “Hmm,” he said. “That sounds boring. Who needs sleep?” Laurel’s hands found Casey’s chest, mapping him out inch-by-inch. There was something decadent and intoxicating about exploring him this way, unable to see anything, every sensation heightened. He bent his head, dragging his tongue over his skin, finding his collarbone and lavishing kisses across it. Traveling lower, he kissed the dip between his pecs, found one of his nipples and sucked it into his mouth, teasing with his teeth. Casey let out a little yelp, his nails digging into Laurel’s thigh.

“God, do you ever stop?” he gasped.

Laurel smiled, pleasure blooming in his chest at the shakiness in Casey’s voice. “To be honest, I don’t know if I can come again tonight,” he said. Finding his way back up Casey’s body, he propped himself up above him on the bed. The fine outline of his profile was barely visible, and Laurel brushed his nose against Casey’s before leaning in for a slow, lazy kiss. “But I never paid you back for earlier, and I really want you to fuck me again.”

“Well.” He heard Casey swallow, and felt his cock twitch and begin to grow heavy against Laurel’s lower belly. “I mean, I’m not going to say no.”

“Yeah, somehow I didn’t think so.”

Casey ran his hands down Laurel’s body, settling on his ass. His breath was hot against Laurel’s ear, and there was a tinge of wicked amusement in his voice when he spoke again. “But that doesn’t mean you’re in charge.” He dug his fingers into Laurel’s skin, a deep, punishing pressure that sent fiery bursts of pleasure-pain exploding across Laurel’s brain. Then he was rolling them over, pinning Laurel underneath him on the bed.

“So, how would you like to get fucked?” he asked almost conversationally.

Laurel's face was so hot that he was sure Casey could see it glowing in the dark. He squirmed. "I thought I wasn't in charge."

"Ask nicely, and I'll think about it."

"I want—" he craned his neck, brushing his lips against Casey's. "I want whatever you want."

"Oh yeah?" Casey kissed the sensitive skin behind his ear, then nibbled on Laurel's lobe, sucking it into his mouth, making his toes clench and his feet shift involuntarily against the bedspread. "Good, because I want to enjoy you."

Laurel wasn't really sure who was enjoying who more, just that Casey was everywhere in the dark, his hips pressing him into the mattress, his lips on Laurel's neck and against his forehead and jaw and eyelids, and his two forefingers were in Laurel's mouth, pressing down on Laurel's tongue. He sucked on them dutifully, with no room for embarrassment about the filthy, wet sound it made or the desperate little whimpers escaping from his throat. When Casey took them away, he gasped in protest, but then Casey was kissing him, his tongue relieving the absence where his fingers had been, and his hand was between Laurel's legs, playing with his ass, opening him up and making him shiver and beg.

He was still tender there, and he couldn't help but wince as Casey's finger fully penetrated him, but part of him wanted it, craved the discomfort. Some dark, destructive part of him wanted to let everything else fall away and just be used. That didn't seem to be on Casey's agenda, though; he must have noticed Laurel tensing up, because he murmured apologies against his hairline and broke away for a moment, fumbling on the bedside table, and when his fingers returned, they were slick with the lubricant that had come with the condoms, and the initial pain Laurel had felt melted into silky luxuriance. He let himself dissolve into it, lost to Casey's touch, his mind a smear of heat and light, his heels digging into the bedspread and the muscles in his

calves tensing and his dick, somehow, hard and leaking even after everything that had already happened that night. Sparklers were going off behind his eyelids, a groan locked in his throat. Casey kissed his forehead, his chest, his lower belly, before dropping a soft, lingering kiss on the head of his cock. His breath was warm against Laurel's skin, and he was whispering sugar-sweet, worshipful things between each kiss. Laurel let out a shuddery curse, stroking the side of Casey's face. He thought he might have meant it earlier, when he said he was in love with him. No one else had ever made him feel this way, this natural and unselfconscious and free.

An almost unbearable pause happened while Casey put on the condom; Laurel was no help, not even sure he remembered how to use his hands. Then he was above him again, and they were face-to-face, and Casey's hand was cupping his hip, getting the angle just right, and then he was sliding fully into him, as deep as he could go. Laurel's head fell back, his mouth open, unable to make a sound, unable to do anything but absorb the pleasure of it, lost here in the dark with Casey. It was slow and sweet and inevitable this time, Casey going slow, like he had promised, until time had no meaning and the night dropped off over the horizon and the two of them were all that existed. He found himself wishing he could see Casey's face as he moved above him, but he settled for running his hands over his features, tracing his expressions. He had been right that he couldn't finish, but it was alright, locked here in this pocket of heat with Casey moving inside of him, the pleasure dilating and stretching out without end, relishing every slow, aching inch and hearing every soft little gasp he made. Laurel held him after he finally came, feeling the quickness of Casey's breaths, the trembling of his limbs.

"God," Casey breathed against his shoulder. "You're okay?"

"I'm great," Laurel said, kissing his sweaty forehead. "Don't worry."

"So about that cafe in Venice."

“Oh yeah?” Laurel smiled. His legs were still wrapped around him, and he kind of never wanted to let him go.

“Yeah.” Casey cuddled up into the crook of his neck. Laurel could feel his eyelids flutter, lashes brushing his skin. “When do we go?”

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The power was still out the next morning, which meant no hot water, no coffee, and no chance to get Laurel back into the shower for a slow, sleepy repeat of the night before. Casey could survive without the coffee, and even without the morning sex, but pulling yesterday's still-damp clothes on over his unwashed skin made him feel barely human. In the bathroom, he splashed his face and armpits with cold water, trying to at least be presentable enough for the drive. They would be in the car all day, and Casey was sure Laurel would take back all the sweet things he had said last night if they had to sit around smelling each other for six-plus hours.

Laurel didn't seem bothered, though. Once they had stopped for coffee, he was perfectly content, sitting at attention in the front seat like a dog on a road trip, eyes alert and sparkling, watching the road as if every highway sign and fast food franchise was uniquely fascinating. The storm had passed, and the milky-white sky of early morning gave way to a collage of oranges and pinks and blues as the sun rose fully and the cloud cover burned off. It was slow going through central Florida, parts of the road closed off to flooding or accidents, but Casey wasn't as frustrated by it as he could have been. Laurel made it easier, commenting on the scenery or singing along to the radio or making fun of the commercials and the prayer line stations. It was strangely effortless, talking with him. Being with him in general.

Traffic thinned as they approached the Florida-Georgia line, the landscape growing greener and more lush, the trees on either side of the interstate a blend of live oaks and palms. The highway was wide and flat, and Laurel must have noticed that Casey wasn't exactly in a rush, because he said, "You can go faster than the speed limit, you know."

"Yeah." Casey felt his shoulders tense up. "I'm nervous about getting pulled over. I

don't really trust the police."

"Why? Does Charles Jefferson Walker have a record?" His voice was teasing, but Casey felt a little prickle of guilt. Which was funny, because for a long time, he'd had himself convinced that he felt guilty about nothing. The world gave and took indiscriminately, and the only way to make sure you survived was to take back.

I don't want you to do it anymore .

Casey wasn't sure he wanted to do it anymore, either. He wasn't sure he wanted to be a person who took, without regard for others.

"No," he said, which was the truth. "But I don't want to get one." He didn't really want to admit it to Laurel, but he had been massively stupid at Melody's house. Between the cat allergies and the missed calls from Denise and the unwelcome memories of all the times his dad had attempted to detox, he had somehow forgotten to flush Melody's drugs, stuffing them into his jacket instead, and now they were in the glove box. Getting pulled over could be very, very bad.

"It's okay." Laurel stretched, yawning. "I'm not exactly in a hurry to get home, either." His shirt rode up, exposing a sliver of skin, and even though Casey's tongue had been all over every inch of him last night, his mouth still watered, and his worries about the glove box winked out of existence. He would never get tired of looking at him.

"Laurel." Casey was about to ask again if he was sure he wanted to go back. They could take a detour at least, stop in Savannah and walk hand-in-hand beneath the dangling arms of the live oaks. Anything to prolong this time together, before real life came rushing back in. But Laurel's phone was ringing, and he had pulled it out to answer.

“My dad,” he said. “Do you mind?”

Casey shook his head. He stared resolutely out at the road, trying to look like he wasn’t listening in. Though of course he was. It was hard to catch anything, though, because Laurel was speaking some combination of English and French, and damn, if everyday Laurel was already as sweet and hot as fresh pecan pie, hearing him speak French was like putting ice cream on top. Casey’s palms felt a little sweaty on the wheel as Laurel’s tongue wrapped around the words.

“ Mais non, Dad , ce n'était pas un ouragan . C'était a tropical storm. No, I don't know how you say it in French. Une ... petite tempête tropicale. Tout va bien .” He shot Casey a smile, and Casey’s heart flip-flopped. “Actually, je suis avec ... eh bien, ce n'est pas un ami. Mais j'espère qu'il sera un petit ami soon.”

The person on the other line said something loud and excited-sounding, and Laurel blushed, running a hand through his hair. “Yeah. Il est très gentil. I’ll have to ask him. Okay. Okay, Dad. Je t’aime aussi. à bientôt .” He hung up, face still flushed. “Sorry about that,” he told Casey. “He gets worried about hurricanes. And his geography of the US is shaky, so he’s sure I’m in the middle of every single one, no matter where it is.”

“I didn’t know you spoke French.”

Laurel made a face. “At, like, a kindergarten level. I understand a lot more than I can speak.”

Casey shrugged. “Still sexy. Did you say you were with a friend?” He had been able to pick out that word, at least, or thought he had.

“Uh.” Laurel turned a little redder, and he fiddled with the air conditioning vent on the dashboard. “Not exactly. I said—I said you weren’t a friend. But that I hoped

maybe you would be a boyfriend soon. Oh, and he wants to meet you now. Sorry.”

“A—” It felt like someone had just released a flock of birds inside Casey’s chest, and his fingers were trembling, and he had to remind himself that he was still driving and that he couldn’t just gaze across the cab at Laurel for the foreseeable future. “A boyfriend, huh?” he said finally. “Are you sure about that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Laurel’s face was open, earnest, and Casey felt sure he would never deserve someone like him. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. I’m scared as hell. But that doesn’t mean I’m not sure.”

“What about my past?”

Laurel shrugged. “People can change. You’ll find a better way to make money, I know it.”

Casey shook his head. “Life isn’t as easy as you think.”

“Then let me make it easier. I can help you. Not,” he added quickly, “as a sugar daddy. Just as—a safety net. It seems like you’ve never had one.”

He hadn’t, and he hadn’t ever really had a boyfriend, either. Casey had spent his whole life wanting nicer things, wanting what other people had, but he’d never dared to want love. He thought of what Laurel had said in the hotel room, and his heart squeezed. He wondered if he had meant it. He wondered if it would last.

Casey cleared his throat. “I have to be honest, Laurel. I have no idea how to be in a relationship. I don’t even know where to start.”

Laurel plucked Casey’s hand off of the steering wheel, kissed the back of it. “Let’s start at the beginning. As Julie Andrews says, it’s a very good place to start. I want to

go on a date with you. Multiple dates, actually. I want to show you all of my favorite places.”

“In Bonard?” Casey’s chest felt like it was full of glitter, but he forced himself to be practical. “What about all the gossip? What about your mom?”

“What about it?” Laurel shrugged, a careless grin on his face, that one tooth catching on his lower lip, and, at least for that moment, all of Casey’s reservations melted away, replaced by a shivery sense of exhilaration. “I don’t really care anymore. I’m done worrying about what people think.”

*

For their first date, they really did go back to the beginning, taking a trip to Abernathy Farms’ annual harvest festival. It was warmer than usual for early October, hay bales baking in the sun, the goats in the petting zoo chewing lethargically at broken-open pumpkins. Had it really only been a number of weeks—eight, or maybe ten?—since Laurel had been out here with Casey the last time, the two of them crammed into the back of a golf cart, resentment and lust simmering between them as their thighs brushed? It felt like years had passed since then, but the Halloween decor all over the property told Laurel that it was, somehow, still Fall. The spooky skeletons and bloody scarecrows set up around the property looked comically out-of-place against the sparkling blue of the sky and the still-green fields of crops. Hordes of sweaty children, many of them in costume, drunk on apple cider, kettle corn, and the novelty of it all, chased each other and climbed on the piles of pumpkins. There was a giant, “haunted” bounce house set up, and a fun slide that Casey definitely exceeded the height limit for. Which was too bad, because Laurel would have forced him to go down it otherwise. He was still kind of tempted to try to talk him into visiting the face-painting booth.

“God, there’s a lot of people here,” Casey said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“I mean, if you want privacy, we could get lost in the corn maze and make out.”

“Uh, no. Sounds scratchy and uncomfortable. Ooh, they have caramel apples!” Casey pointed in excitement at a hand-painted sign on the side of the barn. “Will you share one with me?”

“Sure, go get us one.” Laurel watched him walk away, eyes lingering appreciatively on his tall, slim figure. Casey’s hair gleamed in the sunlight, nearly as bright as the white of his jacket. His eyes were hidden behind designer sunglasses, and he looked elegant, enigmatic. Untouchable. Laurel felt a little thrill, knowing that no one else here had any idea what lay beneath the surface of him.

It was so nice, admiring him from afar and knowing he was coming back. Being with Casey felt comfortable, in a way no other hookup or relationship or situationship had. When Laurel had been in love before, it had been stars and sunsets and secrets and extremes, but this was like the beach on a sunny day, easy and soothing. He knew he probably shouldn’t even be thinking of love this early on, should be protecting his heart, but apparently he wasn’t great at that. Never had been, really. Didn’t want to be.

The line was long, and eventually Laurel lost sight of Casey. He pulled out his phone to pass the time. Nothing from Denise, but that would probably change as soon as the wheels of the town gossip mill started turning. As far as Laurel knew, she wasn’t even aware that he’d been out of town at all, and now that he was back, he and Casey hadn’t made any grand announcements. They were just—together, and people could draw whatever conclusions they wanted. Laurel had already noticed Sarah Ann Copeland here with her grandchildren. She was staring at him with a look of incomprehension, probably already formulating what she’d say to all the church ladies. Laurel waved at her cheerily. She pressed her lips together, not returning the gesture.

Yeah. So it was probably a matter of hours before Denise started blowing up his phone. Laurel saw Casey returning from the concessions booth, a caramel apple in one hand, and thought for a moment about grabbing him around the waist and bending him back in a big, cinematic kiss. Maybe also grabbing a handful of his ass, just to make it extra obvious. But there were kids around, after all.

“That was awkward,” Casey said. “No one in line would talk to me. I can’t tell if it’s because of the whole getting fired thing, or because I’m here with you.”

“Yeah, we do seem to be getting carefully ignored,” Laurel agreed. He couldn’t really bring himself to care. Honestly, it was kind of nice not to have to make empty conversation with anyone. The sun was warm on his back, and he was enjoying being here with Casey, smelling caramel and tartness from the apple and watching his eyelashes flutter happily as he took a bite. “Melody said she’d be here. Should we try to find her?”

“Mm-hm. Here.” Casey handed him the apple. “You finish it.”

“You had like two bites.”

“That’s all I wanted.”

“Fine.” He wished Casey would eat more, but he wasn’t going to push. Not now, at least. “But when we go to Belgium, I’m making you try everything. Even if I have to force-feed it to you.”

“God, you make it sound so dirty,” Casey said with a sly smile.

“It will be. Absolute debaucherous filth.”

“Debaucherous?” Casey gave him a skeptical look. “That’s not a word.”

Laurel grinned, taking out his phone. “Look it up. I dare you. The winner gets to—“

“Laurel, hey!” It was Melody, waving from one of the covered picnic tables nearby. She was sitting with Kierra Nelson and a girl who looked fresh out of high school, and there was a shopping basket full of pumpkins at her side.

“I’m getting into baking,” she explained once they had reached her. “And maybe making pumpkin butter. And I guess whatever else you can do with pumpkins. I’m frickin’ bored, is what I’m saying.”

“Well, you look amazing.” Laurel gave her a hug. He was glad to see that sobriety hadn’t influenced her sartorial sense. The boot had come off her foot, and she was in mirrored sunglasses, a denim halter dress, and strappy heels, looking like she’d stepped out of an early-2000s music video.

“So do you two. It’s nice to see you again, Casey.” Melody smiled up at him, a little shyly. Clapping her hands, she said, “Oh! Introductions. This is Kierra Nelson, the librarian at the high school. And this is Lydia Callaway. We’re part of the same volunteer group.”

Lydia gave them a tight smile but didn’t say anything. Her shoulders were hunched, fingers glued to her phone. Laurel was pretty sure she was Birdie Callaway’s niece, though she’d been much younger the last time he’d seen her.

“Casey, I’m glad to finally meet you,” said Kierra. “I hear you’re into floral arrangements. Have you read *The Language of Flowers* ? It’s really fascinating.”

“No, I, um—“ he looked surprised, like he hadn’t expected anyone to actually care about his interests, and it made Laurel a little sad. “What’s it about?”

“Oh, the Victorians,” Kierra said knowingly. “So, you know. Weird shit.”

Before they could stay and chat more, though, Melody grabbed his arm, tugging on it. “Laurel, come on. I need help loading these pumpkins into my car.”

“You’re leaving already?” he asked. He wanted to stay, if only for Casey’s sake. He liked seeing him engaged, liked the way his face lit up when he talked about flowers Laurel couldn’t name and colors he couldn’t see. But Melody was already halfway across the field, and he had no choice but to follow. In her heels, pushing a cart full of pumpkins with the corn maze as a backdrop, she looked like a particularly silly fashion campaign.

“Yeah, Kierra and Lydia have stuff to work on. And I think Howie is here. I saw his car out in the parking lot, and I don’t want to run into him.”

“I saw it too,” Casey said, catching up to them. “He has a vintage Chevy Camaro, right?”

“What?” Laurel looked at him in surprise. “Since when do you know about classic cars?”

Casey shrugged. “I saw it outside the hotel and recognized the make and model. My dad had one for a while. They’re surprisingly easy to break into.”

“Interesting.” Melody pursed her lips.

“Oh my God,” Laurel said. He had wanted Casey and Melody to get along, but the idea of them teaming up was a little bit terrifying. “Don’t get any ideas,” he told her.

“I’m just saying.” Casey was the picture of innocence in his white suit jacket, a neutral expression on his face, but right then, he felt like Laurel’s own personal, very tempting shoulder devil. “It wouldn’t be too hard to put some raw shrimp in the heating vents. Or ground hamburger under the seat covers.”

“I like the way you think.” Melody smiled, pressing the key fob for her own car. The trunk swung open. “But no, I’m going to let karma take care of Howie. I think, I hope , that—” She bit her lip and grabbed a pumpkin. “You know what, never mind. I don’t want to jinx it. Do y’all want to help me make some pumpkin bread?”

Laurel held up his hands. “Oh no. You know I don’t cook.”

“I can make boxed Mac n’ cheese,” Casey added. “That’s it.”

Melody rolled her eyes. “It’s really not that hard. And it’s surprisingly cathartic to crack a pumpkin open with a meat cleaver. But I get it, you two need your alone time.” She winked. “Give me a call if you ever want a third wheel, though. Casey, Laurel’s never let me meet anyone he’s dated, and I’ve been saving up embarrassing stories for years .”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:20 am

Without the Halloween ball hanging over their heads, the slow, sunny start of autumn was full of possibilities. Neither of them had any obligations, so for the next few weeks, they spent almost every day together. Miraculously, Laurel hadn't gotten tired of him yet; in fact, it seemed like the opposite was true. Laurel couldn't seem to get enough of him, and Casey felt the same.

Laurel hadn't been kidding about showing Casey his favorite places. There was a secluded stretch of beach near the condo, perfect for picnicking, and they spent several afternoons there, feet crusted with sand and skin greasy with sunscreen, Laurel's chest and shoulders getting adorably more freckled. Casey brought pimento cheese and Ritz crackers while Laurel, seemingly unable to not be extravagant, brought prosciutto and brie and premade sushi rolls, and hand-fed Casey pieces of each. One morning, they chartered a boat and toured the tangled skein of tributaries that wove through the coastal marshes, sunlight sparkling on the water like pirate's gold, the air smelling of saltwater and greenery, pelicans and herons watching as the boat glided past. Casey taught Laurel the names of plants, and his favorite facts about Spanish moss, how it wasn't moss at all and how it provided a habitat for several types of bats, snakes, and spiders. They spent a weekend in Charleston, walked cobbled streets in the buttery yellow light of late afternoon and sat drinking coffee and people-watching: the wealthy elites who actually lived downtown, the frumpy, overheated tour groups, and the wobbly, roving herds of girls out for bachelorette parties. Laurel's running commentary was bright and good-natured; Casey's was significantly more judgy.

On other days, it was enough just to stay inside, Laurel's head in Casey's lap and Casey's fingers tracing lazily through his hair. Laurel made Casey watch all of the musicals and other classic movies of his childhood, and even though Casey found

them hopelessly cheesy and would never understand why the characters felt the need to burst into song, he enjoyed seeing the way Laurel's face lit up and the way he mouthed the lyrics almost unconsciously, buoyed along on the current of some overwhelming emotion. In return, Casey made him watch the '80s action movies Grandma Terri had loved and the fantasy and science fiction movies that had been his and Jamie's bread and butter. All except for *The Neverending Story*, that was. Laurel liked horses too much for Casey to ever show him that one.

Melody had tagged along for one movie night, and so had Chip, who was nowhere near as douchey as his name suggested. Casey still wasn't totally sure how to act around them, and the feeling seemed to be mutual. Chip and Melody were friendly, but Casey wondered if they actually liked him. He wanted them to, which was annoying. He didn't often concern himself with other people's opinions of him, not unless he could get something out of it. But now, he was less worried about what he could get out of it, and more scared of fucking it up.

Laurel's friends weren't the only thing Casey worried about. Eventually, he would have to figure out what he was doing with his life. Get a job, at least. Sometimes he worried that he wouldn't be able to. He watched Laurel sleep and ran the pad of his thumb over the freckles on his shoulder and wondered how they could possibly work out, how they would navigate finances and living together and all that other nebulous, intimidating couple-y stuff. He worried about finding the right place to settle down. Laurel had a love-hate relationship with Bonard, but his friends were here, and meanwhile, Casey wanted to get out of the South entirely. He worried that the novelty would wear off, that they had too little in common, that he wouldn't be able to give Laurel the life he was used to.

Mostly, he worried about Denise.

She wouldn't leave Laurel alone, calling and texting at the worst times. Whenever Laurel pulled out his phone and saw her name on the screen, his shoulders slumped

and his eyes got flat, a look of defeat crossing his face. Casey hated to see him that way, especially now, when they were about to do something Laurel had been begging him to try for days.

“Come on, put that away. I already didn’t want to do this, and I’m definitely not bringing Denise along for the ride.” He grabbed for the phone, then cursed as he saw the string of novel-length texts on Laurel’s screen. “Jesus.”

“Yeah.” Laurel sighed. “She’s written a whole-ass manifesto.”

Despite himself, Casey was curious. “Well, what does it say?”

“Oh my God. The usual.” Laurel’s hair was wind-tousled, his cheeks pink from the sea breeze. He offered Casey a smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “After everything she’s done for me, I can’t even bother to answer a call, blah blah blah, people are talking, at least address the rumors, blah blah, I’m selfish, immature, irresponsible, acting out for attention, I have no regard for how my actions impact other people, blah.” His thumb played over the screen. “Oh, here’s a new one. I sabotaged the Halloween Ball by stealing her party planner. It’s a personal insult that I’ve chosen to associate with you. Don’t even think of trying to come to the party.” He rubbed the back of his neck, looking up at the sky. “Should I just tell her we’re fucking? I should just tell her, right?”

“Not right now,” Casey said, bemused. “Not if you don’t want to ruin your whole day.”

Laurel made a face. “I guess you’re right.”

“Besides,” Casey put a hand on his lower back, massaging away some of the tension he felt there. “I’m glad you stole me. Even if I might fall off a horse.” Laurel was wearing the most captivatingly tight pair of riding pants, and Casey let his hand creep

lower, giving his ass an affectionate little tap. He was rewarded by genuine laughter, and the clouds hanging over the moment seemed to lift.

“Oh my God. You won’t fall off. I’ll make sure Mr. Petrowski gives you the gentlest old mare. Come on.” Laurel took his hand, pulling him forward, toward the stables at the edge of the gravel parking lot.

During some conversation or other in the last few weeks, Casey had made the mistake of telling Laurel that he had never ridden a horse, and Laurel had latched onto the idea with single-minded focus. His former teacher, he’d explained, owned a stable that offered rides along the beach. It was completely safe for beginners and Casey would absolutely love it and become a horse convert for life and Laurel wouldn’t accept no for an answer.

And now it was actually happening. Casey’s stomach was tight with unease as Mr. Petrowski and Laurel exchanged enthusiastic greetings, but he shook hands and smiled, playing along. The drama teacher was a tall, birdlike man with a sparse head of hair and a full moustache, good-looking in a nerdy way and probably only about fifteen years their senior. Casey remembered meeting him in a coffee shop, what felt like years ago. Pumping him for information about Laurel, then getting roped into a carriage ride. How the tension between him and Laurel had been red-hot and oppressive, how every time he’d glanced across the cab at him, he’d thought involuntarily of the taste of his lips.

He glanced at Laurel now, with the knowledge that he could taste him anytime he wanted, and a warm, lazy fondness bloomed in his chest. Laurel’s face was full of childlike delight, the stress of Denise’s earlier messages seemingly forgotten. As they toured the stables, he greeted the horses by name, reaching through the bars at times to pet a snout or scratch a glossy flank, apparently unafraid of their giant, finger-snapping teeth. Casey kept his distance, brushing hay repeatedly off of his jacket (it was everywhere, suspended in sun beams and filtering down from the rafters).

It wasn't that he didn't like horses. They were just big, and seemed like nervous, flighty creatures, and Casey didn't enjoy things that were unpredictable. He especially didn't enjoy putting his entire physical person onto something big, flighty, and unpredictable, something that had a mind of its own and might decide to chomp on his leg or buck him off into the ocean.

Mr. Petrowski was rattling off a basic safety lesson about how to use the reins, but the words slipped through Casey's mind like water through a sieve. He wondered if horses could sense fear, like dogs. The one that had been picked out for him seemed calm enough, if a little unimpressed. Which he probably deserved. She was silver-gray, and pretty, and gave him a bored side-eye as he attempted to climb up onto her back. His palms were sweaty, so much so that he couldn't get a good grip on the knob-like thing at the front of the saddle (Mr. Petrowski had maybe called it a pommel?), and he failed four times at pulling himself up before he was finally able to get his foot into the stirrup and swing his other leg over the horse, and then he was swaying, dizzy and off-balance and aware all of a sudden of being uncomfortably tall , the ground very far away.

Laurel was smiling up at him, apparently still willing to be in the same room—or stable, or whatever—as Casey after that embarrassing performance. He gave him a thumbs-up. “You did it! What do you think?”

“It's really high up.”

“You'll get your sea legs,” Mr. Petrowski said, patting the side of the horse. “Mae here will take good care of you. She's the one we have all the little kids ride.”

Oh, great, that made him feel so much better. Laurel's horse was chestnut-colored, and had some badass name like Ignatius or Incendio, and Casey was caught between envy and lust, watching the graceful athleticism of Laurel's body as he climbed up onto its back, his every motion fluid and effortless. He was built for this, more

confident in the saddle then he seemed on land. God, he was even cute in the stupid bowling-ball helmet with the chin strap, and the riding pants caressed every single long, muscular line in his thighs and calves. Casey felt a strange wistfulness, watching the relaxed ease of Laurel's movements, the way he talked to the horse and made clicking sounds with his tongue, directing it to turn and head out of the stables. There was such a chasm of difference between the two of them, and seeing Laurel here, in his element, just rubbed it in.

It was a short walk down a grassy, sloping dune to get to the beach, and Mae seemed to know it by heart, which Casey was grateful for, because he really didn't know what to do with the reins and was just letting them dangle helplessly from his hands. Laurel led the way, sure and easy. The tide was out, tracks of dried seafoam crisscrossing like lace across the sand. It was a mild day, not too hot, the sky overhead white and overcast and the water calm, stretching sleepily out to the horizon.

Laurel pulled back, waiting for Mae to catch up, and then the two horses were walking side-by-side, leaving deep, lunar hoof prints behind them in the sand. It felt even more unsteady than walking on gravel had, and Casey tensed up, trying not to shift around in the saddle too much. His lower back was tingling, muscles he never had to use twitching in his thighs.

"You doing okay?" Laurel asked. "You kind of have to lean into it. Let yourself move with the horse. It's all in the hips, really." His eyes were sparkling, his cheeks flushed, and he looked so joyful that it was impossible to be annoyed, even with the unsolicited advice.

"I'm perfectly good with my hips," Casey deadpanned. "You know this."

Laurel laughed. "Then you should be a natural."

“You’re a natural,” Casey admitted. They had stopped; Mae seemed to have realized that no one was in control and was taking advantage of it, snuffling at a patch of dandelion greens growing along the edge of the sand. “How long have you been riding horses? Since you were a kid?”

“Yeah.” Laurel scratched his horse between the ears, and it whickered good-naturedly. Something passed across his face, too quick to read. “I had one, but my mom got rid of it.”

“Not sure if you’ve noticed, but your mom kind of sucks.”

“Yeah, well. I wasn’t kidding. I’ll tell her about us. If you want me to.”

Casey looked at him, not sure what to say. Laurel was so gorgeous, windswept and flushed, stars in his eyes, and of course it was easy for him to believe everything would be okay, because he lived in a world of heartfelt declarations and happy-ever-afters and bursting into song. He lived in a world where money was no object and there was always a safety net to fall into. Casey kind of hated himself for thinking it, because he knew now that not everything in Laurel’s life was easy, or particularly rose-colored. But the thought persisted, bitter and nagging and unfair. He cleared his throat.

“Did you ever picture yourself with a guy who can’t even ride a horse?” He tried to sound lighthearted.

“You’re doing fine,” Laurel said. “And I didn’t picture myself with anyone, really. I couldn’t get that far. But if I had,” he grinned, “it probably would have been some handsome, smooth-talking bad boy who challenged me and got me out of my comfort zone. Who made me feel brave and worthwhile and pissed off my mom.”

“I—” Casey’s heart stuttered in his chest, and he felt his face getting hot. He wasn’t

sure how he felt about being called a bad boy. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Laurel reached across the space between them, squeezing his hand. “Don’t worry so much, babe. I’m all in. I don’t want anyone else.”

Casey’s breath caught in his throat. He wanted to give in, to let himself fall, but it was terrifying. But maybe he had already been falling for a while, because there was nowhere he’d rather be than sitting in this uncomfortable saddle on this horse who clearly didn’t respect him, basking in the light of Laurel’s sweet optimism. I want to believe you, he’d said, in the hotel. He wanted to believe him still, wanted to believe this patch of sunshine in his life would last, stretch out. “We’re so different,” he managed at last. “I’ve never traveled. I didn’t go to college. My idea of fine dining is, like, Applebees. I—“ I’ve got all sorts of things wrong with me. Probably ones I don’t even know about yet.

Laurel shrugged. “I’m glad we’re different. Fuck, I couldn’t stand dating some obnoxious Peter Pan trust fund kid.”

“Laurel.” He was so much more than that. So much more than Casey had originally thought of him.

“Somehow you seem to put up with me, though.” He winked. His horse was getting restless, snorting and prancing on the sand, and he tugged on the reins. “Should we keep going? I don’t think this guy sits still very well.”

“I mean,” Casey said, unable to look him in the eye. “Mae has found a snack, and I don’t want to bug her.” She was still yanking up mouthfuls of dandelion greens, apparently determined to get every last bit.

“You sure? Because if you’re going to stay here...” Laurel chewed his lip, excitement

building in his eyes. Casey saw his hands grow tense on the reins, forearms practically vibrating. Like a kid about to open a present, he thought. Or a dog about to get a treat. The horse was just as excited, seeming to sense Laurel's mood, its feet beating a tattoo in the sand. Casey thought he finally understood the meaning of the phrase champing at the bit. "Do you mind if I run him for a little while? It's been so long, and I really want to go fast."

"Just be careful." It was barely out of Casey's mouth before Laurel was off. They started off at a trot, but soon the horse was rippling across the beach like a ribbon in the wind, sand flying up from its hooves, wild and powerful and free. Adrenaline flooded Casey's chest as he watched them, the seamless way they moved together, the way Laurel leaned into every turn as the horse streaked across the sand. He wasn't sure if it was because of the speed, the enthralling, wild nature of it, or because of what Laurel had just said. Or maybe it was watching Laurel do something that made him happy, the pure elation shining on his face, the weight lifted from his shoulders. The way he threw himself into it without caution, without a second thought, lost to the bright, open sky and the waves and the wind.

I'm all in.

Was this what it felt like? Was this what all the people in Laurel's movies sang about? The way his heart clenched when he looked at him, the way he never wanted to stop looking? The way every cell of Casey's body seemed to lean toward Laurel, and the way he couldn't get enough of him, wanted to bask in the light of his smile and listen to his obscure jokes and learn every little untold detail that made him who he was?

Mae snorted and made a kind of whuffling sound, apparently satisfied that she had eradicated the dandelion plant. She raised her head, and Casey scratched her gingerly between the ears. Her neck was as strong as a tree trunk, and there was something about her that inspired confidence, like she could keep a secret. "Shit, Mae," he

muttered. “What do I do? I think I’m in love with him.”

*

Laurel was talking a mile a minute in the car; he couldn’t help himself. He felt like he’d been struck by lightning, or like he’d taken one of Melody’s illicit Adderall pills, every particle of his body vibrating with energy. It had been so long since he had been able to ride a galloping horse, to get that vicarious runner’s high and scour all the worries—all thoughts entirely—out of his brain. He really hoped he wasn’t annoying Casey. It had been a big ask to get him on a horse in the first place, and now he was just prattling at him endlessly, not only about horses but about everything and anything, as they made their way back down the coast toward Laurel’s condo.

“Do you think we should go to one of his shows? I don’t know. It sounds fun, but I feel like it would be so awkward, tucking dollars into my drama teacher’s g-string. You know?” Laurel was turning a matchbook over and over in his hands, a gift from Mr. Petrowski, who had told them the next time they were in Charleston, they should stop by the Leopard Gecko Lounge and see him perform. (“I start out in a giant mech suit, then strip down to a little cocktail number,” he’d said.)

“I would go,” Casey said. “I want to see the mech suit.”

“Well, good. Then it wasn’t a complete bust.” Laurel looked at him guiltily. “I know you didn’t really like the horseback riding.”

“That’s not true. I liked watching you ride a horse.” Casey put a hand on Laurel’s thigh, squeezing gently. “And I think Mae and I have an understanding.”

“So you would try it again?” Hope blossomed in Laurel’s chest.

“Laurel, if you keep wearing these pants, I’ll try anything you ask me to.”

*

Back in the condo, Casey was peeling said pants off of Laurel, his mouth on his neck, the corner of the kitchen island digging into Laurel's hip. They had, once again, failed to make it to the bedroom, but that was fine with Laurel, better, even. He wanted Casey here, now, wanted him with raw immediacy. His heart was in his throat as he said, "We can skip the condom if you're okay with it. I'm clean."

Casey pulled back, studying him, untold depths in his dark eyes. He traced his knuckles across Laurel's cheekbone. "I am too. I just—it felt too intimate, before. Not to use one. But I guess I'm your boyfriend now, so..." he shrugged.

The bottom fell out of Laurel's stomach, and he slammed his mouth into Casey's, heart soaring, head in the clouds.

They fumbled their way out of the kitchen and down the hall, nearly knocking several pictures off the wall. Laurel's hands were all over Casey, and the word boyfriend was pounding in his brain, and they toppled onto the bed, Casey pulling Laurel on top of him, nails digging into his ass, and then whatever was left of Laurel's already-beleaguered brain cells evaporated, because Casey whispered in his ear, smooth as honey, "I kind of want you to do me, this time."

"Oh, God." Heat lanced through his groin and exploded across his face, followed quickly by self-consciousness. "Are you sure? It's been a while."

Casey brushed a soft kiss across his forehead. "I'm sure." And then, more ironically, "I can't be the one doing all the work every time. And my thighs are sore from horseback riding."

"Oh, you poor thing." Laurel undid Casey's belt, sliding his pants down his legs. He painted his lower belly with kisses, his hips, his thighs, and finally his hardening dick,

taking him into his mouth. It was tempting to just stay there, lost in the smell of his skin and the haze of Casey's soft sighs and the patterns his fingertips were tracing on Laurel's scalp. But Casey had made a request, and Laurel was nothing if not obliging.

It was awkward at first, but the awkwardness soon burned off, like morning fog on a hot day, and then it was just the privilege of getting to touch him this way. Laurel's lubricated fingers found the cleft of Casey's ass, and Casey's eyelids fluttered and he whispered against Laurel's throat, words of encouragement and instruction—what had that been, again, about not wanting to do all the work? Because he certainly didn't mind giving direction—and Laurel got lost in exploring him, in the way his breath hitched and the sheen of sweat on his brow and collarbone and the dazed look of desire in his beautiful eyes. He wasn't sure how long it went on, just that eventually Casey cursed and put a hand on his wrist, his voice ragged as he said, "Enough. Please. I want you."

And again, Laurel was happy to oblige, leaning down to kiss him as Casey guided his cock between his legs, and then it was just the tight, pulsing heat of him, almost too much, sending electric shocks down Laurel's thighs and making his thoughts scatter. Casey was gazing up at him like he was a starry sky, and Laurel did his best, but every scrape of the sheets against his knees, every creak of the mattress, every time his eyes caught on Casey's parted lips or his heaving chest or the way the planes of their bodies seemed made to fit together, sent him closer and closer to the edge, and soon he was coming, sooner than he'd like, and he reached a frantic hand between their bodies and jerked Casey off against his stomach, taking them both away together.

"Sorry," he said, moments later, as they lay side by side, their breathing growing slow. "I wanted that to last longer."

Casey traced a line down his thigh. "You just need more practice."

“Oh yeah?” Laurel looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

“And someone to show you how it’s done.”

“Oh really?” A thrill traveled through him, and he rolled over so they were face-to-face, pressing a soft kiss to Casey’s lips. “Are your poor, aching little legs feeling better so soon?”

“Not yet.” Casey wrapped one of said legs around him, pulling Laurel’s hips down against his. Really, his legs were anything but little. They were long and lean and gorgeous, and Laurel felt his mouth go dry. “But they will be, in a few hours.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:20 am

Halloween arrived clear and balmy and mild, which was too bad: Casey really didn't want any trick-or-treaters coming by his apartment. He hadn't bought any candy, and had been hoping the weather would be bad enough to discourage them. It was funny, he thought, lying on the couch, flicking through the channels. Funny to still be in Bonard on Halloween, and funny to be at home instead of rushing around town, trying to find decorations, or a seamstress to hem Denise's dress, or a tiny bow tie for Jasper, or whatever other last-minute bullshit her new party planner was currently having to deal with. Casey guessed he must be feeling especially magnanimous, because he sent up a brief prayer for whatever poor soul it was that had taken his place.

As it was, he actually had nothing on his agenda today. Maybe a face mask and a bath. Laurel had said something about hanging out with Chip and Melody later that night, but since Melody wasn't drinking, he doubted it would be anything wild. Probably dinner and scary movies, which sounded fine to Casey.

The clock was inching past seven and it had gotten dark out. Right now, someone was probably setting up place cards at Landry Hall, or administering last-minute adjustments to Denise's sunflower wall. In the kitchen, they must be mixing up bowls of punch and setting pumpkin spice martinis on trays and piecing together seafood towers. He had to admit, he kind of wanted to see it, if only out of spite. He was sure his successor's decorations wouldn't be as good as what he'd had planned.

There was a knock on his door. Laurel had texted that he and Melody were coming over, so he hoped that it was them, and not the beginning of a deluge of trick-or-treaters. But as it turned out, it was kind of both.

“Trick or treat!” Laurel and Melody wore matching smiles, and they were elaborately, magnificently in costume, shimmering beneath Casey’s porch light. Laurel was some kind of Roman soldier, in armor and a short little kilt that did everything for his legs, and Melody couldn’t be anyone but Cleopatra, dripping in gold, all hair and cleavage and eyelashes, a snake diadem on her head and her eyes ringed in kohl and electric blue eyeshadow.

“Damn, girl,” Casey said, impressed. “Save something for the rest of us.”

“Do you like it?” Melody asked. “We’re Antony and Cleopatra. Or, I guess, Liz Taylor and Richard Burton as Antony and Cleopatra. But without the multiple marriages or sexual tension.”

“I hope it’s not too much,” Laurel added. “We commissioned Mr. Petrowski. Did you know he makes costumes, for conventions and stuff? It’s his other-other side hustle.”

“It’s not too much,” Casey said, letting his eyes travel obviously over Laurel’s chest and bare thighs. “But why get so dressed up? I thought we weren’t going out.”

Laurel and Melody exchanged a look, and Casey knew that his quiet night at home had just flown out the window.

“We weren’t going to at first,” Laurel said, putting an arm around Melody. The gold beading on her costume clinked against his chestplate. “But Melody’s got something to celebrate.”

“Howie Bonard got arrested!” she cried, pumping the air with her fist.

“Oh, shit.” Casey was surprised it had worked. He’d been planning to make an anonymous call, but hadn’t gotten around to it yet. “Did they search his car?”

“What?” Laurel and Melody looked confused, which made Casey confused, in turn.

“The drugs?” he prompted. “In his car?”

Melody frowned. “What drugs? He got arrested for enticing a minor.”

“Oh.” Now Casey felt disgusted, and a little silly for his attempt at vigilante justice. He’d done it on a whim, seeing Bonard’s car parked downtown, unattended, no one else around. He hadn’t really planned to tell Laurel or Melody, not wanting to get their hopes up and not sure if he was overstepping. But men like Howie Bonard never had to face any consequences in their lives, and sometimes it chafed. Sometimes somebody needed to step in and be a vengeful bitch. Just a little bit. “Well, there are drugs in his car. Yours, actually,” he said, looking at Melody. “I kind of forgot to flush them, and they needed to go somewhere.” He shrugged. “And like I said, that model of car is really easy to break into.”

“Jesus, Casey.” Laurel was staring at him, a little dazed.

He bit his lip. “I hope you don’t disapprove. It’s the last illegal thing I’ll do, I prom—” He couldn’t finish the sentence, because Melody was hugging him, in a cloud of perfume and hair and clattering jewelry, the snake on her headpiece leaving a divot in his cheek.

“Oh my God,” she said, squeezing Casey so hard that his ribs creaked. “That is the weirdest and possibly sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. Laurel, if you don’t marry him, I might.”

“Well, I mean, it didn’t amount to anything,” he muttered, suddenly embarrassed. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal.” Laurel pressed a kiss to Casey’s temple. “And dangerous and

stupid, so don't do it again." He had joined in the hug, and some last brittle thing gave way in Casey, his limbs growing loose and relaxed and his heart slowing. In the pale, anemic light of his front porch, squished between Antony and Cleopatra, he felt, strangely, like he finally belonged somewhere.

When the hug had started to get cloying and sweaty, Casey squirmed his way out of it, saying, "Well, where did y'all want to go?" He plucked at the front of his T-shirt, looking down at his own outfit. "Should I put on a nicer shirt? I feel awkward. You have such amazing costumes, and I've got nothing."

"Oh, that's not true," Laurel said, smiling. "Your costume is in the car."

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That was how Casey ended up in a divey karaoke bar, wearing what he assumed was a historically-accurate toga and listening to Chip yell legal jargon over the music while Laurel and Melody sang their way through what seemed like Fleetwood Mac's entire catalog.

Chip, who hadn't been required to dress as a character in some sword-and-sandals epic and was instead wearing a low-effort attempt at a Freddy Kruger costume, was explaining to Casey that Lydia Callaway, who was just recently over eighteen, had come forward with texts Howie Bonard had sent her several years ago, when she was a freshman in high school. "The statute of limitations expired for Melody a long time ago, even if she'd had proof," he said. "But not for Lydia. And she's from one of the most prominent families in town, so it's hard for a judge to just brush it off."

"So what's going to happen to him?" Casey asked.

"Not sure yet." Chip sipped his beer. "He's out on bail now, but he'll stand trial. And maybe more girls or women will come forward, after Lydia. I'm sure there are more."

He was watching his friends on stage, and Casey followed his gaze. Laurel and Melody glittered under the lights, shards of green and red and blue dancing across them. They were stunning, drawing every eye in the room not just because they both could carry a tune (Melody had a decent enough voice to at least keep up with Laurel), but because they just were. Two captivating people, dressed like movie stars, being themselves without a care in the world. Casey would almost be jealous of their connection, except that it felt so good to see Laurel shining and happy.

“It was her and Kierra who persuaded Lydia to speak up,” Chip said, nodding toward Melody. “I’m sure of it.”

Casey took in the look of admiration on Chip’s face, the way his fingers tightened around his glass. It was hard not to admire those two, but he thought there might be more to it.

“So what’s your story?”

“Me?” Chip shrugged. “Divorce lawyer. Gets divorced himself, has a quarter-life crisis, buries himself in work. Embarrassing, and very common. Not much else to it.”

“No, I mean you and Melody. Is there something there?” he asked.

Chip sighed, shaking his head. “No. I think—I think I hoped there would be, for a while. But Melody needs to do her own thing, and so do I.” He glanced at Casey with sudden, sharp focus, and Casey had an impression of what he must be like in a courtroom. “I hear you and Laurel are official, though?”

Before he could open his mouth to say anything, the DJ’s microphone crackled to life, and his voice boomed through the bar. “Aaaand that was Laurel and Melody singing Landslide . Now I think Laurel’s got a special solo performance planned, is that right, man?”

Laurel, already sweaty and flushed under the hot lights, appeared to turn an even deeper red. “Uh, I do?”

“This one’s for you, Casey!” Melody shrieked into her microphone, before skipping off the stage and leaving Laurel there, looking like a deer in the headlights.

The chords of some jazz song started to play, and Laurel let out an audible groan, saying “Seriously, Melody? No pressure.” There were light titters from the crowd. Laurel started to sway uncomfortably to the music, not really in time with the rhythm, chewing his lip as he watched the lyrics begin to scroll down the screen overhead. Casey was a little worried for him at first; he could read the discomfort in the lines of Laurel’s body, the stiff way he held the microphone up to his lips. It was as if by losing his singing partner, he’d gotten all the confidence sucked out of him. Or maybe it was the song itself. His voice was shaky as he started to sing, thick with emotion.

“Maybe this time, I’ll be lucky. Maybe this time, he’ll stay...”

It was vaguely familiar, but Casey wasn’t sure where he recognized it from. It was sad for a love song, wistful and full of longing, and he wanted to tell Laurel that he didn’t need to worry. He would stay. He was tired of moving around, tired of running. His gaze was fixed on Laurel, trying to reassure him, to will courage back into him, and Laurel caught his eye, blushed, and flubbed a line. Then he recovered, laughing, and when he started to sing again, he sounded a little stronger, and then stronger still, and then he was off, hitting each note effortlessly like Casey knew he could, lungs opening up as his voice swelled and soared like a bird through the room.

He didn’t drop the mic when the song was over, though he could have, just replaced it politely in its holder and shuffled off the stage a little shyly, a grin on his face, hair in his eyes and cheeks on fire. Chip, Melody, and Casey were standing up, clapping, and some other people in the bar were clapping, too, but with less enthusiasm. Jazzy, melancholy ballads didn’t please the crowd as much as old standbys like Freebird and

Margaritaville, after all, even when beautifully executed. As Laurel approached the table, Casey, a little caught up in the moment, flung his arms around him and kissed him. Somebody across the room wolf-whistled, and the DJ exclaimed, “Woah, I don’t remember that happening in Gladiator !”

“Holy shit.” Laurel was giggling, and his mouth tasted like Jell-O shots. “Am I shaking? I feel like I’m shaking. I love that song, but I can’t sing it. Melody…”

“You did amazing,” Casey said against his ear. “And I’m not going anywhere. I’m all in, too, Laurel. I—“

“And now let’s welcome Chip, and—I guess Laurel again, with Friends in Low Places ! Wow, table five is putting on a regular concert tonight, ladies and gentlemen!”

Laurel pressed his flaming-hot forehead against Casey’s shoulder. “Are you kidding me?”

“Oh, I forgot that I signed you guys up for that one, too,” Melody said calmly. “Better get up there and save him, Laurel.”

“You’re kind of a menace,” Casey told her, as she scooted into the booth next to him.

She smiled, shrugging. “They’re used to it. But don’t worry, I won’t sign you up for anything. Not after the thing with Howie’s car.”

“That’s a get-out-of-karaoke-free card, huh?”

“A get-out-of-everything-free card, in my book. Well, except breaking Laurel’s heart. Which I’m sure you won’t.”

Casey shook his head. “Never on purpose,” he said honestly.

“Huh.” Melody studied him. “You’re realistic. That’s good, though. He’s kind of a dreamer. You might balance each other out.” She clinked her glass against his. “Water,” she explained unnecessarily, after taking a sip.

“Diet Coke,” Casey said, indicating his own drink.

“Yeah, Laurel said you don’t drink much.” Melody wound a strand of hair around her finger, looking uncomfortable, like she wanted to ask more.

“There are—problems with addiction in my family. And I don’t really like how it makes me feel.”

“Man, I wish I didn’t like how it makes me feel.” Melody tried to smile, but it was a little wobbly. She was still messing with her hair, pulling it tighter and tighter around her finger. “I really wanted a drink tonight. I had a little sip of Laurel’s vodka soda earlier, but then I felt so guilty.” She looked away, shoulders hunched.

“You’ll figure it out,” Casey told her. He was surprised to find that he didn’t feel very awkward, despite the topic. For some reason, people tended to confide in him, even people he didn’t know well. Maybe it was something about his face. Trying to make Melody feel better, he said, “You know, you never did tell me any of those embarrassing stories about Laurel.”

“Oh.” She laughed, surprised. “There actually aren’t that many. He was a good kid. He did have this weird Humphrey Bogart phase—”

“What are you two up to over here?” Laurel asked, sliding back into the booth. He and Chip had yielded the stage to a female Mario and Luigi duo, who were currently scream-singing Kelly Clarkson.

“Just telling Casey about your hardboiled detective days,” Melody said, with an angelic smile.

“Wait a second.” Casey’s mind was blown. “All that cyberstalking and investigating me was because you were into, like, detective movies as a kid?”

Laurel shrugged, a liquid smile sliding across his face. “Hey. Of all the dog weddings in all the world, you had to walk into mine. Or, I guess, my mom’s.”

“There aren’t actually that many dog weddings in—oh. Oh, it’s some ancient movie reference, isn’t it. Okay.” Laurel was laughing, whether at his own cleverness or at Casey’s lack of understanding, Casey wasn’t sure, and it seemed like the best way to shut him up would be to kiss him again, so Casey did, grabbing him around the waist and pulling him down into the booth.

*

The grass was cool under Laurel’s legs, and the night air was slowly washing the effects of the Jell-O shots from his head. It was a little weird to party with Melody when she wasn’t drinking, but it seemed like a net positive. Laurel had drunk far less than he usually would have, and they were finishing the night with an impromptu picnic of Teriyaki noodles, rather than bumming cigarettes off of strangers in an alleyway. Also, Casey was there, which was the most positive thing of all. The three of them sat in a circle on the lawn in front of the Bonard arch, passing takeout containers back and forth. Chip had gone home, citing an early morning, but it really wasn’t that late, Laurel saw when he checked his phone. Only ten o’clock.

“I still can’t believe that one girl kept trying to get Chip to sign her boobs,” Casey said, pinching a piece of broccoli between his chopsticks.

On second thought, that might have been why Chip had left early, and not because he

had to work the next day. “He does do a mean Garth Brooks impression,” Laurel said.

“I can’t believe we got Casey to sing!” Melody exclaimed.

“You can’t really call it singing,” Casey protested. Laurel beamed at him, reaching out to rub Casey’s bare calf. He made for an oddly hot Julius Caesar; he could command Laurel’s army, that was for sure. Among other euphemisms. And at the end of the night, stone-cold sober, he’d agreed to the most adorably disorganized performance of Baby Got Back that Laurel had ever seen.

“I liked it,” he said. “You can sign my boobs, if you want.”

Casey raised an eyebrow. “Yeah? With what?”

“All right, you two,” Melody cut in, smiling fondly. “Save that for later. We’re in public.”

They’d been in public when Casey had kissed him, too, in front of the whole bar and probably at least a few people Laurel knew from high school, and Laurel was still riding high on the exhilaration of it, his body buzzing. He looked down the street. Downtown was quiet, but he could see the brightly-lit windows of Landry Hall just blocks away, peeking through the trees, and hear the faint strain of music. Maybe the Jell-O shots hadn’t worn off as much as he’d thought, because something chaotic and reckless was creeping into his head, whispering that he didn’t want the night to end. “Let’s crash the party,” he heard himself say.

“Laurel,” Melody said cautiously.

“Come on.” Laurel stood, dusting himself off. “We’re already dressed up, and Casey planned half the thing, anyway. He should get to see how it turned out.”

“I actually am curious.” Casey’s voice was noncommittal.

“I don’t know.” Melody made a face, chewing on the end of her vape pen. “Are you really sure you want to deal with your mom tonight? It’ll be messy.”

“It’ll be perfect.” Better, even, than he could have planned it. He turned to her. “It’s just like we talked about. A chance to show everyone up. Howie Bonard’s been arrested, so now everyone knows what a slimeball he is. You can walk into that party with your head held high, and no one can say anything.”

“They can say a lot,” Melody replied darkly. “I’m sure more than half the town still thinks he’s blameless. Or that she’s making it up.”

“Fuck them,” Laurel said. “Casey? What do you think?”

“Won’t it cause a scene?” he asked. “Denise will be pissed.”

“I know.” Laurel felt himself smile, but it was more of a baring of teeth. His heart was pounding, a giddy, foolish heat spreading through his limbs. He felt like he was about to climb up a cliff, or jump out of a plane. “It’ll be amazing.”

Casey took one last bite of noodles, then got to his feet. He gave Laurel a sly, indulgent smile. Playing the devil again, even though he was actually the best thing that had ever happened to him. “Well, I’m in. I want to see how bad these flowers are.”

Melody sighed. “Y’all.”

“Come on, Melody,” Casey said. “You have to admit, you look too good tonight not to rub it in people’s faces.”

She let out a surprised little puff of laughter. “You’re too convincing. Okay. Fifteen minutes, and that’s it.”

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The word festooned came to mind as soon as they stepped into the ballroom, and it didn't leave. Laurel knew that Halloween colors were black and orange, so he assumed that was the color that was everywhere, even though orange often looked pretty greenish to him. Landry Hall was covered in it, garlands draped along the molding and dripping down the walls, giant bouquets of sunflowers and daisies and corn cobs and autumn leaves wobbling on the tables, dwarfing the seafood towers Denise had demanded, which looked pretty gruesome after several hours of sitting out. There were pumpkins, too, clustered around the edges of the room and piled against the far wall, gauzy patches of fake spider web clinging to them. Laurel's mom had never been afraid of doing too much, as evidenced by the interior of her house, so there were also a plethora of Halloween props: scarecrows in the corners and along the walls, bats hanging from the ceiling, a mummy holding a tray of programs, a witch propping up the cocktail menu, plastic skulls and rubber rats scattered along the tables.

"Oh my God, it's absolutely tragic," Casey muttered.

"It's definitely a lot," Melody agreed.

They had come in through the service entrance (Casey had remembered the key code) and up the backstairs into the ballroom, and they were lurking on the periphery of the room, next to one of the tables of appetizers. Laurel knew from the schedule that Casey had spent hours poring over that they had missed cocktail hour and the seated dinner, and now the party was supposed to be in full swing. But the dance floor was less than full, and the jazz band (at least it wasn't a string quartet this time) didn't seem to be inspiring people to get out and cut a rug. Laurel saw a few couples out shuffling around awkwardly. Jessica Fuller was some sort of sexy tiger, and her

husband wore safari clothes and a pith helmet (problematic?). Wayon Bonard and his third wife were dressed as George and Martha Washington, if Martha Washington shopped at Frederick's of Hollywood. Apparently they didn't care about his little brother's arrest, or didn't find it embarrassing enough to skip the party. Birdie Callaway, costume unclear, was out there dancing by herself, a glass of punch in each hand, seeming to be the only one actually having any fun.

The rest of the guests were mostly seated, or milling around aimlessly with cocktails in their hands or taking selfies with the decorations. He recognized almost everyone: his lacrosse coach, his polo coach, many of his former teachers (Ms. Nelson and Mr. Petrowski hadn't made the cut— I wonder why , Laurel thought sarcastically). Lavinia Bonard was at one of the tables, not in costume (was it beneath her?), holding court with a gaggle of church ladies and school board moms. Melody's parents weren't there, which was a small mercy. He knew from working on the guest list that they had been invited, but they were the kind of religious where Halloween bordered on sacrilege. The rest of the Callaways also weren't in attendance, probably not wanting to face Lavinia Bonard after Lydia's accusations had gone public. Jasper lay under one of the tables, sleepily chewing on part of a ham that he must have stolen off one of the carving boards. Denise's friend Meredith, dressed as a ladybug, had brought her lhasa apso, Peaches, also dressed as a ladybug, and was crouched down, trying to get a photo of her posed on a stack of pumpkins.

Laurel didn't see Denise at first, but then he did, as the sparse population on the dance floor milled around and shifted. She was dancing with Sarah Ann Copeland's oldest son, Roland, her brown hair piled into Holly Golightly's iconic bouffant hairdo, her tiara slightly askew.

His stomach dropped, and, despite all of his fantasies of confronting her, Laurel felt the sudden urge to turn and run back out the emergency exit and down the stairs. He fumbled blindly at one of the plates of appetizers, finding a meatball skewer and taking a big bite.

Melody put a hand on his arm, showing him her phone. “It’s already been five minutes. You’ve got ten left.”

Laurel swallowed, hardly tasting the food. Maybe they should actually just leave. They’d satisfied themselves that the party was worth missing and the decorations were terrible, and there was really no one there he wanted to spend time with. “Yeah. I think—I think I’m good.”

“I’m not.” Casey flicked contemptuously at a rubbery piece of shrimp dangling from one of the seafood towers. “I want to see the flower wall.”

“What, just to see how bad it is?” He had to admit, he liked Casey’s spiteful side.

“Exactly.” Casey peered across the room. “It should be just inside the front entrance, unless she changed the layout around, too.”

“No, you’re right.” Some of the foolhardy sense of chaos that had gripped him on the lawn was returning, and Laurel squared his shoulders. “We should take a selfie with it, for posterity. I just wonder if we can get over there without getting trapped in a conversation with any—”

The screech of microphone feedback cut him off. Laurel winced, and Jasper, from under the table, let out a short, howling bark in protest. Denise was climbing up the steps to the stage, and Laurel’s stomach sank as he heard her clear her throat into the microphone. He recognized that sound from years of parties past. It meant she was about to make an announcement, and even though she didn’t know he was there, couldn’t possibly be about to bring him up to sing, he could feel sweat prickling at his hairline and acid rising in his throat.

The band had stopped playing, the hum of conversation in the room growing quiet.

“Hello, everyone!” Denise’s voice rang out across the ballroom. It was her beauty-queen voice, breathy and girlish, her accent thicker than usual. Laurel realized he had inched closer to Casey, as if he could hide behind him. The last time he’d seen his mother face-to-face had been in this same ballroom, and all of a sudden, Laurel felt unfathomably tired.

“It is my absolute pleasure to welcome y’all to the first-annual Bonard Halloween Ball.” Denise was smiling out over the crowd, but she didn’t seem to have noticed the three of them. Of course not. This was her moment, after all, and there was no room for anyone else. “And gosh, what a ball it’s turned out to be! When I tell y’all I did not think I would be standing here, well.” She let out a laugh, pressing a hand to her chest. “As many of you know, we faced quite a few trials and tribulations pulling this event together. But the night is finally here, and it’s everything I dreamed of!”

A few polite claps from the captive audience. “Jesus, is she accepting an Oscar?” Casey muttered under his breath. Laurel squeezed his hand gratefully.

“Now, I’ve prepared a little surprise in honor of all you fabulous people here,” Denise continued. “A long time ago, I was blessed enough to win Miss Idaho. Yes.” She nodded, hand still on her heart, as if to absorb everyone’s admiration. “And believe it or not, my talent was singing. So the band and I have thrown together a little number...”

The familiar tune of Moon River started up, and Laurel couldn’t help but roll his eyes. Man, she was really going for it. Had he been this embarrassing at karaoke? He sure hoped not.

Melody pointedly checked her phone as Denise launched into her best Audrey Hepburn impression. Laurel chewed on another cardboard-tasting meatball. Denise sounded good, but the song wasn’t exactly a banger, and people were starting to get restless. Casey mimed taking a nap. Laurel was contemplating whether his mom had

any critical thinking skills, and if she had ever bothered to read the actual book, because he was pretty sure Holly Golightly wasn't supposed to be an aspirational character, and—

“Melody! Melody Harper, is that you?” someone exclaimed from across the room.

Birdie Callaway was bustling toward them, dance floor forgotten. Laurel felt sweat pooling on his lower back as several of the other guests looked their way, whispering. He groaned. It had only been a matter of time. They weren't exactly inconspicuous, Laurel's chestplate shining under the lights and Melody covered in gold beading and glittery silk.

“Oh, and Laurel!” Birdie exclaimed, pulling him into a hug before he could do anything to stop it. Her cheeks were shiny, dark plums, and she bore a lingering aroma of sherry. Pulling back to look at him, she smiled sweetly, lipstick on her teeth. “My goodness, look at you. So handsome. And is that Casey? Well, well. Hail Caesar! What a magnificent trio y'all make. Oh, to be young and beautiful!” She put a hand on her heart.

“Thanks so much, Birdie,” Laurel said, trying to extricate himself. “We actually—”

“And Melody, Queen of the Nile herself!” Birdie fixed her wobbly gaze on Melody, grabbing her hand. “Sweetheart, you're a vision. And—and you look so healthy. And, gosh, you know, I really do owe you an apology. It's—difficult, you know. To believe certain things until they happen to someone close to you. But I should have believed you all along.”

“Oh, Birdie.” Melody looked like she might cry, and she was squeezing Birdie's hand just as hard as Birdie was squeezing hers, and for a moment, Laurel forgot about Denise, who was still singing, but louder now, as if to cover up the chatter that had started to rise.

But only for a moment.

“Excuse me.” Denise tapped the microphone with one nail. “Is there something—“ Her mouth snapped shut like a steel trap. She had seen them now, and she was glaring directly at Laurel. The buzz and crackle of the microphone stretched out across the room.

A chill went down his spine, and he felt his stomach shrivel up, but there was nowhere to go, because now Denise was down on the ballroom floor, cutting her way through the crowd.

“Laurel.” His mother’s voice, whip-sharp and cold. Her hand was on his arm, nails digging in. The band seemed to have stopped playing, but he wasn’t entirely sure, because his ears felt full of cotton, even the hammer of his pulse sounding muffled. For a moment, he was small again. She was dragging him out of the cupboard he’d hid in on his birthday. She was parading him around at church, the collar of his shirt stiff and starchy at his neck. She was telling him to sing, hissing in his ear, don’t you dare ruin this for me .

“Mom,” he said, mouth dry.

“How dare you. I told you you weren’t welcome. And why did you bring him ?” She narrowed her eyes, looking at Casey.

“He’s here as my date.” It was a relief to say it.

A murmur rippled across the room, and Birdie clapped her hands, saying, “Oh, bless you both!” Laurel felt the weight of many eyes, and he forced himself to breathe, bracing himself for Denise’s reaction.

But it hardly seemed to register for her. “Don’t joke, Laurel, it’s not funny. I don’t

know what's gotten into you or why you're determined to sabotage my party, but you need to leave. All of you." Denise crossed her arms, looking at him, then at Melody. "Have you been drinking?"

"I don't know, Mom. Have you?" It was weird how calm he felt, or maybe numb was a better word, a buzzing sound in his head, his fingertips tingling. Laurel was vaguely aware of the rustle of Casey's toga as he moved closer, putting a hand on Laurel's back. A solid, grounding spot of warmth in the chaos. "We really are dating," he added, leaning into him.

"No you're not. You're just acting out again. Trying to embarrass me. I don't know what I've done to deserve being treated this way. Casey, I really thought you were better than this. And Laurel, we are done. No more handouts, no more beach house, no more inviting you to stay just so you and your little friends can go out on the town and make fools of yourselves every night." Denise sighed theatrically, smoothing her hair.

"Fine," Laurel said. "I can't say it's been a pleasure." He'd miss the beach house. Or at least the kitchen. But most of his money came from his dad.

"My God, the things I have to put up with!" Denise started to make herself cry, one perfect, mascara-stained tear trickling down her face. "I just don't understand how you can be so ungrateful."

"Hon, it's okay." Meredith had emerged from the crowd, rubbing Denise's shoulder. She shot Laurel a dirty look. He could only imagine what stories Denise had told her.

Laurel didn't say anything. A small part of him was squirming, wanting to go to his mom, to hug her and apologize and start the whole cycle of guilt all over. But Casey's hand on his back reminded him that he didn't have to, not this time.

“It’s not!” Denise shrieked. “I want them out ! Both of you, before I call security. And she can’t be here, either,” she added, pointing at Melody. “I have a very exclusive guest list, and there are people on it who would not like to be in the same room as her, let alone be harassed —”

“No one’s harassing anyone except you,” Casey said, his voice flat.

“Don’t you dare speak to me,” Denise hissed. “Don’t say a damn word.” She pulled out her phone, stabbing at the screen with one finger. “Security will be here in a moment, so unless you want to get dragged out, I suggest you all—”

“Son of a bitch,” someone said, loud enough to echo across the room.

“Oh, for fucksake,” Melody groaned. “I should have known.” Birdie rubbed her arm sympathetically.

Howie Bonard had evidently just gotten back from the bathroom, judging from how he was wiping his nose, his eyeballs jittery, jaw working to chew some invisible wad of gum. He was dressed as late-stage Elvis, in a rhinestone-studded suit, and he’d used some kind of black spray dye on his hair that was beginning to ooze down his temples in runnels of sweat. He looked insane, like he was melting from the inside out. As Laurel watched, he clenched his fists, face contorting into a mask of rage.

“You dumb little whore.” Howie was stalking across the room, people ducking out of his way. The party had already ground to a halt, but now even the hum of background conversation faded away. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath. “What, did you show up to gloat? I was in a jail cell for ten fucking hours yesterday, you bitch.”

“Laurel. Let’s go.” Melody tugged at his arm, her eyes ringed in white. She was scared, and so, Laurel realized, was he. This must be the side of Howie Bonard that only she had seen, all the slimy, superficial charm burnt away.

Lavinia Bonard stood up from her chair, back ramrod-straight. “Howie, sit down,” she said quietly. “Don’t make a scene.”

“It’s not fair, mom!” he bellowed, gesturing to Melody. “She and her little sissy-ass friends have had it out for me for years. They’re behind all those bullshit charges, I know it.”

“We will settle it in court.” Lavinia Bonard’s teeth were gritted, one hand squeezing the life out of her napkin.

For a moment, Howie looked cowed, and Laurel thought maybe he would actually listen to his mother, and they could leave in peace. Wayon was making his way toward his brother, hands out to intercept him. But before he got there, Howie caught sight of Laurel’s expression, and something seemed to break loose in him.

“You. What the fuck are you smiling about?”

Had he been smiling? He guessed he had, and now he felt immensely stupid for that moment of amusement, because Howie was charging at him, and time seemed to slow down, the room all smearing together into a mess of garlands and novelty decorations and Howie Bonard’s fist and his crazed eyes, the pupils like scribbly circles of jet-black ink—

And he had the faintest impression of movement in front of him, a white sheet of fabric flashing across his vision, and then Casey was falling back into his arms and the table was giving way beneath their weight, canapés and meatball skewers and cocktail shrimp whizzing off in all directions. Laurel’s skull hit the marble floor, stars bursting behind his eyes. His ribs creaked; he was getting crushed. Casey was on top of him, and Howie was on top of Casey, and something crunched and there was a spray of wet warmth across Laurel’s face, and then he heard Howie grunt as Casey shoved him away, rolling to the side.

Laurel sat up, vision bleary. There was blood on his face, he realized, but it wasn't his, and assorted seafood plastered to his dented chestplate, and he regained his senses just in time to see Casey on the ground on top of Bonard, his mouth and chin a mask of blood, a handful of Howie's hair in one hand and his fist drawn back and—

Laurel was about to yell for him to stop, or to jump in, or something, but then the security guards were there, separating the two men, pulling both of them to their feet with their hands behind their backs.

People were shouting. A few of them had their phones up, recording the whole spectacle. Denise was sobbing. Jasper was baying. The Lhasa apso was letting off a staccato stream of yap-yap-yaps. Laurel rose to his feet, a little unsteady.

Lavinia and Wayon Bonard had already converged on Howie, trying to get the guards to let him go.

“He didn't do anything. It was that guy in the toga, you saw it, he was going to—“

“Get them out , get them all out of here!” Denise wailed.

“Self-defense,” that was Casey, sounding a little stuffy but otherwise crisp and in control. “My nose is probably broken. And you'd better fucking believe I'm going to press charges.”

Laurel rushed to his side. “Babe. You okay? Jesus, what happened, did you jump in front of me? You didn't need to. I could have—“

“I'm fine. I wanted to.” To the guard, he said, “I'm done. I'm not fighting. You can let me go. He's the problem.” He nodded toward Howie Bonard, who definitely wasn't helping his own case. He was thrashing around, teeth bared, scraping the bottom of his vocabulary to call Melody, Laurel, and Casey every slur he could think

of.

“Yeah, ok.” The guard gave Howie a look, seeming to agree. “Be good.” He released Casey, who collapsed into Laurel’s arms, wobbling slightly. He was shaking. Laurel kissed his forehead, then pulled back to look at his face.

“It’s super bloody,” he said, examining his nose. “But it doesn’t look broken.”

“How do you know?”

“I played polo, remember? And lacrosse.”

“God.” Casey grinned, blood on his teeth. He looked fierce and beautiful and a little bit terrifying. “So fucking preppy.”

“Your toga’s wrecked, though. There’s blood all over it, and whatever that black crap was that Howie had in his hair.”

“I know.” Casey held up a hand, showing Laurel his palm. It was covered in what looked like shoe polish. “Guess we can’t repeat Halloween costumes next year.”

Dimly, Laurel heard Lavinia Bonard’s voice in the background, dripping with silky contempt. “Well Denise, this has certainly been an interesting evening—Howie. Howie, control yourself. Think of your brother’s campaign.”

“Lavinia, it wasn’t my fault. I swear they weren’t invited—“

Lavinia cut Denise off. “Oh, I know, dear. It’s just that I put in a good word for you with my party planner. I trusted you to have some discretion, what with Howie’s recent—difficulties. I understand, of course, with your background, you’re obviously not used to hosting large events. But I always make sure to have very strict security.

It's unfortunate that yours wasn't up to par."

"Lavinia, please. I'll send them away, and then we can get all get back to—"

"Oh no, Denise. I think the party is most definitely over. I'll pray for you, you know. And for your son."

Laurel's stomach lurched, and he felt the hair stand up on the nape of the neck. Lavinia Bonard's offer of prayers was as harsh as a kick in the teeth, and he could feel her eyes boring into him. He didn't turn to look.

Denise was still protesting somewhere in the background. Melody put a timid hand on his back. "Oh my God. Are you two okay?" She was trembling, arms tense, the beads on her costume rattling.

"I think so." He gave Casey one last squeeze before letting him go. Birdie Callaway, who'd been hovering nearby with a handkerchief and a glass of liquid in her hands, immediately swooped in. Taking a hold of Casey's chin, she began to clean him off without asking, like an overzealous mother cat.

"This might sting. I couldn't find any water but I think this is someone's gin and tonic."

"Birdie." Casey pushed her hand away. "Please. I don't want gin and tonic germs all over my face."

Laurel looked over Casey's shoulder as Birdie continued to fuss over him. He was nearly blinded by camera flashes. Everyone had their phones out now. It had definitely turned into a night to remember, though not in the way Denise would have wanted. Howie was getting led out of the ballroom, his mom and brother on either side, the security guards at his back. Off to the side, Denise was sobbing to Meredith,

face flushed, mascara streaks down her face. Meredith looked a little green. As Laurel watched, she stumbled off, apologizing.

“Sorry. It’s the blood. Or maybe something in the shrimp.”

He didn’t look away quickly enough, and Denise caught his eye. “And you’re just over here laughing about it!” she hissed.

Laurel shrugged. It kind of was funny, except for Casey’s nose. Meredith was now throwing up into a vase. Laurel saw Mary Devereux cover her mouth and gag in sympathy, then rush out of the room. Jasper and Peaches, meanwhile, had descended upon the table of spilled hors d’oeuvres and looked to be having the absolute best time of anyone there. There were black smudges of Howie’s hair dye all over the hundred-plus-year-old hardwoods, and a plastic skull from one of the toppled tables had rolled into the middle of the ballroom, stranded there on its own. Alas, poor Yorick , his brain suggested, and Laurel tried again not to giggle.

“Mom,” he said.

“My own son. I thought I raised you better.” Denise wiped her nose. “Is it really true?” she asked, lower lip wobbling. “Are you—? And with the party planner, of all people? Does your father know?”

“Yes.” He crossed his arms. “And yes.”

“Well, why didn’t you tell me? You know I would have supported you. I mean, if you’d found someone suitable. I’m very progressive, Laurel. I’m insulted that you wouldn’t trust me with this information.”

Someone suitable . She just had to get one last dig in. “Mom.” He sighed. “You know, you just never gave me a reason to.”

He turned away before she could answer, putting a hand on Casey's shoulder. "Hey. Let's get you out of here."

Casey smiled at him, then winced. "Ooh. Yeah. Adrenaline's wearing off. I think I need to sit down for a second."

Laurel glanced at Melody. "You coming?"

She smiled and reached out, wiping something off his cheek. "I'm ok. Birdie's driver is taking me home, apparently."

"Get home safe. I'd hug you, but I'd get blood and shrimp all over your dress."

Denise was saying something else, something aimed at Casey this time, but Laurel didn't listen, leading him out of the ballroom, through the vestibule and into the front entryway, where there were benches. A photo station had been set up, with a (he assumed) red carpet rolled out in front of a wall of sunflowers and daisies, crammed together petal-to-petal, their powdery pollen smell filling up the room.

"Huh," Casey said, sitting down. He was cradling his head, and Laurel worried that he would be in more pain as the time passed. "I guess it's not as hideous as I thought it would be."

"We should get you to a doctor."

Casey let out a sniffly laugh. "What, because I don't hate the flower wall?"

"No, because you got punched in the face and bled everywhere. You might have a concussion."

"Sure. Later." Casey waved a hand in the air. "First we need to call the police. I was

serious about pressing charges. He assaulted me and tried to assault you. And also,” he added slyly, “I think it would be hilarious if he got arrested twice in twenty-four hours.”

“Oh my God,” Laurel said. “I love you.”

Casey looked up at him with a dazed little smile. “Oh. I love you, too. But I thought we were saving that for Venice.”

Laurel’s breath caught, a galaxy of stars bursting to life inside him, lighting him up, and he desperately wanted to kiss Casey then, but he was worried about bumping his nose, so he settled for stroking his cheek, instead, smoothing his hand over Casey’s face and down his neck, and tracing a thumb along his collarbone.

“I guess I couldn’t wait,” he murmured.

“Well, good,” Casey said. “I didn’t want to either.”

“Venice does sound nice, though,” Laurel sitting down next to him and taking his hand. Casey leaned against his shoulder, cautiously. “Or just, anywhere that’s not here. I feel like we might not exactly be welcome in town, after this all blows over.”

“Fine with me. Where will we go?”

Laurel shrugged, not really caring as long as Casey was with him. “Anywhere. Spain. England. Canada. Wherever you want.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Want to open a flower shop and have lots of hot working-class sex?”

Casey raised Laurel's hand to his mouth, kissing the knuckles. "Sounds perfect."

Epilogue: Four Months Later

It was the most romantic day of the year, and Casey was spending it with sore wrists, cramped fingers, and scratches all over his hands. He guessed it came with the territory, though; florists didn't really get to enjoy Valentine's Day, just like bartenders probably hated New Year's Eve and retail workers dreaded Black Friday. It still felt a little strange to think of himself as a florist, and sometimes he wasn't quite sure he deserved it. He was working out of their apartment for now, until a brick-and-mortar location opened up in the right neighborhood. The kitchen counter was covered in petals and leaves, and there were stray pieces of wire and tape scattered all over the floor. He would have to clean the house before Laurel came home, make himself presentable. Laurel had said they would celebrate for real tomorrow, and knowing him, he had probably planned something elaborate. Still, Casey was hoping for a little bit of romance on the actual holiday. He felt like he deserved it, after all the hours of arranging stems in vases and trimming leaves and handwriting sappy messages on cards and getting poked in the fingers.

Really, though, he couldn't complain, despite the soreness in his hands. Rain was pattering down outside, the sky gray and overcast, and the little kitchenette was quiet and cozy. Peaceful. Laurel didn't like the dreary weather, but Casey kind of did—although maybe it was just the novelty of it. Everything about Vancouver still had an air of novelty; they'd only been here three months, after Casey had finally gotten his passport. He liked the city so far. It was vibrant and busy, all sleek skyscrapers and glittering water, the North Shore Mountains at its back. There hadn't been much time to explore, but they were slowly getting out on weekends, trying new restaurants and visiting cafes and museums. They had gone to Banff with Melody and Chip for Christmas, although none of them skied, and the snow had been magical, the soaring, icy peaks like nothing he had ever seen before.

It was nice to have Melody close. Chip had stayed in Charleston, where he had a successful practice and, apparently, a mysterious new older girlfriend who was an accomplished lawyer herself. Melody had finally gotten out of town, though. She'd sold her condo, and she and her cat had ended up just over the border, in Washington State. She was taking community college classes and doing a lot of yoga, and she'd gotten really into CBD tinctures and pottery. It sounded a little woo-woo, but it seemed to work for her. At the very least, it was better than being in Bonard. Even though Howie was currently in prison awaiting multiple trials, his family wasn't, and they blamed Melody and apparently Casey for everything. After Casey had pressed charges, Howie had been drug tested, and the results had led to a search of his personal effects, including his car. Now he was facing charges for possession and assault on top of enticing a minor. It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy, Casey thought, stabbing a rose stem into a vase with a pleased little smile. The scandal had cost Wayon Bonard his congressional campaign and deeply embarrassed the family, and Lavinia Bonard seemed to hold him personally responsible for it. (Which maybe he was, a little bit. No regrets.) Denise was also furious at Casey for turning her son against her, and furious at both of them for ruining her party. She had even texted Laurel blaming him for the food poisoning several people had gotten from eating warm, hours-old seafood. That had been the final push he'd needed to block her number.

The change of scenery had been good for them both so far. Casey's business was growing, and Laurel had picked up a part-time job as a vocal coach. He didn't really need to work, since he still had a trust fund from his dad, but it kept him busy doing something he loved. Plus, it got him out of the house when Casey was working. They were still getting used to living together. Casey loved waking up tangled in Laurel's arms, loved brushing his hair back from his forehead and kissing him awake, loved hearing him sing in the shower every morning. He didn't necessarily love having Laurel breathe down his neck while he was putting together floral arrangements—though he had to admit, all of his questions about flower varieties were oddly charming. And sooner or later, one of them would have to learn how to

cook. Living off of takeout was too bougie for Casey's tastes, and he had gained fifteen pounds (fifteen pounds!) since getting together with Laurel. Apparently that was what happened when your boyfriend reminded you to eat dinner. And bought you cheesecake and chocolate truffles and gelato all the time. Laurel said the weight looked good on him. His therapist said that his need to have control over his weight and his skin stemmed from his wounded inner child. Which was also a little woo-woo, but maybe kind of true. He was working on it. Along with some other things.

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"Hey, I'm calling because I need some advice about what to get my boyfriend for Valentine's Day."

Casey felt his face break into a grin. It was Laurel, and apparently he was up to something. "Hmm," he said, keeping his tone neutral. "Well, if I were him, I would probably want a nice dinner and a blow job."

"Oh, well that's a given. But I wanted to do something special. He's been working really hard lately, and I want to show him how proud I am. And this is our first Valentine's Day together, so I want it to be unforgettable."

Casey's heart clenched, and he felt warmth bloom in his chest. It was so strange, and so lovely, to have someone be proud of him. He still wasn't always sure how to respond when Laurel said something sweet and genuine, so he settled for humor, saying, "I don't know. Your blow jobs are pretty unforgettable."

Laurel laughed. "What about a trip? Do you think he'd like a trip somewhere?"

“A trip where? Laurel, what are you up to?” There was the sound of keys jingling at the front door, and then Laurel was coming into the apartment, his hair rain-soaked, his eyes bright, phone still to his ear.

“I don’t know,” he said, hanging up. “Maybe Belgium?”

Casey crossed his arms. “That’s my present? Meeting your dad?”

“Not just that. We could go to Bruges. See a bunch of castles. Do a chocolate tour. Ride horses again...” Laurel shrugged, a hopeful smile on his face.

“Horses again? Whose Valentine’s Day present is this?”

“I did mention the chocolate tour, right? And there are waffles.”

Really, Casey couldn’t even pretend to be irritated. He would do anything, go anywhere, for this man. And anyway, staying at an estate in the Belgian countryside wouldn’t exactly be a chore. Neither would meeting his dad. They had already said hi over FaceTime, but they’d barely been able to understand each other. It would be good to see him in person, to get to know more about where Laurel had come from, and what had shaped the man he was. Casey was still learning about him, and he was greedy for every piece of knowledge he could get. And chocolate and waffles didn’t sound too bad, either.

“I think I’d like that,” Casey said honestly.

“Really?” Laurel was gazing at him, and Casey was surprised to see that his eyes were slightly wet.

“Really.” Crossing the room, he pulled him into an embrace, kissing a raindrop off the tip of his nose. It still felt surreal that he was allowed to do that, that Laurel was

his. He thought about the hotel bar in Las Vegas, Laurel sliding into the seat next to him, unwelcome, annoyingly beautiful, his smile bright and slightly devious. “You know, less than a year ago, you were begging me to ruin your life.”

“I was not begging,” Laurel said against his shoulder. He pulled back, studying Casey’s face, and there was a hint of that same deviousness in his expression. “It was really more of a challenge.”

“Huh.” Casey raised an eyebrow. “Well, challenge accepted, I guess. Because now you’re stuck with me.”

“That’s okay. You’re not ruining it. You’re just making it better.”

“Oh my God.” Casey groaned, rolling his eyes, but secretly he was a little pleased.

“Sorry,” Laurel said, looking anything but. “Too sentimental?”

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